Week 3

Frédéric Le Marcis

Michel Foucault
and Erving Goffman
are two canonical authors
in Western thought on prisons,
but they are also important for those
interested in prisons in Africa. Why?
Because their theories
are real toolkits!
In short, Marie, their theories
help us to understand
how prison is organised,
how it is administrated,
and how it is managed.

Marie Morelle

They also help us to gain
a better understanding
of the tangible effects of prison, as
well as the social uses
of prison sentences:
Who do we imprison?
Why do we imprison?
Can we speak of a failure of prison?
All of these questions have been
addressed by these authors
in relation to Western societies
and they make complete sense
for African societies, too.

Week 3.1

What prison tells us

What prison tells us

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The birth of the prison?

Frédéric: Among the books on prisons, one essential work is Discipline and Punish by Michel Foucault. What can you tell us about the central theme of this book?

Marie: Michel Foucault focuses on the history of punishment and looks at the 'metamorphosis of punitive methods', as well as the 'birth of the prison', which is incidentally the subtitle of his work. Michel Foucault studies the turning point in methods of punishment in France between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He looks at the moment when punishment shifted from torture to incarceration.

Frédéric: Is it the work of a historian then?

Marie: Not exactly. Michel Foucault wants to understand how prison came to be the only acceptable form of punishment. He wants to understand what makes it possible, what legitimises it. One thing that is interesting to remember is that Michel Foucault wrote Discipline and Punish in the 1970s. At the time, there were revolts in French prisons, leftist activists were incarcerated, and prison was truly a topic of critical debate. In this context, Michel Foucault signed a manifesto, along with others, in 1971, which led to the creation of the GIP, the Groupe d'information sur les prisons [Prison Information Group]. The aim of this group was to build knowledge on prisons with the goal of changing them.

Frédéric: He signed the manifesto along with Daniel Defert, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, and Jean-Marie Domenach.

Marie: Yes.

The disciplinary society

Frédéric: What then is the meaning of prison for Foucault?

Marie: What is interesting is that Michel Foucault does not tell us that prison only serves to punish crimes. He tells us that it has another function: to monitor and discipline the individual. He studies a moment of change in French history: significant demographic growth, new agricultural and industrial technologies, and, finally, new production. And in this context, you have to think about how to situate bodies, how to use individuals, how to make them as useful as possible and increase their performance. In this context, prison becomes a disciplinary institution. But it is not the only one: there are also hospitals, barracks, schools, and factories. These allow the management of people.

Frédéric: Yes, later in his work, Foucault called it pastoral power, in other words, the way the state takes charge of the population like a good shepherd in order to improve the lives and health of populations. I was wondering how this system you mentioned works practically in prison.

Prison as a way of understanding the exercise of disciplinary power

Marie: Let us take an example: the Yaoundé Central Prison, but we could take other prisons in other countries. As you approach the Yaoundé prison, the first things you see are walls and watchtowers. Then you come to a door monitored by guards. Normally, you can only come on certain days, visiting days, at certain times, and you must have authorisation. Let's imagine we have all of this and we enter the prison. You go

Yaoundé Central Prison 2013 ©Thomas Chatelet

through a first courtyard, then you enter a second courtyard, and in this second courtyard there are doors that lead to the cell blocks, and in these cell blocks, there are shared cells. There is therefore a real partition of the prison space.

Frédéric: I understand the architectural description, but how can this be analysed?

Marie: Prison excludes, supresses, and prevents, but it also enables surveillance. The idea is to place bodies, to assign individuals to spaces, in order to be able to control their schedule, what they do, and, finally, to know them. And this project of knowledge about individuals should allow more power over them.

Frédéric: Could you give us an example of how it works in Cameroon?

Marie : In Cameroon, in the prison I just described, there is the idea that people are placed in certain cell blocks, in certain cells, in order to control their movements and their schedule. There are also other forms of rationalisation: meals are held at a given time during the day, collectively, with food distributed in a series of bowls.

Frédéric: Prison in Africa was introduced to divide up the territory, to categorize populations, to put some to work through forced labour, but also to separate others by punishing them with prison sentences?

Marie: Precisely. Prison teaches us about power relations, and on several levels: both inside the prison and in terms of what prison allows with regard to the control of a territory. That said, I have given you a first description of a prison, that of Yaoundé. However, we need to take a step back. There is a second description that is important. In the Yaoundé Central Prison, there is capacity for about 800 prisoners. And, in general, there are between 3,000 and 4,000 inmates. There are two cell blocks that hold 1,500 and sometimes more than 1,800 inmates.

Key takeaways: Moving beyond the idea of a deviation from the model

If Foucault's model is so different to reality, what is the point of studying Foucault? There is certainly a gap between reality and what is described in Discipline and Punish. In reality, prison is often solely a place of relegation. There is not so much training or education activity, and what does exist is insufficient, useless, and ineffective. Several historians who have worked on prisons in Europe and Latin America as well as Africa have criticised Discipline and Punish. They have said that Foucault studied prisons without prisoners, that he did not pay enough attention to disturbances or forms of resistance.

However, Foucault never claimed to be creating a model, nor are African prisons avatars of one, and our goal is not to measure the deviation from such a template. Michel Foucault's reasoning, his idea, was to provide a toolkit. And these tools should help us to understand what prison is, what it tells us about a society, and how it punishes. In fact, studying prisons should help us to understand how power is exercised over individuals, their bodies, and their lives.

