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TOWARD AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF PRISONS

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■ **Abstract** The late twentieth century saw an intense expansion of the prison system in the United States during the same period in which Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* influenced academic approaches to power and subjection. This article reviews the history, sociology, and anthropology of the prison, as well as some recent popular critiques of the current situation. It highlights critical perspectives on modern forms of punishment and reform and suggests areas in which an anthropology of prisons might take up questions of modernity, subjection, classification, social suffering, and ethnographic possibility in the context of an increasingly politicized and racialized system of incarceration.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States today almost two million people are in prison. The expansion of the prison system began in the early 1980s, continues despite years of falling crime rates (Blumstein & Wallman 2000), and has resulted in the highest rate of incarceration in the world (Blumstein & Beck 1999, Caplow & Simon 1999, Donziger 1996, Mauer 1999). Most of today's prisons are a far cry from those of the earlier decades of the twentieth century, in which the occasional sociologist could ply his trade remarkably undisturbed (Tonry & Petersilia 1999a). Contemporary penology involves an increasingly managerial and technological orientation, psychologically and sociologically based forms of classification, and tight control over information and access (DiIulio 1987, Rhine 1998). A huge corrections industry depends on prison growth and promotes new technologies of enforcement, surveillance, and restraint (Christie 1994; Dyer 2000; Parenti 1999, pp. 211–244).

The past 20 years of prison expansion are the same years in which "the prison"—that space of regimentation and surveillance described in *Discipline and Punish*—has come to figure prominently in contemporary scholarship (Foucault 1979, Gordon 1991). The drawing of the kneeling prisoner that illustrates Foucault's discussion of Bentham's panopticon remains an icon of disciplinary subjection and an omnipresent subtext in discussions of the modern interpenetration of power and knowledge. Yet the extent to which Foucault's prison either serves as a guide

to the historical prison or represents any particular form of institutional discipline is unclear. Twenty-five years ago the development of a massive prison complex by the end of the century was beyond the horizon of the historians and social scientists then engaged in a wide-ranging critique of institutions of social control (e.g. Morris 1974). Today a large and growing body of work alludes to, but does not explore, the prison as a central site for the exercise of disciplinary power (e.g. Butler 1990, Santner 1996), while other literature, less theoretically driven, describes and critiques a rapidly metastasizing "prison industrial complex" (Burton-Rose 1998, Tonry & Petersilia 1999a, see also Parenti 1999, Duguid 2000, Alford 2000).

Little work in anthropology concerns prisons. Other disciplines, however, have an overwhelmingly productive historical involvement with crime and punishment. Psychiatry and psychology, sociology, criminology, and to some extent modern philosophy emerged as "disciplines" in relation to nineteenth-century institutions and are deeply implicated in their classificatory and normalizing impulses (Foucault 1965, 1979, 1988; Kittler 1990; Leps 1992). These fields share with the prison itself two features of modernity described by Giddens. The first is a "hidden compulsiveness," a "drive to repetition" (Giddens 1994, pp. 68–70) that can already be seen in Weber's discussion of the Protestant work ethic. The same ethic drove Bentham and Howard when they invented the penitentiary as a means of producing conscience through repetitive and meaningless work (Bentham 1948[1789], Semple 1993, Southwood 1958). The long engagement of the "disciplines" with the prison is nothing if not repetitive, a point that troubles any attempt to critique or contribute to these discourses. The second feature of modernity is reflexivity, the "pervasive filter-back" (Giddens 1994, p. 91) through which academic discourses affect the objects they describe. This looping of influence produces a "haunting double" (Lash 1994, p. 112; Beck et al 1994) in almost all areas in which disciplinary knowledges intersect with the practice of incarceration (for a more general discussion of reflexivity in relation to prisons see Caplow & Simon 1999, pp. 97–110).

