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Inside-out: exploring prison culture

Inside-out: esplorare la cultura carceraria

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Abstract

Prison culture encompasses the unwritten rules, values, behaviors, and power structures within correctional institutions, emerges from interactions among inmates, staff, and the broader societal context. This culture encompasses social hierarchies, unwritten behavioral codes, survival mechanisms, and attitudes towards correctional systems. Its influence extends to inmates' behavior, perceptions, psychological well-being, and the dynamics of prison management. Studying prison culture is vital for identifying institutional gaps, enhancing safety and efficiency, supporting inmate rehabilitation, safeguarding human rights, and informing evidence-based criminal justice policies. This chapter examines the historical evolution of prison culture from the 1800s to today, exploring its elements, effects, and the challenges it poses. By analyzing these aspects, the chapter aims to foster a comprehensive understanding to guide humane and effective corrections practices.

Keywords: prison culture; prison history; restorative justice; prison factors.

Sintesi

La cultura carceraria comprende le regole non scritte, i valori, i comportamenti e le strutture di potere all'interno delle istituzioni correttive, e nasce dalle interazioni tra detenuti, personale e il contesto sociale più ampio. Questa cultura include gerarchie sociali, codici comportamentali non scritti, meccanismi di sopravvivenza e atteggiamenti nei confronti dei sistemi correttivi. La sua influenza si estende al comportamento dei detenuti, alle loro percezioni, al benessere psicologico e alle dinamiche della gestione carceraria. Studiare la cultura carceraria è fondamentale per identificare lacune istituzionali, migliorare la sicurezza e l'efficienza, supportare la riabilitazione dei detenuti, tutelare i diritti umani e informare politiche di giustizia penale basate su dati concreti. Questo capitolo esamina l'evoluzione storica della cultura carceraria dal 1800 a oggi, esplorandone gli elementi, gli effetti e le sfide che pone. Analizzando questi aspetti, il capitolo mira a promuovere una comprensione approfondita per guidare pratiche correttive umane ed efficaci.

Parole chiave: cultura carceraria; storia del carcere; giustizia riparativa; fattori carcerari.

1. Introduction

Why is it important to study *prison culture*?

Prison culture is a set of unwritten rules, values, behaviors, norm, practices, attitudes, and power structures that develop within correctional institutions: it arises from the interaction between inmates and prison staff, as well as from the social and power dynamics present within the prison context. Furthermore, prison culture may include elements such as social hierarchy among inmates, unwritten codes of behavior, alliances between prisoners, mechanisms for adapting to prison life, and unofficial rules for daily survival: it can also reflect negative attitudes towards correctional institutions, a mindset of suspicion towards custodial staff, and a culture of compliance with internal prison rules. In some cases, prison culture can become a significant influence on the lives of inmates, affecting their behavior, perceptions, and psychological well-being; at the same time, it can also be subject to criticism for its implications for the mental health, well-being, and rehabilitation of prisoners. Finally, penitentiary culture also reflects the opinions and attitudes of the broader society towards crime, punishment, and rehabilitation. Studying prison culture, over the centuries, has proven to be fundamental for several reasons, as understanding its dynamics and effects can help inform more effective policies for the management of penitentiary institutions and the treatment of inmates. Firstly, analyzing prison culture provides valuable insights into the nature and functioning of the prison system: understanding these aspects is essential for identifying gaps, inefficiencies, and issues within correctional institutions, thereby enabling improvements and reforms. Moreover, a thorough understanding of prison culture helps prison staff better comprehend internal dynamics and develop effective strategies to manage correctional facilities safely and efficiently. This, in turn, helps reduce the risk of violence, riots, or other emergencies within prisons. Prison culture can also significantly impact the behavior and well-being of inmates. Studying this culture allows for the identification of more effective approaches to inmate rehabilitation and reducing recidivism rates, such as promoting educational programs, vocational training, or psychological support within prisons. Another crucial aspect is the protection of inmates' human rights: analyzing prison culture can highlight any violations of human rights within correctional institutions, allowing for corrective measures to be taken and promoting fairer and more respectful treatment of inmates. Finally, studying prison culture provides important data and information to inform the formulation of public policies in the criminal justice sector. This enables policymakers to adopt more evidence-based approaches aimed at promoting justice, equity, and public safety. This chapter, using existing scientific articles, case studies and specific examples, aims to define the concept of prison culture, exploring its meaning and importance over the centuries. Specifically, it will analyze the historical development of this culture by highlighting significant historical events that have led to notable changes, from the 1800s to the present day. Additionally, various factors that can influence prison culture will be examined. Through this comprehensive analysis, the chapter seeks to provide a deeper understanding of prison culture and its implications, offering valuable insights to support the development of more effective and humane correctional policies and practices.