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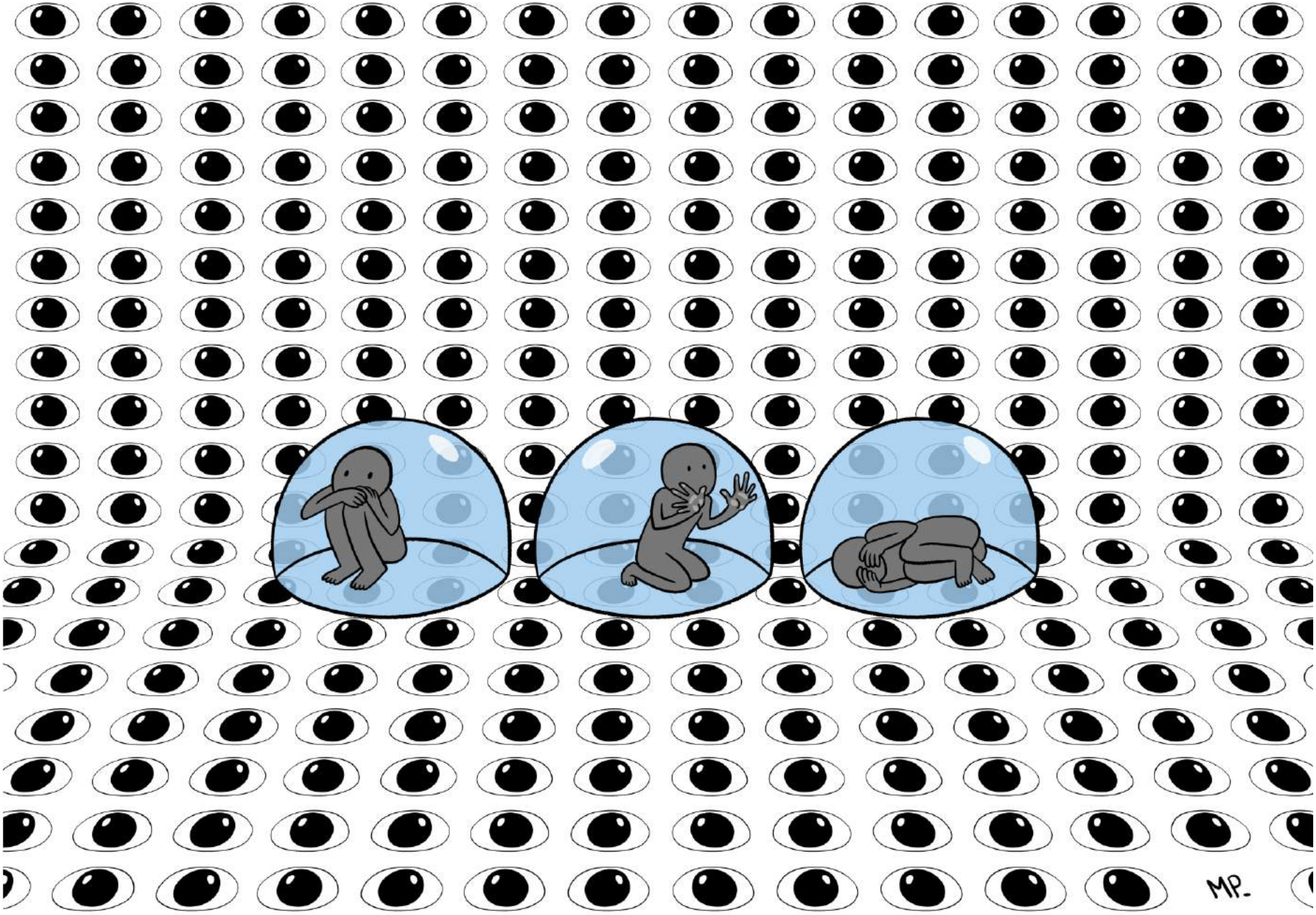
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Week 3.2

Forms of work in prison

Forms of work in prison

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The history of penal labour

Marie: Here we will discuss penal labour. Habmo, you are currently undertaking doctoral research in Cameroon, and your focus is on work in prisons. Is this a recent topic?

Habmo: Not at all. The history of penal labour should be placed in a historical perspective. In Africa, it overlaps with the history of colonisation. By using penal labour, prisons provided colonies with a low-cost labour force for public and private worksites. More broadly, penal labour was used to control populations and to punish them, including when they rejected certain administrative constraints. In Cameroon there were also agricultural penitentiaries.

Work and prison reform

Marie: And what is penal labour like today?

Habmo: In Europe, in the 1930s, Rusche and Kirchheimer were the first to take an interest in the relationship between labour and prison. For them, specific methods of punishment and practices of putting to work correspond to a given moment, to a phase of economic development. Today, it is important to think about the different goals of work in prisons.

Marie: What are the contemporary justifications of penal labour?

Habmo: Today, African states are subjected to demands from many international organisations and institutional donors that call for a rethinking of the rule of law. Programmes related to prisons are therefore part of these projects. To humanise detention conditions, work becomes in a way one of the elements of prison reform, through rehabilitative work, as opposed to the strictly punitive dimension of incarceration.

Marie: How is it taking place in Cameroon?

Habmo: In Cameroon, thirteen years ago, some priests created a carpentry workshop in a prison. During its thirteen years of existence, this workshop has already trained around sixty inmates. While the operation and financing of this workshop are managed by priests of the archdiocese, and primarily by the service for charity work, the selection of the inmates participating in the training, the work schedule, and discipline all fall to the penitentiary administration. In 2008, European funding enabled the creation of a soldering and sewing workshop. The reorganisation of some prisons and the creation of workspaces are justified by a logic of rehabilitation and resocialisation.

Questioning the functions of penal labour

Marie: So, penal labour serves a project of rehabilitation?

Habmo: It's not that simple. We are caught between different priorities here: following colonial penal labour, Cameroonian penitentiary laws in 1992 provided for the existence of production prisons. Once again, there was the intention to turn inmates into a labour force that would

benefit the exploitation of the territory. More recently, some donors and prison governors have defined the reinstatement of labour in the fields as a measure for improving prison rations. Financing agricultural activities then becomes a way to combat malnutrition and undernutrition. These projects unfortunately face the problem of escapes.

Marie: What do you mean?

Habmo: The imperatives to produce and to rehabilitate collide with the security imperative. Leaving the prison to go and work in the fields leads to the risk of escape. It has also led to a gendered management of these activities. In Cameroon, one governor wrote an internal rule limiting the number of women who could leave to work after several women returned pregnant.

Marie: Michel Foucault explains that prison is an institution with a disciplinary function. Here, you are telling me about escapes, pregnant women, and even labour that covers for deficiencies in prison. I'm a little lost!

Habmo: Let us take the example of the carpentry workshop. Its financing and operation are covered by the archdiocese. But the selection of inmates, the work schedule, and monitoring are the responsibility of the penitentiary administration. The person responsible for the carpentry woodwork, who is neither an inmate nor a prison agent, sometimes faces difficulties based on the dual hierarchy. On one side, there is the governor, and on the other, the chaplain. When this workshop was first created, the priests were involved in the selection process. Along with an evaluation of the motivation of candidates confirmed by the trainer, one of the head guards had to confirm or examine the good behaviour and good morals of the inmates. For their part, the priests had to encourage inmates who were candidates for the training programme to express their attachment to the Christian faith and the Catholic Church. In recent years, with the change in personnel and in particular a change at the head of the prison, the priests have been sidelined from the selection process.