Much writing on prisons consists of normalizing discourses enmeshed in this dynamic (see, e.g. Mays & Winfree 1998). A smaller literature attempts more self-reflective and problematizing approaches, while also revealing the difficulty of escaping the prison's disciplinary orbit. In this review I consider this second form of prison writing, which I have divided into four general types: (*a*) contemporary critiques directed against the numbing effects of the current situation; (*b*) efforts, particularly following Foucault, to revisit and revise our understanding of prison history; (*c*) sociological and anthropological work that attempts an entry into and a direct engagement in the interior life of the prison; and (*d*) work that addresses women as prisoners and problematizes the predominance of masculine perspectives in and on the prison. I end with a discussion of prospects and difficulties for future anthropological work. Though I discuss some European sources, my primary emphasis is the prison in the United States. For general overviews of US prisons see McShane & McShane (1996), Christianson (1998), and Tonry &

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Petersilia (1999b); for studies of historical and contemporary prisons worldwide see, for example, O'Brien (1982), Spierenburg (1991), Morris (1998), and Stern (1998). On the recent spread of US practices to Europe, see Wacquant (1999).

WRITING AGAINST THE CONTEMPORARY PRISON

A growing critical literature meets the current prison boom head-on by questioning its premises and contextualizing the political emphasis on crime and punishment that supports it. Over half of prisoners in the United States are African American and three fourths are people of color; a rapidly growing number are women, also three fourths of color (Currie 1998, Donziger 1996, Mauer 1999, Miller 1996, Tonry 1995). Critics contend that prisons perform a kind of social, economic, and political "magic" by "disappearing" large numbers of poor and minority people (A Davis in Gordon 1998/1999, Donziger 1996, Hallinan 2001, Irwin & Austin 1993, Miller 1996, Tonry 1995, Walker et al 2000). This process occurs on many levels. One is political: repression of "disorder" and dissent through increasingly draconian methods of policing and control, including the war on drugs (Baum 1996, Dowker & Good 1995, Kennedy 1997, Kerness 1998, Miller 1996, Parenti 1999, Perkinson 1994). Another is economic: Prisons create jobs both in the rural areas where they are sited and in the growing prison-related industrial sector, remove the unemployed from statistical visibility, add to the census of depopulated counties, and disenfranchise current and former prisoners (Christie 1994, Davis 1998b, Dyer 2000, Gilmore 1998, 1998/1999, Gordon 1998/1999, Western & Beckett 1999, Western Prison Project 2000). The public discourse on crime reinforces this prison magic. Containing a barely concealed subtext in which danger to "law-abiding citizens" is located in African-American and other men of color, it "reproduces racism . . . in [an] ideologically palatable fashion" (Parenti 1999, p. 242), serves to "mobilize . . . fears . . ." (Davis 1998b, p. 62), and "relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging . . . the problems of late capitalism" (A Davis in Gordon 1998/1999, p. 148; see also Baum 1996, Dyer 2000, Parenti 1999, Reiman 1998, Tonry 1995). Analysts of media representations of crime and imprisonment point to the political, economic, and cultural work these representations perform in supporting policies that lead to increasing rates of incarceration (Chambliss 1999, pp. 13–59; Baum 1996; Beckett 1997; Caplow & Simon 1999; Currie 1998; Dyer 2000; Ferrell & Websdale 1999). The proliferation of "supermaximum" high security facilities is a parallel form of magic within prisons, serving to further "disappear" some prisoners, again disproportionately African-American and other men of color, through new forms of high-tech solitary confinement (Abu-Jamal 1995, Dowker & Good 1995, Grassian 1983, Haney 1993, Human Rights Watch 1997, Kerness 1998, Parenti 1999, Perkinson 1994).

Ranging from pragmatic to visionary, from experience-near to sweeping, critiques of the prison problematize its role in the production of an "enemy within" (Duguid 2000, pp. 147–77). Prisoners also participate in this critical tradition of

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resistance to the prison's "dual function: to keep *us* [non-prisoners] out as well as *them* in" (Wicker 1998, p. xi). One former prisoner writes, "Most Americans remain ignorant . . . that they live in a country that holds hostage behind bars another populous country of their fellow citizens" (Baca 1998, p. 363). Among many voices from that second country are Himes (1998[1953]), Rideau (1992), Abbott (1981), and Genet (1964), as well as contributors to Franklin (1998b), Chevigny (2000), Arriens (1997), and Leder (2000). A prisoner newsletter and website report on prison conditions, legal actions, and the political climate (*Prison Legal News*, with links to many other prison sites; see also Burton-Rose 1998). Prisoners' accounts of current conditions, especially of solitary confinement in supermax prisons, describe a "nether-world of despair" (Abu-Jamal 1995, p. 12) and are "far more bleak and desperate than the prison literature of any earlier period" (Franklin 1998a, p. 17).