2. Understanding the concept of *prison culture*

Does prison have a particular *culture*?

The term *culture* is often used imprecisely, making it difficult to develop a replicable approach to understanding prison culture itself: although research has always focused on interactions among incarcerated people, which are governed by informal rules and formal regulations of the institution, the *prison culture* could be defined as a "shared understanding of how to behave in prison" (Young, Meyers, & Morse, 2023, p. 422). Due to the lack of theoretical development surrounding the properties of *culture*, the available literature has made little progress regarding its conceptualization and operationalization: to avoid further complications, it would be necessary to refer to the concept of *cultural schema*, a "*socially shared representation deployable in automatic cognition*" (ibidem). Alternatively, focusing on the domains of prison culture, which dictate the organization of life within prison, could offer a clearer understanding. In fact, research has primarily focused on two dimensions: the prison code, which emphasizes behaviors such as loyalty, self-reliance, and distrust of authorities, and the racial code, which highlights rules regarding racial loyalty and segregation within institutions.

If there's a mutual agreement among inmates on how to conduct themselves in prison, individuals engaging within this environment should demonstrate a collective awareness as cultural patterns: put simply, if the rules of conduct within the prison or the racial dynamics are deeply ingrained in the everyday experiences of inmates, to the extent that individuals internalize and reflect these norms through their behavior, then we should observe cultural patterns that align with these specific aspects of prison life (Young, Meyers, & Morse, 2023).

2.1. The prison code

The initial investigations into prison culture revealed the existence of a "code which all prisoners learn by word of mouth" (Young et al., 2023, p. 423): the prison code, comprising shared expectations regarding how incarcerated individuals should conduct themselves and interact within their confinement.

From the outset, scholars have aimed to identify the semantic components of the prison code. Clemmer (1940) characterized it as a commitment to fellow inmates and a reluctance to assist correctional authorities, suggesting that the prison code emerges through prisonization, wherein incarcerated individuals adopt the values, norms, and practices of the prison environment. Sykes (1958) expanded on this notion, proposing that the code serves as a collective response to the hardships inherent in prison life, offering a means to mitigate the pains of imprisonment while fostering social solidarity in opposition to institutional control.

Sykes and Messinger (1960) outlined some principles to elucidate the code: *maxims that caution* against engaging in conflicts with fellow inmates, refraining from exploiting others, self-preservation, and withholding deference from correctional staff.

Since then, the prison code has undergone evolution, becoming ingrained in the daily existence of incarcerated individuals. It now generally promotes individual responsibility for one's own time, mutual loyalty among inmates, maintaining a relational distance from correctional staff, refraining from informing on others, projecting toughness, and demanding respect. More recently, Mitchell delineated the prison code across four dimensions: masculinity, social detachment, strategic adaptation, and anonymity. The prison code is also referred to as the *inmate code*, an informal set of guidelines among inmates that emerges as a response to the need for stabilizing internal prison dynamics (ibidem).

Early investigations posited that admission to total institutions initiates a process of individuality erosion, resulting in a fragmentation of the self that transforms the individual into an institutionalized identity: under this model of deprivation, the prison experience represents a definitive shift from the former identity of the individual to a subdued, inmate identity (Dieter, & Freitas, 2020).

However, during the same era, the early 1960s, there emerged a growing recognition that inmate culture mirrors the criminal culture found on the streets: according to the importation model, the street serves as the primary cultural conduit that shapes and elucidates the social order within prisons. Whereas deprivation theories argue that prison culture primarily stems from the prison environment itself, importation theories propose that individuals bring their pre-prison lifestyles, values, attitudes, and behaviors into the prison, shaping its culture. This underscores the presence of multiple subcultures within prisons, the significance of pre-prison experiences, and how prison culture reflects shared cultural norms and values existing beyond the prison walls (ibidem).

In modern times, two additional perspectives have broadened the conceptual borders that delineate the separation between prison and society. One viewpoint regards prison as a microcosm of society, wherein the external institutional environment plays a significant role in shaping the experience of incarceration. The second perspective proposes that prison boundaries have become more permeable and expansive, extending beyond the physical confines of the institution (ibidem). The concept of inmate families experiencing a form of quasi-imprisonment has been explored, highlighting how they are subject to a secondary form of prisonization. Other studies suggest that prolonged contact with incarcerated loved ones can lead to financial, social, and psychological challenges for families and kin. This dynamic constitutes a form of prison presence in the lives of marginalized populations.