Marie: What you are describing here is a logic of selection between good and bad inmates. Those who can be rehabilitated and those who cannot, those who would eventually be useful to society, is that right?

Habmo: Once again, it is not that simple. The carpentry workshop, because of its distance from the prison (five or six metres), also represents a place for trafficking and escape. Since the workshop opened, four of the inmates training there have escaped. And many others do not necessarily go out of love for the profession or for the training, but rather to traffic goods, to take advantage of the freedom to come and go between the city and the prison in order to bring in large amounts of products, pills, cigarettes, and drugs. In other prisons, workshops serve less as training spaces than as workspaces for inmates who are already trained in another trade. The workshop therefore produces wealth, but not through the training it provides.

Informal work in prison

Marie: What then should we think about penal labour?

Habmo: In reality, professional activities in prison are rare. In any case, they are insignificant compared to the high number of inmates. Work in prison comes more from individual initiatives. Inmates negotiate with the guards and the prison directors. Some work as traders, other as barbers, and so on. For example, in Cameroon, a barber can charge 100 francs for a haircut; he can cut the hair of five to six people per day. He cuts both the guards' hair and his fellow inmates' hair. With this money, he can buy soap, he can buy food, and he can pay other inmates to wash his clothes.

Marie: Is this the case in other countries too?

Habmo: At the Abidjan Detention and Correctional Centre, the MACA, in Côte d'Ivoire, for example, the container where rubbish is placed is called SOCOCE by the inmates, after the name of a department store in the city. The name refers to the fact that inmates recover many articles from it that they recycle into the prison's informal economy. Items can range from fans with electrical resistors to old plastic sandals worn down to the last thread.

Marie: What do these activities tell us about prison and how it works?

Habmo: In a context characterised by scarcity, this panoply of informal activities generates a great deal of revenue. And it gives a certain status to inmates. It also grants them a certain influence within prison. In addition, it makes it possible to pacify the cell blocks by tolerating the existence of these activities, even when it is a question of illegal trafficking. Work is also a set of activities that exist alongside rehabilitation policies or work programs in penitentiary spaces and establishments: for example, washing fellow inmates' clothes or washing guards' motorcycles. In short, you have to think about all these informal activities that inmates perform in prison and that generate a lot of revenue. These activities are not always considered to be work in their own right, but they really should be.

Working in prison, and after?

Marie: I have one last question. You spoke about training workshops. They are not sufficient and some inmates who work there already had training before their incarceration. When they leave prison, do they consistently find work?

Habmo: Good question! When it comes to rehabilitation, who is being trained? For what? With what future prospects in mind? What jobs will be found by these former inmates, who often come from working-class neighbourhoods? We may ask to what extent their incarceration comes more from a logic of marginalising and controlling working-class economies.

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Key takeaways

Work has been an integral part of the functioning of prisons since the colonial era. Over the decades, it has fluctuated between a logic of exploitation of the prison labour force and a project of rehabilitation in the name of human rights. However, we observe that these efforts at rehabilitation are rare and often clash with other priorities, particularly in relation to security. We might also ask ourselves about the prospects for reintegration in various socio-economic contexts across Africa. Finally, there are other, informal, kinds of work that go unrecognised, but that play a key role in the functioning of the institution by generating revenue and structuring relations within prisons.

Week 3.3

Who governs prisons?

Who governs prisons?

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Spaces and hierarchies

Frédéric: In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault considers prison to be an instrument of discipline. But when we learn about the rates of overpopulation, we have to ask how can you organise the movements, schedules, and activities of inmates?

Marie: Yes! But we must go beyond this impression of excess, of overflowing. When you arrive in prison, you first go to the prison records office and then you generally spend some time in a holding cell before being assigned to a cell block with available cells. Assignment to a block depends on certain criteria: age, sex, and sometimes the reason for incarceration.
There will also be another factor: your ability to negotiate your assignment and, potentially, your ability to pay. If I take the example of Yaoundé Central Prison, there are some inmates who are assigned to what is called the *upper* prison, the so-called blocks of 'leaders', where you find civil servants and sometimes former directors of major companies. These blocks are obviously contrasted with other areas, where people who have more trouble negotiating are likely placed. All these blocks are called the *lower* prison: they contain poor inmates, but also some veterans of the prison system.

Institutional and informal logics

Frédéric: How is life in prison structured, in concrete terms?

Marie: You not only have to know how to negotiate your assigned cell block and cell, but also, in the situations of overpopulation that you mentioned, there is the issue of finding a bed or, more precisely, a bed frame. And if I take the example of Cameroon, the bed frame is a *mandat* [mandate]. Here, you can negotiate to have a *mandat*—you can become *mandataire* [mandatary]. Or, conversely, you become a *dorment-à-terre* [ground-sleeper].

Frédéric: In any case, this means that there are hierarchies in prison.

Marie: Yes, first and foremost there are inequalities. How you *faire sa prison* [do your time], as some inmates say, depends on your social origins. We mentioned beds, but there is also the question of food. This is what a former inmate of the Mpimba prison in Burundi states:

Jules: These blocks are really for those of low status: for prisoners that receive no assistance, not from their family and not from the government. These are prisoners that take advantage of or benefit from government rations. They're people of low status.

Marie: There are inequalities, as we just saw, and there are also hierarchies, as you said. Often, the way these hierarchies are put into words produces or echoes certain spheres, for example, the military sphere. This is another thing that the former inmate at the Mpimba prison in Burundi bears witness to.

Jules: Blocks are governed by generals. We call them generals, but they are not generals in rank, no, we just call them generals or *capitas*. They are the ones responsible for telling you about the organisation of the block you're assigned to. (...) The directors appoint them and they

have as many as they want. Because there are criteria that you have to meet just to be a *capita* or general. In other words, you have to be a convict. A pre-trial detainee, like I was, couldn't have these roles. Even a prisoner who has already been sentenced but whose case is on appeal isn't eligible for these roles. Being an already-sentenced prisoner is one of the conditions. The second condition is to be on good terms with the governor, with the directors. And now, when you learn that you have to be a member of the ruling party, it becomes even more complicated. (...) Being a general, when you go to the directors, you're not required to wear a uniform. When you're a general, you leave every day and return at 8 p.m. You don't have to be like the other prisoners when you're a general—obviously I'm talking about the main general and the deputy main general, the other generals remain in prison. And then there's the right to a telephone, a mobile phone. They have the right to some benefits, like a phone to call the authorities in case of a problem, in case of subversive activity in prison, yes. It becomes a work tool.