Many critics of the prison aim to "interrupt the conversation"—both popular and academic—that frames contemporary forms of incarceration as inevitable (Gordon 1998/1999, p. 156). They take on what Feldman, writing about the media imagery surrounding Desert Storm and Rodney King, calls "cultural anesthesia": "the banishment of disconcerting, discordant, and anarchic sensory presences and agents that undermine the normalizing and often silent premises of everyday life" (Feldman 1994, p. 405; cf. Daniel 1998, Kleinman & Kleinman 1997). Anesthesia results from evading the "embodied character of violence," not only through denial, but also through numbingly repetitive media images that engage the viewer in "material complicity" with its terms. Like police brutality and war, the prison enacts on the bodies of "others" a violence camouflaged by its position as what Davis calls an "abstract site" in the public imagination (A Davis in Gordon 1998/1999, p. 147; cf. Benjamin 1986[1920], Davis 1999, Santner 1996). At the same time, however, this national "secret" is highly fetishized, both as the spoken or unspoken complement to crime and in many of its public representations (cf. Sloop 1996). The academic study of prisons is enmeshed in this contradiction: On the one hand, the appearance of "objectivity" contributes to the abstraction that protects these sites from view, while on the other, intense engagement runs the danger of a compulsive intimacy with the terms provided by the prison itself.

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REVISITING THE MARCH OF PROGRESS

In 1939 Rusche & Kirchheimer asked, "To what extent is the development of penal methods determined by . . . social relations?" (Rusche & Kirchheimer 1939). This question had great impact in the years following the reissue of their work in 1968, the same year in which the Paris student uprising struck Foucault with the realization, he later said, that he had been talking about power all along (Foucault 1980, pp. 115–16; also see Bright 1996, pp. 15–18). In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault turned Rusche & Kirchheimer's question on its head to offer the prison as an originary ground for the analysis of power (Foucault 1979). Other scholars,

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influenced by the same moment, produced less generalizable accounts that also direct attention to the contingent nature of the prison and its embeddedness in particular social and political conditions (Howe 1994, pp. 63–64). Like Foucault, they challenge conventional or "march of progress" accounts (Howe 1994, Cohen 1988; for examples of conventional histories see Am. Correct. Assoc. 1983, Keve 1991).

The more materialist of these approaches, and the closest to Rusche, considers prisons in direct relationship to labor conditions. Writing about American penitentiaries of the early nineteenth century, Melossi sees them as a response to economic dislocation in a society in which "Pauperism . . . came to be intimately connected with the problem of . . . criminal behavior" and a "voluntaristic explanation of 'being poor' [was] conducive to a 'punitive' approach" (Melossi & Pavarini 1981, p. 119). At the Auburn penitentiary—one of the first American prisons—a combination of factory-style labor during the day and isolation at night created "work structured in the same way as the dominant form of factory work" (Melossi & Pavarini 1981, p. 129; Melossi 1978). This approach can be criticized for its insistence on the primacy of the economic (as, e.g. by Howe 1994), but as a demystification of the rhetoric of reform it also highlights the compulsive temporal and spatial arrangements of modernity. Prison labor mimics the factory not because the factory is the primary institution from which prison derives, but because the configuration of bodies, work, and architecture in the postcolonial prison constitutes a form of power peculiar to the new democratic regime (Foucault 1979, Gordon 1991).

This configuration is central to three histories written in the 1970s that join *Discipline and Punish* in regarding the "architecture of mind" as central to the modern prison (Bender 1987). Rothman considers the asylums and penitentiaries of the Jacksonian era less in economic terms than as the consequence of a political response to widespread fear of social disorder (Rothman 1971; see also Rothman 1980). This response rested on the assumption that architecture was "one of the most important of the *moral* sciences" (Rothman 1971, p. 83). Evans explores the parallel development in England of the belief that "architecture [was] . . . a serviceable weapon in the war . . . against vice . . . as a vessel of conscience and as pattern giver to society . . ." (Evans 1982, p. 6). The intent to make "each individual . . . the instrument of his own punishment," in the words of one proponent (Rothman 1971), was most fully realized at Pentonville in England. Ignatieff describes the enforcement, in this mid-nineteenth-century penitentiary, of total isolation sustained by an impersonal "bureaucratic formalism" (Ignatieff 1978, p. 113). "Men came apart in the loneliness and the silence [and] . . . were taken away to the asylum" (Ignatieff 1978, p. 9).