These two recent and innovative perspectives on prison culture have expanded the comprehension of prison boundaries beyond the deprivation-importation models (ibidem).

2.2. The cultural schema: two different approaches

In the context of prison culture, the notion of *culture* defined as “what we must understand to operate effectively in a given society” (Young et al., 2023, p. 426) is collectively understood. Despite a lack of explicit articulation of this concept, this challenge can be addressed by employing the idea of cultural schema. Schema are “knowledge structures that depict objects or events and offer default assumptions about their characteristics, relationships, and implications under conditions of incomplete information” (ivi, p. 427): they can be viewed as “collections of cognitive associations, formed through repeated experiences, that represent information and aid in interpretation and action” (ibidem). Schema become cultural when they are shared socially and passed on through social learning. Cultural schema serve various purposes, one of which is to organize and facilitate social interaction as individuals “encode and utilize information within extensive and intricate cultural domains to navigate our daily routines” (ibidem).

When examining the conceptualization of “sharedness” (ivi, p. 428), two distinct approaches emerge.

One approach, viewing culture as a consensus, conceptualizes cultural schema as reflected by consensus among individuals within a specific context: the sharedness of a cultural schema is indicated by agreement in opinions and attitudes. This consensus-oriented perspective suggests that opinions and attitudes among incarcerated individuals regarding the prison code are largely in harmony.

In contrast, a relational perspective of culture conceptualizes the shared aspect of cultural schema as one where individuals agree on how elements of a cultural domain are interconnected. This viewpoint highlights that individuals may hold differing opinions while still sharing an understanding of the semantic structure of a cultural domain: "sharing an understanding does not necessarily imply having the same opinions but rather agreeing on the structures of relevance and opposition that make symbols and actions meaningful" (ibidem). The relational stance on cultural schema recognizes that the defining features of the prison code indeed shape life in prison but suggests that it does not possess the uniformity emphasized by the consensus view.

2.3. The racial code

"The racial code, though closely associated with the prison code, represents a unique aspect of the prison social hierarchy with distinctive correlates" (Young et al., 2023, p. 426). More recently, an additional perspective posits that the prison code has weakened over time: particularly with the advent of mass incarceration and the emergence of race-based prison gangs as fundamental social organizational features within prisons, this viewpoint stresses the significance of race in shaping a shared understanding of how to conduct oneself in prison (the racial code) that has supplanted the traditional prison code. Prisons have a lengthy history of racial segregation and voluntary social grouping based on racial or ethnic identity. However, in the 1970s, scholars studying prison societies began to incorporate race relations into their comprehension of prison culture.

Racial segregation and conflicts between groups are viewed as enduring aspects of incarceration that influence social organization (ibidem). This behavior can manifest informally, as incarcerated individuals opt to segregate themselves within their racial groups voluntarily. Reasons for voluntary self-segregation vary, from the competition for limited resources to a desire to uphold power and control within the institution. Segregation based on racial lines can also be more formal and a direct consequence of correctional policies and practices.

Although the practice of assigning prison placements based on race is unconstitutional, many states persist in this form of formal racial categorization, as it assists correctional departments in managing misconduct; however, it also dictates with whom one can associate during their time in incarceration (ibidem).

The interaction between formal governance structures and the informal racial code, however, is not a one-way street. While formal governance structures contribute to the social organization of prisons, the racial code also influences these formal structures. Whether formal or informal, the literature on race in prisons consistently highlights the existence of a racial code that organizes social life within men's prisons, and this code is collectively understood by incarcerated individuals and prison administration, shaping their conduct (ibidem).

In summary, numerous studies have argued that race and ethnicity represent distinct facets of prison culture that establish rules and norms based on an individual's racial or ethnic classification.

3. The historical evolution of prison culture

Prisons are government-sanctioned facilities designed for the long-term confinement of

adults as punishment for serious offenses: this definition of prisons, often contradicted by actual practice but accurately representing the prison as an ideal type, emerged relatively late in human history. For most of Western history, incarceration played a minor role in punishment, often reserved for elites or political offenders, and was not often considered a punishment in its own right for most offenders.