Marie: We can see that there are forms of delegation of authority to certain inmates. There are inmates who are responsible for monitoring the courtyard, cell blocks, and cells. They manage the distribution of beds, as I mentioned. They organise full participation in the cleaning of cells and common areas. Here again, not everyone participates equally: there are some who can pay and don't have to do anything; they sometimes even have television sets. On the other hand, there are those who have to pay fees to watch television, and when they have no money, they do certain things, like cleaning. What we can learn here as well is that guards do not know all the inmates, which is the reason for these forms of delegation.

Being a prison guard

Frédéric: Guards seem to be absent from this description.

Marie: In fact, there are several points to think about. First: Who are these guards? This is a context where there are often not many salaried jobs. It is hard to get into the civil service. If there is a competitive exam to become a guard and you succeed, then you're not going to hesitate, but it is not necessarily a job you choose by default. And there are many guards who feel like they are not held in high esteem, especially compared to the police or military.

Frédéric: All those that we call the 'uniformed services'?

Marie: Yes, that's right.

Frédéric: What does the career of these guards look like?

Marie: According to them, it does not look good. They say that their salary is low, that pay rises are infrequent and not very substantial. Some say that opportunities for career mobility are hard to find. Others say that they are often transferred, and, after a while, their families no longer follow them. There are also guards who say: 'I absolutely do not want to be assigned to a rural prison', because the inmates there have to be taken out into the fields and there is the risk of escape. And there are others who want to be assigned to large urban prisons because you can sometimes meet important people there, former CEOs or ministers. They say that it might widen their networks of contacts and make it possible to exchange favours. So we can observe in passing that guards participate in these forms of categorising inmates. And guards also categorise among themselves. Some do not want to search the cell blocks at all because they feel they will have to resort to force. And there are some who are much more comfortable in the records office. There are guards who become legal advisors for inmates. And then they say that they are able to stand the test of corruption. There are also guards who say that some of their colleagues are violent. Inmates also accuse some guards of violence. The coercive aspect of prison cannot be denied: disciplinary cells, handcuffs, chains, beatings... Guards are seen as both potential representatives for projects to improve detention conditions and as potential problematic factors in the prison space.

Key takeaways

Behind the apparent disorder, we can observe certain logics underpinning placement. There is a co-production of space on the part of inmates and guards, following an informal normative register. These norms structure daily life in prison. They make it possible to know the inmates, to organise detention, to monitor, and to pacify.

Adhering to these norms, rather than rebelling against them, makes it possible to gain certain privileges, despite the constraints, shortages, and lack of privacy. The existence of violence should not be overlooked, but we should be aware that this government of prison, in both its formal and informal logics, produces norms that inmates are encouraged to follow for reasons of subsistence. Any project that fails to take these norms into account would soon reach an impasse.

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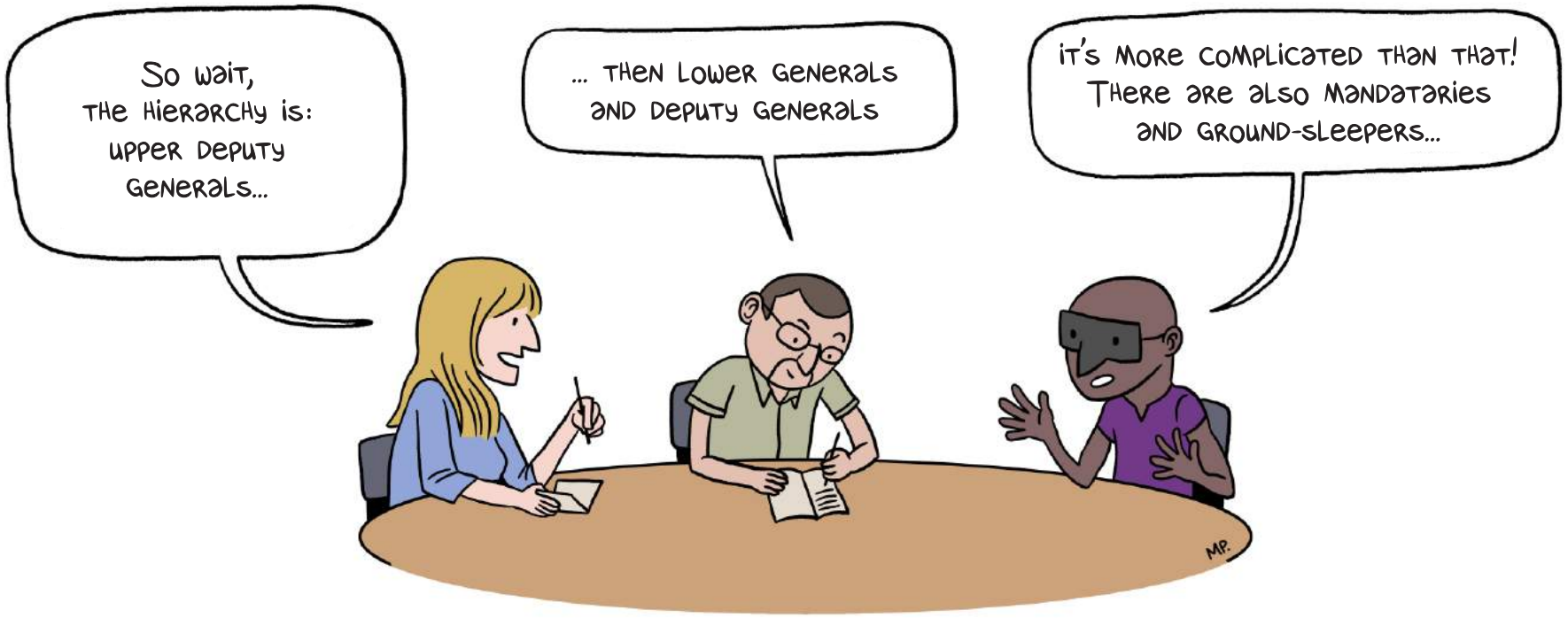

Week 3.4

Who is incarcerated?