Further unpacking of the social context and moral contingency of the nineteenth-century prison has followed these critical histories. Important, though so far scanty, is work that makes clear the central relationship between slavery and the American prison. The coexistence of slavery with the new penitentiary system was theorized by prison advocates (some of whom were involved in the antislavery movement)

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in terms of the beneficial effects of labor on the mind (soul). Slaves were not subject to reform of character, but the position of the prisoner as a "slave of the state" came both to substitute for slavery and to serve as an impetus for the rationalization of prison discipline (Hirsch 1992, p. 76; Davis 1998a, p. 99; Lichtenstein 1996; Oshinsky 1997; Wacquant 2000). One reading of the relationship between the prison and the construction of self (that is, the soul or mind that was considered absent in slaves) locates the intent to rewrite the "character" of prisoners in the earlier context of eighteenth-century literary conventions that portray the newly modern individual. "Both the realist novel and the penitentiary pretend that character is autonomous, but in both cases invisible authority . . . fosters the illusion [of a] consciousness . . . as free to shape circumstance as to be shaped by it" (Bender 1987, p. 212; cf. Foucault 1979). Individual "freedom to shape circumstance," this foundational "pretense" of the historical prison, continues to be the most familiar contemporary defense of prison discipline and labor, masking both racially disproportionate incarceration and the use of inmate workers in the global economy (e.g. Alford 2000, Bennett et al 1996; cf. Cole 1999 Davis 1998b, 1999).

A pervasive rhetoric of reform is built into the modern prison from the outset (Foucault 1979; e.g. Bookspan 1991, Pisciotta 1994). Ignatieff ends his grim account of Pentonville by hopefully suggesting that to "pierce through the rhetoric . . . [of] carcerel power as 'reform'" is to prevent this "suffocating vision of the past" from "adjust[ing] us to the cruelties of the future" (Ignatieff 1978). Instead, a new set of reforms was springing up even as he wrote, including a conservative "new realism" that eschews utilitarian (rehabilitative) approaches in favor of incapacitation (e.g. Bennett et al 1996, DiIulio 1987). Today's supermaximum prisons isolate inmates much as Pentonville did, but have largely abandoned any gestures toward rehabilitation. Cohen noted in 1983 that in Orwell's dystopia the "proles" were subject more to segregation than to thought control. He speculated prophetically that we might be headed for a similar division between those subject to normalization (through various therapeutic strategies) and those simply encapsulated and policed (Cohen 1983, p. 121; cf. Hamm et al 1994, Parenti 1999).

Nevertheless, the penological and criminological literature depends on proposals for change, and in making them critics are drawn into an inevitable relationship to the rhetoric they hope to "pierce." Cohen quotes Adorno's remark that "One must belong to a tradition to hate it properly" (Cohen 1988, p. 5). Reflecting (from the perspective of 1985) on his career as a critical criminologist, he writes that "Every attempt I ever made to distance myself from the subject, to criticize it, even to question its very right to exist, has only got me more involved in its inner life" (Cohen 1988, p. 8). One consequence of this ambivalence on the part of critical theorists has been a series of shifting identifications of "where" power is. Is the enemy centralized authority, in which case "community" corrections and treatment offer a way out? Or is community itself a euphemism for intrusive surveillance and normalization? (Cohen 1983, 1985; cf. Torrey 1997). Such oppositions are enmeshed in a repetitive cycle of reform that seems to draw all

who enter—whether self-consciously or not—into the strategies through which power/knowledge reconfigures and disguises itself.