The concept of the prison as a place of punishment developed gradually, according to most accounts, over the 17th through 19th centuries. Although there were several precursors to penal incarceration, the most influential were the 17th-century Dutch workhouse and the late-18th century proto-prison. The birth of the modern prison primarily occurred in early and mid-19th-century America, with these modern prisons proving influential worldwide. In the late 19th century, the modern prison experienced a series of re-imaginings or iterations, beginning with a proliferation of different forms, including distinctive forms of Southern punishment (convict leasing, chain gangs, and plantation-style prisons), specialized prisons nationwide (women's prisons, adult reformatories, and maximum-security prisons), and efforts to reduce reliance on prisons, drawing on innovations from Australia and Ireland. This flurry of activity was followed by a period of serial recreation in the 20th century in the form of the big house prison, the correctional institution, and the warehouse prison, including its subtype the supermaximum-security prison.

3.1. A brief excursion throughout prison history

Until the 19th century, prisons, as we understand them today, played a relatively minor role in Western systems of criminal justice (Rubin, 2018). The penal experience was dominated by public capital and corporal punishments for a wide range of offenses, while "penal incarceration – long-term incarceration intended as punishment – was virtually unknown" (ibidem). Many jurisdictions used jails, but these were not primarily places of punishment. Jails (spelled *gaols* or *goals* in English-speaking jurisdictions and sometimes called *county prisons*) in colonial America and early modern Europe often housed vagrants, beggars, debtors, witnesses, those condemned to execution, and even some family members, in addition to petty criminals confined until they paid their fines.

Jails' mixed populations were housed together, often indiscriminately, in large rooms.

Labor was sometimes required to compensate the keeper (or *gaoler*), but there was no organized attempt to rehabilitate these inmates through physical and social separation, religious reflection, education, or vocational training. Far from being the primary form of punishment, jails were generally an administrative apparatus aiding criminal courts: debtors were incarcerated to extract their debts, political prisoners were incarcerated to isolate them from the community, and criminals were retained for trial or until their sentence was carried out (ibidem).

While modern prisons were absent, other forms of punishment emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries that served as precursors to or laid the theoretical groundwork for the prison: many of these punishments included restrictions on one's freedom of movement and enforced labor (ibidem).

In Mediterranean countries, convicts were sentenced to row in large ships, a punishment known as *galley slavery*. In France, as galleys became obsolete due to changes in naval policy during the 18th century, convicts were sent to labor camps located near decommissioned ships. In England, convicts were transported to the New World for seven or fourteen years of hard labor under a system known as *convict transportation*. When the American Revolution halted this system in 1776, prisoners were confined to hulks, or

moored ships that accommodated the overflow of prisoners from local jails or bridewells, and were later transported to Australia when transportation resumed. The most significant precursor to the modern prison during this period was the workhouse.

Workhouses emerged throughout the Western world in the 16th to 18th centuries (ibidem). Known by various names, these institutions generally involved forcing a low-status population into labor. Typically, these were marginal institutions for marginal populations – beggars, vagrants, petty thieves, prostitutes, and other minor offenders. In some instances, they also housed other social outcasts, such as delinquent sons of wealthy families, widows, the feeble, and the poor.

The first workhouse was established in London in 1555: it relied on hard labor to combat the idleness believed to drive vagrants and petty offenders (ibidem). However, it was only in the 1770s that workhouses were adopted on a larger scale, driven by industrialization and the belief among social elites that such scale was necessary. Despite these developments, their influence was limited.

Workhouses, also known as houses of correction, were quite rare in Colonial America. More common was the almshouse, available in a few of the largest towns, but it too remained a small, marginal institution in a society that primarily avoided institutionalizing its problematic populations. While the English pioneered the workhouse, theirs was not the most significant (ibidem).

The most influential model of the workhouse emerged in Amsterdam in 1596 and became common in the Dutch Republic by 1650. Beggars and vagrants were confined there and subjected to forced labor to reform them. The rasphouse (*rasphuis*), where inmates scraped wood, was the most prevalent type. Unlike modern prisons, rasphouses allowed inmates to return home after work and followed a familial rather than military model.

In the 17th century, incarceration as punishment was rare, and rasphouses were considered charitable institutions for pseudo-criminals like beggars and vagrants. Wealthy families sometimes sent their rebellious sons there to isolate them. With the spread of workhouses and their increasing punitive use, specialized structures emerged, such as a new rasphouse in Amsterdam in 1664 for low-level offenders and a spinhouse in Hamburg in 1669 for criminals. These workhouses expanded and increased the number of inmates during the 18th century, influencing similar institutions (ibidem).