Who is incarcerated?

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What is the purpose of prisons?

Marie: What is the purpose of prison? To discipline and punish (to paraphrase Foucault), to protect society, to rehabilitate criminals?

Frédéric: There are two key ideas to grasp here. The first is that prison materialises power. It incarcerates, it holds individuals within its walls, it organises their lives, their schedules, their activities. The second is that prison separates. It separates individuals from their environment, from their family. It de-socialises them. We can also speak of a disaffiliation, and this disaffiliation echoes precolonial practices, in particular banishment or enslavement. This expression is clearly expressed in the names given to prison in Côte d'Ivoire, for example. People say about prison, 'it's blackness', to indicate this form of annihilation of the self. In Anyi (a language in Côte d'Ivoire), prison is called *bisoua*. *Bisoua* means the house of waste. For Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, with the advent of prison sentencing, we do not merely judge a crime, but we produce categories. The perpetrator of an infraction is classified. In fact, prison produces criminals, and it brands individuals instead of re-socialising them.

The stigma of prison

Marie: Would you have any other examples?

Frédéric: TYes. Marcel Bléhoué Angora is a doctor at the Abidjan Detention and Correctional Centre, in the tuberculosis treatment centre. He describes the experience of meeting inmates outside of prison, inmates who reject the classification and the stigma of prison and who make great efforts to stop carrying them.

Marcel: I have seen some characters. I have been lucky, in the short time I have been here, to actually see politicians, economic operators, civil servants who are 'the top of the top', as someone said, but these characters practically run from us as soon as they leave the MACA. We smell like prison. We are not socially acceptable. Even if he was my friend when he was here, well, once he is outside, avoiding us is the highest priority. When they recognise us, they give a sign with their head to say, 'stay away from me' [laughter], 'you bring back too many memories', or something like that. That's what I wanted to say.

Marie: What does this account tell us?

Frédéric: Prison de-habilitates more than it rehabilitates. And not all inmates are equal when faced with this stigma. Some can escape it, but the majority are somewhat confined within this identity. Prison is one of the institutions that is used to manage spaces and populations. We can nuance this assertion to an extent. For example, look at the incarceration rate in the United States: 655 inmates per 100,000 inhabitants. For the United States, we often speak of a prison-industrial complex. Now, compare this with Burkina Faso: 41 inmates per 100,000 inhabitants, which isn't very high. In fact, prison is one institution among others that is used to manage the population, along with the police, the justice system, and public health.

Marie: You mentioned incarceration rates, but you are asking us to go further, to think a bit about who is incarcerated?

Tolerance or incarceration?

Frédéric: Absolutely! We should ask what crimes were committed by those who are incarcerated. Several forms of crimes can be identified, petty crimes like phone theft, water theft, or theft of fabric. There are also crimes with bloodshed, of course, economic crimes, or people who are accused for political reasons. More specifically, on the African continent, you can also encounter people in prison accused of witchcraft or accused of killing a person who they thought was performing witchcraft on them. In Burkina Faso, there are also entire families incarcerated for female genital mutilation. You should know that female genital mutilation is criminalised in Burkina Faso. You can therefore meet families put behind bars for this reason, with sentences relative to their participation in the excision. The sentences can go from four to six months and mothers are often punished less harshly than aunts or mothers-in-law. And it can go up to two or even four years for the excisor, especially if she repeated the practice several times despite being convicted before. Administration of the sentences, however, is not systematic. Not all families that practise female genital mutilation are sent to prison. Of course, you also see migrants who are incarcerated. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire: there are many Burkinabés in Ivoirian prisons. Homosexuals are also imprisoned. Not directly because of homosexuality, but more for indecency. This is the case in Senegal and in Côte d'Ivoire too. Across the continent, it could be said that prison is scarcely and poorly used. In fact, Michel Foucault invites us to consider the relativity of sanctions. It is important to consider what is codified as an offence and the sanctions provided for by the law for a given offence. In parallel, we must also think about what is authorised and what is legalised or, of course, what is not tolerated in society.

Marie: Let's take an example from Yaoundé to make sure I have understood. In some neighbourhoods, there are cannabis dealers. Sometimes the police tolerate them, sometimes they negotiate with them, and, at other times, they crack down on them. They first put the dealers in a cell in the police station and then they transfer them to the public prosecutor's office. Sometimes they end up in prison, then leave, to be tolerated again, etc. I could also mention the fact that, in relation to this idea of tolerance, many inhabitants of Yaoundé have the impression that embezzlement and corruption by major business owners, by senior public officials, is tolerated much more than crimes in sub-neighbourhoods.

Frédéric: With this balance between tolerance and punishment, the goal is simply to maintain order. To do this, you either allow transgressions or you crack down on them. Practices may be criminalised because they are written into the law, or they may be tolerated because they are not set in law or simply because we tolerate them. They are written in the law, but they are allowed to happen.

The carceral continuum

Marie: In this context, what can you tell us about the carceral continuum, about the connections between some neighbourhoods and prison?

Frédéric: We can observe in some neighbourhoods a particular exercise of surveillance and punishment. Certain categories of the population may be punished, potentially the most impoverished, but that does not mean that the neighbourhoods targeted are naturally criminogenic or that the individuals are born criminals. That is not the case at all.

Marie: Could you also give us an example in the Ivoirian context?

Frédéric: Yes, absolutely. Look at this photo of Koumassi-Campement. Koumassi-Campement is a sub-neighbourhood of the commune of Koumassi, which is one of the communes of Abidjan. In this neighbourhood, the activity of individuals is mostly informal. There is no water network, no sanitation, no school, and no health centre. The only tangible presence of the state is the police station that you see in the photo. This photo displays the strong presence of the police and the control of populations by the state. The young people who live in this neighbourhood mostly engage in informal activities, and


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these informal activities are regulated by the ghetto culture and the clientelist relationships that are established between social inferiors, young children, people who are in the service of more established people—these may be social elders or powerful people that are called vieux pères [old fathers]. And the connections between these social inferiors and elders, between old fathers and bons petits [good kids], is what keeps the informal economy going in this society and space. It is what characterises the life of the ghetto. It is interesting to note that the ghetto life that develops in these informal spaces is also found in prison. You find old fathers and good kids; and this is what structures the relationships between powerful inmates and others who are less powerful. This ghetto culture shapes life in prison. In return, prison is also a required rite of passage in criminal careers, as the inmates in the prison of Abidjan often say. The MACA is the training school.