Following the publication of *Discipline and Punish*, numerous historians weighed in with objections, though there seems to be general agreement about the moment when the modern disciplinary apparatus took shape (Howe 1994, Ignatieff 1983, Megill 1987). Leaving this aside, however, both conventional and critical histories of the prison show that "discipline" in prisons has in fact been erratic and temporary (Beaumont & de Tocqueville 1964[1833], pp. 162–163; cf. Hamm et al 1994, O'Brien 1982). We are misled about the implications for theory if we take too seriously administrative schemes for the prison and miss the extent and implications of slippage away from them (Ransom 1997, p. 33; cf. Alford 2000, Garland & Young 1983). The contemporary prison calls out for analysis along the lines suggested by the work of Ransom, Feldman, and others who ask how disciplinary power has those gaps and openings suggested by Foucault's comments on power's inevitable link to resistance (Feldman 1991, Ransom 1997; for a compelling recent example, see Jackson & Burke 1999). Studies of the historical prison lend depth to our understanding of the "deep struggle . . . between discipline and its objects" (Bright 1996, p. 26) and suggest that the contemporary prison be seen not only as shaped but also as haunted by the past (Gordon 1997, pp. 3–28).

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ENTERING THE PRISON: THE SOCIOLOGICAL TRADITION

Beginning in 1933, the Stateville Penitentiary in Illinois had an official job title called sociologist-actuary. Although the academics who held it had "no impact whatever" on day-to-day prison operation, it was symbolic of the decades-long relationship between the prison and University of Chicago sociologists (Jacobs 1977, p. 19). Classic works by these scholars considered the prison of the 1930s and 1940s a "small society" or a "society of captives," best understood in terms of roles and hierarchies. This view was reinforced by the isolated and relatively homogeneous character of prison populations at the time (Clemmer 1958, Sykes 1958; for a prisoner's account of this era at Stateville, see Leopold 1957).

By the 1970s it had become clear that prisons were in a state of flux and less at the "margins" than these accounts suggest (Irwin 1988). Jacobs, a member of the next generation of Chicago sociologists, approached Stateville through a combination of archival research and participant observation with inmates. Influenced by Rusche & Kirchheimer and Rothman, as well as his Chicago mentors, he viewed the prison "developmentally" as it moved away from the rigidly authoritarian regime of the 1930s and 1940s (Jacobs 1977, cf. Erickson 1957). Irwin studied the prison in Soledad, California, where he had himself been incarcerated earlier (Irwin 1970, 1980). Both Jacobs and Irwin attributed the decline of the "Big House" prisons of the previous era to "penetration" by legal, social welfare, and gang influences. The old order of authority decayed through successive periods of reform as links

to the outside, particularly to the civil rights movement, increased (cf. Cummins 1994).

Both Jacobs and Irwin point to some reasons why little additional ethnographic work has been done in US prisons (cf. Tonry & Petersilia 1999a, p. 10). The period of relative permeability to academics had subsided by the early 1980s with the increased bureaucratization and rationalization of prison management described at its inception by Jacobs (see also Irwin & Austin 1993). His appendix on "participant observation among prisoners" recounts his unsuccessful struggle to avoid identification with any particular group and the threats leveled against him when he failed (Jacobs 1977, pp. 215–229). Such an unpredictable situation would be avoided by most prison administrators today (for exceptions see Fleisher 1989, Thomas 1988, Owen 1998 and, for journalism, Bergner 1998). In addition, the sociologists and other reform-minded entrants into the prisons of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were engaged in a reflexive "loop" in which their perspective on human nature—particularly their belief in rehabilitation and enthusiasm for prison "subcultures"—contributed to experimental programs throughout the country; these were largely abandoned after the violent inmate uprisings of the 1970s and early 1980s (Unseem & Kimball 1989, Braswell et al. 1994; but for Canada and Great Britain see Duguid 2000 and Waldram 1997).

Some continuing sociological research explores the socialization and role adaptation of correctional officers (guards), reminding us that prison workers are worthy of study in their own right (Crouch 1980, Philliber 1987, Zimmer 1989). One researcher became a guard in a Texas prison. His description of his own socialization and subsequent witnessing of extreme violence toward inmates suggests both the difficulty of entering this world and the ethical hazards encountered once in it (Marquart 1986; for an excellent contemporary account by a journalist see Conover 2000). Violence is also at the center of *States of Seige*, which describes in detail the social dynamics of prison riots (Unseem & Kimball 1989). Another heir to the sociological tradition is the social psychologist Toch, who has developed an ecological approach that considers prisoners' lives in terms of adaptation and coping styles (Toch 1977; also see Johnson 1987, Morris 1998, Toch & Adams 1994). Toch's perspective is helpful for its emphasis on the interactive aspects of prison work and developmental orientation to the experience of being imprisoned.

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ENTERING THE PRISON: ANTHROPOLOGY

The anthropological work that has been conducted in and about prisons is more self-conscious than the sociological perspectives just described, and reveals contradictions perhaps less obvious in more accessible ethnographic contexts. Analytic and critical possibilities that emerge by virtue of the prison's "confinement" of resistance within a (presumably) observable space are fraught with difficulty in coming to know this resistance as an outsider (cf. Bright 1996, pp. 1–31). Not least of these difficulties is that observation itself is what is being

resisted. Feldman's account of political violence in Northern Ireland relies on former prisoners' descriptions of extremes of brutality and resistance, a context in which the usually submerged kinship between "informant" and "informer" was an explicit danger. Feldman notes that in "a culture of surveillance, participant observation is . . . a form of complicity with those outsiders who surveil" (Feldman 1991, p. 12). He chose instead to gather oral histories that describe how larger structures of authority and domination are both expressed in and resisted by political action at the level of the body. This move gives him compelling access to the prisoner's (retrospective) bodily relation to the prison, while offering some protection from the political implications of telling and listening.

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The now-classic Stanford Prison Experiment has come to stand for the possibility that the individuals who make up the prison are susceptible to being "made up" by it according to their positions in a structure of domination (Haney et al 1981; cf. Butler 1990, Hacking 1986, Morris 1995). Two ethnographic monographs written in the 1980s suggest the susceptibility of the anthropologist to this dynamic. In striking contrast to Feldman's approach, Fleischer enlisted the support of the Bureau of Prisons to become a correctional officer at the Federal Penitentiary at Lompoc, California. He describes a period in which "I began to think of myself as a correctional worker . . . I was becoming lost . . . what hacks [guards] did was right, what convicts did was wrong" (Fleisher 1989, p. 112). The result, *Warehousing Violence*, is a vividly realist account supporting the "warehousing" of violence. Fleischer contends that the "profit-making maximum-security penitentiary" can, under good management, become a "peaceful" solution to violence by hard-core offenders. Thomas, whose participant observation in a prison drew him toward what he came to see as a slippery slope of identification with inmates, describes the pull in the opposite direction. "In ten years of research, many informants became close friends . . . there was a danger that I might begin to romanticize [them]" (Thomas 1993, p. 46). His decision to write on topics "less vulnerable to distortion by emotional attachment" resulted in an ethnography centered on the studied resistance of jailhouse lawyering (Thomas 1993, p. 47; Thomas 1988).

Both of these ethnographers are acutely aware of how their subjects are positioned and show how the formation of self and "others" proceeds at multiple levels within the hierarchical structure of the prison. They do not, however, see how these positions entail a cumulative investment in performances that must be repeatedly developed and asserted in practice. Thus, they describe the bedrock drive to legitimate the institution through repetitive acts of domination but tend to attribute the results to the "character" of either inmates or staff. Feldman is helpful here because, though he does not observe these interactions, he grounds his understanding in the body with the aim of "fractur[ing] the appearance of lawful continuity between centers of legitimation and local acts of domination" (Feldman 1991, p. 2). Though the accounts of Fleischer and Thomas are rich in an awareness of "local acts," they do not engage the tension underlying "lawful continuity" as it emerges in both the effort of legitimation and the need to conceal its fundamental instability (cf. Benjamin 1986[1920], Santner 1996). Without this element,

however, it is difficult to situate the prison beyond its internal preoccupations with who has power and why, and to ask, instead, how they have it and what supports and legitimates its expression (Rhodes 1998; LA Rhodes in preparation).