Marie: Could we talk about gangs?

Frédéric: We can talk about gangs in Côte d'Ivoire if you'd like. For example, the gang that runs the prison of Abidjan is called the Camorra, but it is less present than in other contexts, in particular South Africa. Jonny Steinberg, a South African political scientist and writer, very clearly describes the experience of inmates in South African prisons. His book is called The Number. The title comes from the names given to gangs in prisons. There are the '26s' or the '29s'. Each gang has a specific role in the prison, and inmates are required to adopt a gang or enter a clientelist relationship with a cell leader who himself is part of a gang. This clientelist relationship enables the inmate to access resources and to benefit from protection by the gang. But it also requires the inmate to accept providing services, which may include washing dishes, cooking, or often taking on the role of 'Wyfie', or symbolic wife, and accepting unwanted sexual relations. These circulations of culture and values are sustained in prison by a frequent turnover of people who re-enter and leave prison. There is therefore a link, a continuum between neighbourhoods and prison, such that the ways of acting in prison and in the ghetto, if they are part of a continuum, are common for both families and inmates.

Key takeaways: The failure of prison?

Over the centuries, depending on the country or from prison to prison, there have been many criticisms of this failure of prison. These criticisms may highlight the fact that crime rates do not fall despite the presence of prisons, they may point to recidivism, or they may simply suggest that prison is effectively a school for crime.

However, as Foucault explains, while prison brands, stigmatises and categorises, its very failure is part and parcel of the prison project. It was part of prison from its very beginnings. It is not simply a question of how to improve living conditions in prison, but of asking what the social and political logics and functions of prison are in a given society, in connection with the work of other institutions, such as public health, the police, or the justice system.

In fact, Foucault helps us to ask the following questions: What social order underpins the institution? Who are the undesirables placed in pre-trial detention and ultimately incarcerated? How does a given society define what a criminal is? Why do we decide to convict one person for a crime and not another? All of Foucault's questions help us to think in a universal way about the deeper meaning of what prison is.

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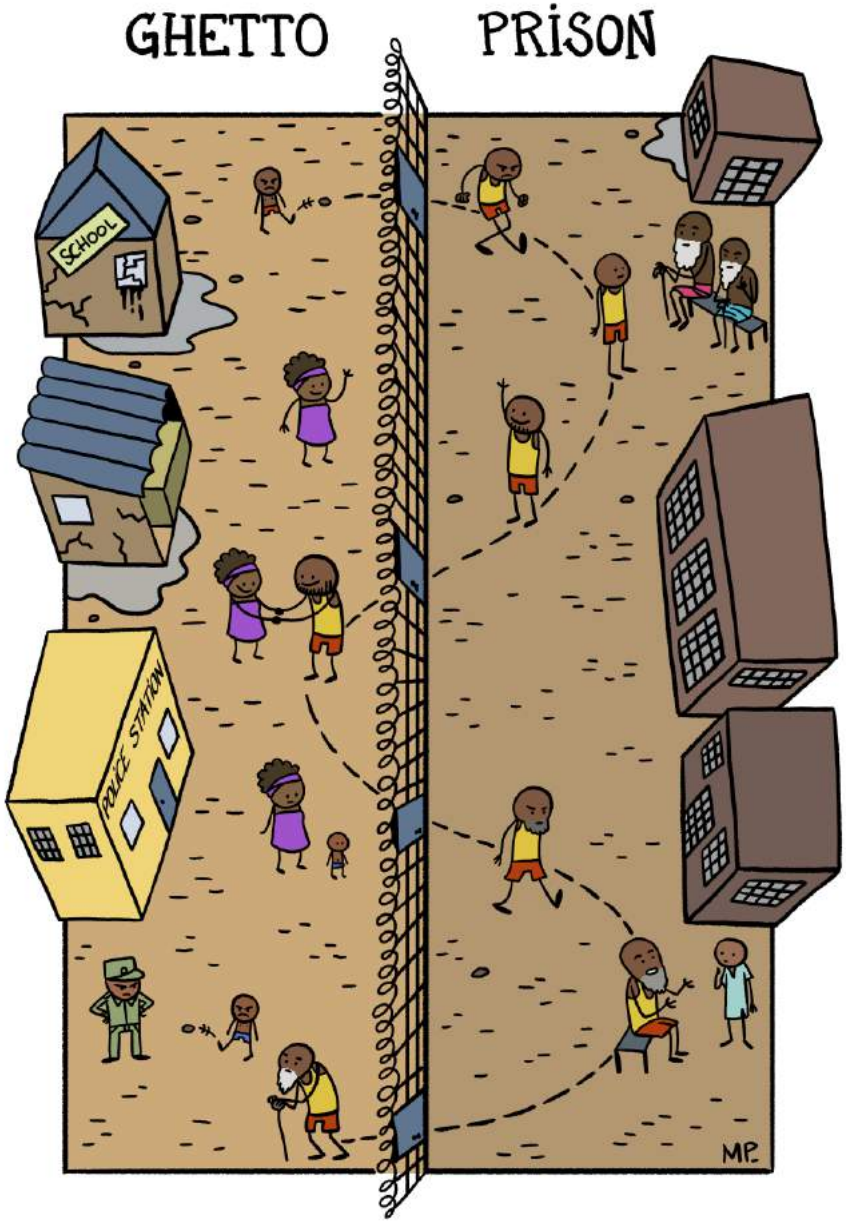

Semaine 3.5

Prison, a total institution?

Prison, a total institution?

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A project grounded in interactionist sociology

Marie: Erving Goffman is a key author in prison studies. In 1961, he published *Asylums*. Of what use can a work called *Asylums* be when thinking about prisons?

Frédéric: Goffman's project consisted in understanding how confined spaces work. For this purpose, he chose an asylum—a psychiatric hospital—, and his interest in this space departs from the stereotypes around mental illness. Instead, he sought to understand the nature of the interactions between actors in a confined space. To do so, he developed a project grounded in interactionist sociology. This way of approaching confined places makes it possible to analyse how they work and to prepare interventions.

What is a total institution?

Marie: So, it was in this context that he developed the notion of the total institution?

Frédéric: Absolutely! A total institution is a place that brings together all the features shared by asylums, military camps, monasteries, and all enclosed places where individuals have to develop forms of pre-constrained interactions.

Marie: What makes prison a total institution?

Frédéric: Prison is part of the total institution family for rather simple reasons: they all involve interactions that are regulated, codified. They have rules that are strictly enforced and yet, despite the presence of these official rules, we can also observe forms of adaptation to these worlds, forms of negotiation and of resistance by the actors involved. This is what Goffman refers to as adaptations. What is more, these places are surrounded by borders and tall walls, like prisons for example. These borders are like all borders, they are meant to be crossed. They are sites for the flow of goods, people, ideas, and values. And these flows form the link between the outside and the inside of prison.

The shock of prison

Marie: Could you give a specific example?

Frédéric: Let's take the example of an inmate. When he enters prison, his first experience is one of shock. He discovers that the rules that applied to his life on the outside are turned upside down by the experience of entering prison. A former inmate of Mpimba prison in Burundi explains how he experienced this shock.

Jules: That's when I really did get a little scared for the first time, because you see inmates who are there, who are screaming, yearning for visits, for help from the people who are there. And right there, they open the gate and put you inside. It's scary, you get the feeling that they're beasts who want to devour you, but in the end, once you're inside, you find that it's completely normal.

Frédéric: This inmate's account aptly reflects the shock of entering prison. But we must nonetheless realise that this shock is not limited to time T. It is a process that starts with being locked up in a cell at the police station. It continues in the transit, in the vehicle that takes detainees from the police station to prison, or from court to prison, where the inmates will begin to take stock of the change in rules they are faced with. And then, for instance, at the Ouagadougou Detention and Correctional Centre, when inmates first arrive, they are sat in the courtyard, they are searched a first time, they are then sent to the cells, where they undergo a second search, organised by the inmates themselves; and that's when the cell leader teaches them and explains to them the new rules that apply to their lives, the rules of this confined space.

Marie: Do you have other examples in other prisons?

Frédéric: Yes, in other prisons the same process can be seen, but sometimes practised more violently. In some prisons, inmates are systematically made to strip naked at the prison records office. They are searched again even more violently by the inmates. For instance, I have accounts by inmates at the Abidjan Detention and Correctional Centre who were stripped and had their anus and all their orifices searched by inmates looking for money that may have been hidden or ingested. All these practices, all these shocking experiences, fall under a ritual of separation, that is, of the body's incorporation of the experience, of leaving one world to be part of another; a ritual of separation that is usually followed by a ritual of aggregation, allowing the inmate's acceptance into a new world. This issue of the ritual of separation and integration was addressed in Southern Africa by a British anthropologist named Victor Turner, who attempted to understand and compare initiation rituals in Africa regarding, for instance, entry into a monastery. He points out, for example, what Goffman calls mortifications, including the marking of this new rule of life by means of blows to the body: among monks, this is reflected in the shaving of one's head. This is observed in some prisons, where inmates are systematically shaved upon entering prison. I invite you to try to observe at home, in your daily life, what are those moments when this change of status is reflected on bodies. We all come across such experiences. For example, in the context of marriage and in the context of a baptism, where consecration is the ritual that materialises the individual's change of status.

Marie: To summarise, we observe a desire for isolation from the outside and a desire for control within the walls?

Frédéric: Yes, there is indeed a will to authoritatively legislate on all aspects of the individual's daily life: the time he eats, the time he gets up, whether he has the right to go out, when, and how. At times, even the individual's sexuality is regulated. All of this is presumably taken care of by the institution's regulations. But still, compared to this Goffmanian model, which appears to present a highly codified, very controlled image of individuals' ordinary lives, we are able to very quickly see an inflection when we look at how things play out in reality. For example, there is no irreversibility of roles between inmates and guards in this process of control. Indeed, everyone takes part in co-producing this space. Let's take the example of the Abidjan Detention and Correctional Centre, the MACA, in Côte d'Ivoire. At the MACA, the prison system is not just maintained by the guards; it is not the guards alone who ensure that the law is observed. The rule of the prison is also implemented by the inmates themselves in the context of a balance between guards and inmates, which enables the development of informal activity, which is central to the functioning of the prison.

Marie: Could you give an example or a number of examples of this?

Frédéric: A concrete example: a guard can obviously put an inmate in the *blindé* [the SHU—Solitary Confinement Unit—or "the hole"] to punish him for an action that contravenes the rules of the establishment. However, the prison's informal government, the *Camorra*, can also decide to send an inmate there for breaking the rules of the *Camorra*: for example, by revealing an internal secret of how the prison operates. Each block at the MACA is managed by a head of block. The head of block is the governor of the block. He operates with certain *elements*, inmates who are at his service, with whom he is also in a clientelist relationship, of rights and duties. And among these, there is for instance the *porte-clés* or key master, who opens the blocks in the morning to allow what is called the *décalage* [displacement], i.e., letting the inmates out into the courtyard or within the building, and who in the evening will also effectively help count the inmates and pass on the number of inmates in the prison. If an inmate is missing, the *requins* [sharks] will be called upon. These are other inmates who are engaged in upholding the prison's internal law.

They scramble in search of inmates who are not present at the time of the roll call, or at the day's end, they monitor homosexual practices, and they demand respect for the rules of the *Camorra*. All of these actors contribute to upholding the rules of the prison, which govern the lives of those known as the *Kaabacha* at the MACA. The *Kaabacha* are the men of the prison, and ironically the MACA is called the *Kaaba* in Côte d'Ivoire, because the *Kaaba*, as you know, is the black stone of Mecca. What the *Kaaba* and prison have in common is the fact of being imbued with a set of extremely strict taboos and rules. Therefore, it is not just the inmates who take part in this system; the guards are also actors in this system of control. They rely on this informal government to keep the prison running. Furthermore, this system benefits them: they profit from the trafficking generated by this informal system.

Making sense of inmates' practices

Marie: I'm a little puzzled still, because Goffman gave importance to the practices of prisoners, of inmates?