CONSIDERING GENDER

The majority of prison studies describe male inmates without reflecting on the implications of this depiction or the language in which it is framed (Howe 1994). Feminist writers point to a double invisibility here that applies to both women and men. Women prisoners have been largely ignored by historical and sociological work, though a rather scant gender-sensitive literature runs parallel to the approaches discussed thus far. The critical history and sociology of women prisoners suggest that they may be simultaneously neglected and subjected to specifically intrusive and abusive forms of discipline (Belknap 2000; Carlen 1983, 1998; Dobash et al 1986; Freedman 1981; Rafter 1985; Zedner 1998; for an anthology of writing by women prisoners see Scheffler 1986). Many observers note that norms of female domesticity influence the discipline imposed on women and intensify the pain of imprisonment when they are separated from families (Howe 1994), so that even in prison there is "no place where (women) . . . can be considered as family-immune" (Carlen 1998, p. 86). Several contemporary scholars and journalists explore the life stories of women prisoners, connections between women's imprisonment and the general increase in incarceration, and the social dynamics of women's prisons (Girshick 1999, Owen 1998, Rierden 1997, Watterson & Chesney-Lind 1996). Concurrent with this effort to bring attention to women's imprisonment, feminist scholars have also become increasingly aware of the danger of reproducing a normative category of "women" and "repeat[ing] criminology's 'will to truth'" in relation to it (Howe 1994, p. 214).

The second invisibility pertains to the fact that the maleness of prisons is so taken for granted in penal history and contemporary criminology. This suggests that "rather than looking at men as prisoners we might look at prisoners as men" (Sim 1994, p. 101; cf. Howe 1994, Naffine 1996). Such a perspective, so far barely visible in the expanse of prison literature, opens up questions of the prison's various displays of masculine power, men as victims of violence in prison, the influence of gendered popular representations of crime and prisons, and the exploration of unconscious gender assumptions in criminology and penology (Naffine 1996, Sim 1994).

INTERRUPTING THE TERMS OF DEBATE

The increasing impact of prisons on growing numbers of people is a compelling reason for turning anthropological attention to these institutions. Many issues have arisen or become more acute in the years of expansion and are in need of fresh insight and analysis. Prominent among them are racism in the criminal justice

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system, including the prison (Cole 1999, Davis 1998b, Donziger 1996, Walker et al 2000); the increasing numbers and long sentences of women in prison (Donziger 1996); increasing numbers of mentally ill inmates (Kupers 1999, Torrey 1997), including those in supermax prisons (Lovell et al 2000); an expansion of policing that overlaps the operation of the prison (Parenti 1999); economic globalization and changes in employment patterns that affect both prison staff and prisoners (Gilmore 1998/1999); high-tech forms of solitary confinement (Dowker & Good 1995, Parenti 1999); and the impact of imprisonment on families and neighborhoods (Gilmore 1998, Wacquant 2000). Although I have indicated some of the available analyses of these issues, few include either general anthropological or specifically ethnographic perspectives.

The most pressing need for the study of prisons is to challenge the terms of the discourse that frames and supports them. One possibility I have mentioned is to extend to contemporary prisons the kinds of questions that have been applied to their history. For example, Foucault queried the production and "utility" of the nineteenth-century discourse on the "dangerous individual" as the object of new forms of policing and confinement (Foucault 1980, p. 47, 1988). This discourse has since multiplied exponentially (see, e.g. Hare 1993, Meloy 1997), and its current version figures heavily in prison management. Antidotes can be found in recent works that explore the development of classificatory systems within and outside institutions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Donzelot 1997, Kittler 1990, Leps 1992) and in the critical unpacking of the contemporary classificatory and criminological impulse (Knox 1998, Lesser 1993, Seltzer 1998, Tithecott 1997). These authors suggest avenues for exploring the construction of criminality and madness in the practices of prisons and in the criminal justice system more generally. What effect does classification have on those classified and on those doing the classifying? How does the productivity of classification intersect with other practices, such as prison industry (labor) and education, in institutions based on principles of transparency and rationality? (cf. Carlen 1983; Hacking 1986; Nuckolls 1998; Rhodes 1998, 2001; Sloop 1996).

A second possible challenge to the prevailing discourse centers on the link between transparency (surveillance) and subjection. It is possible to simply critique the contemporary prison as a site of visual power, but doing so produces a rather static and functionalist argument that fails to take into account the play of visibility and opacity in these settings (cf. Alford 2000). More helpful is to take Foucault's critique of vision beyond its use as a metaphor for reflexivity. Ransom (1997) suggests that power/knowledge offers the possibility of interception, a fluid and sometimes fragile overlapping and disjunction. This perspective can be used, for example, to understand the complex dynamics of the relationship between psychiatry, "treatment," and the prison (Carlen 1998; Duguid 2000; Kupers 1999; Lunbeck 1994; Rhodes 1998, 2000). We can thus discover a less automatically reflexive, more complex site for resistance in the form of unexpected subjective, interpersonal and/or bodily identifications (Bright 1996, Rhodes 1998).