Frédéric: What Goffman wanted to do was to provide an account of the ways of acting and thinking of the prisoners themselves, the detainees, the inmates. He sought to reveal their own frame of thought, and ultimately to understand how their action unfolds, and according to what logic, with regard to the confined space in which these actions take place. His book makes it possible to give the inmates a voice, and he summarises the adaptations made by actors in order to get by in this very constrained space. This is for instance what Pacôme speaks of in an interview I conducted with him in Côte d'Ivoire. Pacôme is a former inmate who was head of the infirmary block at the MACA. Pacôme, what does it mean to be in the infirmary and to be both an inmate who takes part in the prison system and who knows the rules of the *Camorra*—the unofficial government of the prison by inmates—and a health worker and head of the infirmary block? What does this entail on a day-to-day basis?

Pacôme: Firstly, as a care assistant, the inmates, my fellow inmates, respect me a lot. As for the management, almost all the agents know me, as I go to the main office on a daily basis. Every day, I might go into the main office five to six times, I may go to the blocks, the other blocks, at least three, four, five times a day. All the inmates know me, and it's me they come to when they have serious problems in order to get through to the doctors. This means I am respected, both by my fellow inmates and by the prison management, as well as in the eyes of the medical staff. So this means that I juggle between these three entities, because when inmates come to deal in the infirmary, I have to turn a blind eye their way, so as not to harm their business or myself too perhaps, as I get a glimpse of the daily settling of scores at the MACA, so I must avoid being at the receiving end of their wrath. I also try to turn a blind eye to the authorities, because the prison guards are responsible for the supervision of these inmates, and it is the very same prison guards who supply them with drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes. As such, I can't go against it, I'm just there to take note, to pass on the report to the appropriate people, namely the medical staff.

Frédéric: This interview clearly shows that inmates find themselves in a position of multiple allegiances to various sources of authority: the prison management and the prison's internal hierarchies. And this means that *faire sa prison* [doing your time], as the inmates themselves say, is actually an art of negotiation between various official and unofficial norms. Inmates must constantly adapt in order to learn how to manage their relationships with these various sources of authority, which are sometimes clearly in conflict with each other. Indeed, through these practices of negotiation, all of the prison's actors, inmates, and guards sustain and reproduce the prison's fragile balance.

Borders and porosities

Marie: The room for manoeuvre that you describe within prison, does it also exist in the relationship between prison and the outside? Are the borders a little more porous than one might be led to believe?

Frédéric: Yes, absolutely. Exchanges between the inside and the outside of prison do indeed exist. These exchanges are both material and symbolic. A very simple example: from the point of view of prison governance, the system that I just mentioned with these heads of buildings, who are often called vieux pères (old fathers) and bons petits (good kids), all of this actually takes up the codes and the value system of Nouchi society, which governs life in informal neighbourhoods, in the poorer neighbourhoods of Abidjan. The exercise of

power, the modalities of alliance, i.e., the forms of allegiance, the clientelism that governs prison life and its interactions, all of these are a continuation of life in poorer neighbourhoods.

Marie: Could you give other examples of flows?

Frédéric: Yes, certainly. Prison is not a closed world; it is a world that has multiple flows running through it. It is actually an echo chamber of tensions in society. In addition, prison, while being a situated, closed space, is also a space with numerous flows running through it. We see the entry of food, money, information, drugs, and goods permeating prison, thereby making it part of both legal and illegal networks. Finally, we must not forget that there are many actors who enter prison, and who ensure that prison is also placed in a context of de-totalisation.

Marie: Do you have examples of this?

Frédéric: Yes, we could for instance think of the presence of institutional actors who intervene in prison. For example, in terms of health: the ICRC, Médecins du Monde, Expertise France. All of these actors intervene in prison alongside other actors, such as denominational actors: Protestant and Catholic churches, as well as some Muslim movements, which are generally a little less present than Christian movements. We also come across many private actors. For instance, in Burkina Faso's Ziniaré prison there is a healer called Seydou Bikienga, who is directly contacted by the inmates by mail to ask for help. And this healer has built within the prison shelters from the sun for inmates and for the families who come to visit, and he regularly provides food aid. Finally, we shouldn't of course forget that these actors who bring things into prison also represent open doors to the outside.

Key takeaways

The total dimension of the institution is a model. It is not an intangible reality that we should systematically search for in the field. The question raised by the description of the negotiations is that of the capacity of the prison institution to achieve a result that is in keeping with its aims and its mission, while being caught between the official regulations and daily practices discernible in its operation.

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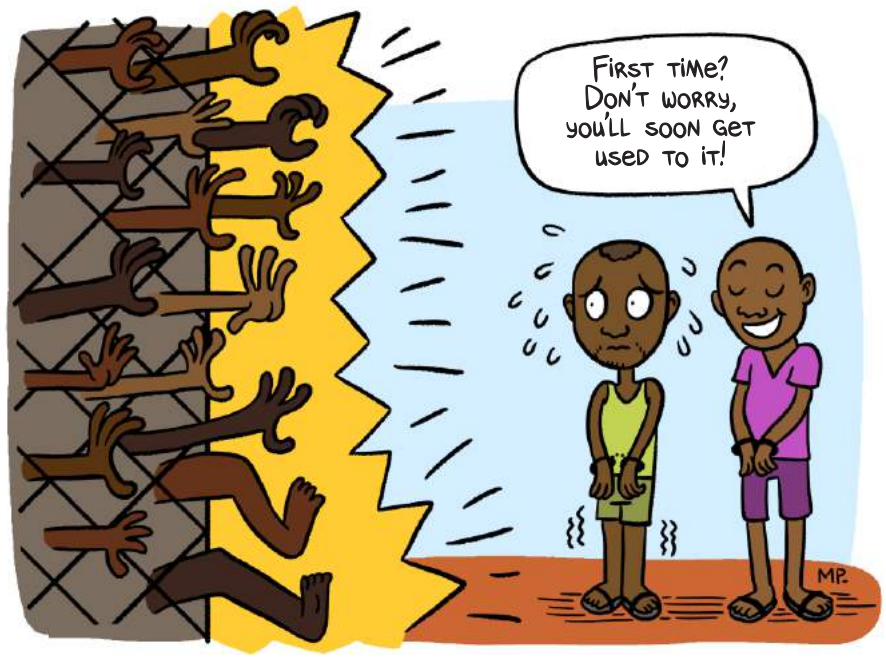

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