These possibilities must be seen, however, in relation to the specifics of the current political economy and the haunting of the American prison by slavery, as well as in light of the use of force in contemporary prisons (Davis 1998a,b; Gilmore 1998/1999; Kerness 1998; Reiman 1998; Wacquant 2000). Power/knowledge is not, as Foucault himself noted, intended to encompass conditions more closely resembling slavery or torture, both of which can also be found in (some) US prisons (Hamm et al 1994, Kerness 1998). Thus, we need to ask, not only about the "fit" of power, knowledge, and the prison, but about those areas in which other forms of domination need to be addressed. The close connection between incarceration and policing, the use of electronic weapons and restraints, and the preventive detention of reputed "gang members" within prisons all point to hybrid forms of power with particularly problematic implications in light of the current massive incarceration of people of color (Parenti 1999).

The entanglement of the prison with the intellectual history of the West also calls out for exploration through ethnographic and oral history approaches to those directly involved as prisoners, families of prisoners, correctional workers, administrators, architects, and manufacturers. The premise of much analysis of prison history is that internal contradictions and certain paradoxical elements of practice can be discovered in institutional structures. Those in "the system" struggle with the terms of these contradictions and may have something to tell us about how this struggle unfolds. If arguments about prisons are happening in prisons and expressed in daily practice, then we might expect them to shed some light on how such discourses become so hard to dislodge.

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CONCLUSION

A few of the prison researchers described here have approximated "traditional" ethnography, and without their work we would know less about prisons than we do. Fundamentally, however, no outsider/observer can "participate" in the situation of the prisoner. Prison workers are well aware that this is the case for all visitors, often offering enthusiastic tours of their facilities that reveal and conceal in the same gesture. The ethnographer may get past the tour to an extent, but prisons are pervaded by an interpersonal opacity that thwarts even those who govern, manage, or live in them (cf. Bergner 1998, Conover 2000). To forget one's position as an outsider is to be in danger, not only from interpersonal trouble of various kinds but, more enduringly, from alarming emotional and intellectual identifications. Here the ethnographic desire for (perhaps fantasized but nonetheless compelling) alignment with one's subject(s) must be relinquished or at least bracketed (Daniel 1985, p. 246). Nor can one discount the element of coercion that dogs the acquisition of "knowledge" in this setting (cf. Hornblum 1998). The structure of relations inside the prison should disabuse us of the hope—often held in spite of ourselves—that knowledge of power/knowledge can trump power/knowledge itself (Feldman 1991).

This undermining of ethnographic identification is counterbalanced by the potential for an anthropology of prisons to engage us in other ways. Although the inaccessibility and opacity of the prison make ethnography difficult, they do not necessarily preclude it. In a thoughtful discussion of what she calls "quasi-ethnography" in a women's prison, Owen points out that the necessity for restraint on her part—for example, her recognition that prisoners may have too little privacy to tolerate the intrusion of a researcher—also deepened her understanding of the situation she was studying (Owen 1998). Restraints imposed on research by prison staff may be similarly folded into the process through which the ethnographer comes to appreciate the larger dynamics of restraint governing these institutions (cf. Waldram 1998). This kind of work, so obviously partial and so inescapably part of the historical context it aims to illuminate (Feldman 1991), forces an awareness of the paradoxical entanglements that snag us in the very categories and problems we set out to study.

Although no single work of anthropology will resolve this conundrum, we are increasingly aware that social suffering—in wars, illness, and as a result of a myriad of forms of social injustice—raises the issue of how we might speak to and against cultural anesthesia without contributing to its perpetuation (Daniel 1998, Feldman 1994, Kleinman & Kleinman 1997, Scheper-Hughes 1995). The dramatically bounded space of that "other country" of prisoners (Baca 1998) demands that we engage the haunted and saturated quality of specific routines of domination while not losing sight of the "prison nation" in which they occur (Hallinan 2001). We may hope that an anthropology thus grounded can offer some resistance to the historical undertow of compulsive repetition. The task of steering between abstract and fetishized representation is delicate, but it contains the possibility of a necessary confrontation with the brute facts of domination as they play out in institutions that have become ubiquitous, if partially veiled, features of our cultural and political landscape.

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