During this period, models of confinement emerged that relied less on labor and more on institutionalized incarceration. The evolution of prisons has been linked to monastic models characterized by isolation, work, and silent prayer, and an austere life, from which the term *penitentiary* derives (ibidem). San Michele in Rome is an example of this model: founded by Pope Clement XI in 1703 for male juvenile delinquents, it was a composite institution that included an orphanage, hospice, poorhouse, and house of correction for both sexes, with contributions from various popes and notable figures. This composite model was common, as demonstrated by the Dutch workhouses. Michel Foucault *(1965)* describes a similar process in France, called the *Great Confinement*: from 1657 to 1794, France institutionalized the mentally ill, the poor, the sick, and criminals in the Hôpital Général, although the mentally ill were later transferred to specialized facilities for treatment and observation (ibidem).

During this period, confinement (including coercive confinement) was applied to a mixed population that also included convicted criminals. However, these facilities did not resemble modern prisons, which emerged following political, demographic, and economic changes in the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment brought new political theories about

individual rights, sensitivity towards pain and suffering, and a preference for rationality in laws and punishments. The liberalization of Christianity (ibidem) promoted a vision of a more loving God and the idea of reforming criminals rather than punishing them harshly. Demographic changes, such as immigration and wars, made citizens more valuable and increased urbanization, making crime more noticeable. Finally, mechanization and industrialization heightened the importance of work and the training of workers in new production methods (ibidem).

Influenced by these trends, two men wrote treatises that in turn influenced the ideas of many statesmen and reformers on punishment (ibidem). First, in 1764, Cesare Beccaria wrote a treatise against the death penalty, using arguments based on Enlightenment rationality: he argued that the death penalty was an ineffective deterrent and that states would be better off punishing with certainty rather than severity. When juries refused to convict guilty defendants, they diminished the deterrent power of the death penalty; conversely, a relatively mild punishment would not raise such objections and the guilty would certainly be punished. These arguments were particularly powerful as intellectual elites around the Atlantic world began to question the limits of monarchs' absolute power.

Second, John Howard wrote less from a coldly rational perspective than from a more humanitarian perspective: he had served as sheriff in an English county and thus had responsibility over the local jail. Horrified by what he saw, he set out to investigate conditions elsewhere, touring the prisons of England and Wales and publishing his findings: the cohabitation of men and women, young and old, debtors and felons crowded together with virtually no supervision; prisoners in tatters after their clothing had been stolen by fellow inmates; and rampant disease caused by overcrowding, stale air, poor ventilation, and exposed raw sewage. Howard called for extensive reforms, including the relocation and construction of new, healthier, larger prisons; the separation of prisoners – women from men, the sick from the healthy, debtors from felons (ibidem). With these improvements, prisoners could become reformed and leave the prison as law-abiding citizens.

Howard's pamphlet arrived at a time of both opportunity and challenges. The American Revolution halted the transportation of convicts, increasing England's reliance on incarceration as a temporary solution, thus making reform urgent. However, the Revolution also brought additional expenses and political distractions. After a few years, Howard collaborated with jurist William Blackstone to draft a *Penitentiary Act* to implement his recommendations. Although counties began to establish "penitentiary houses" based on his ideas, it would take half a century before change occurred on a national scale (ibidem).

Following this paragraph, it is interesting to analyze some of the main phases in the evolution of the history of prison.

3.2. Penal colonies: an historical review

As already said, since ancient times, the customary punishments for criminal offenders have been capital punishment and exile: expulsion from the community with the associated deprivation and death. As exile to the wilderness became impractical, societies relegated prisoners to slave status, road construction, propelling ships, and, in more recent history, colonizing foreign territories during the era of expansion. The modern prison system differs in form, not in substance, from these ancient practices (Murton, 1984).

Prisons exist to punish. This punishment should be confined to the natural consequences of exile and loss of freedom, and should not involve physical abuse inflicted by fellow inmates

or prison staff. Society has the right to exile those convicted through regular judicial processes. The primary issue in prison management is not necessarily inherent in the concept of prisons. It is a result of mismanagement, leading to enforced idleness, degeneration, physical abuse, and the creation of a more hardened offender by the time of release (ibidem).

Penal colonies exemplify the troubled history of prison management: often regarded as relics of archaic, medieval practices, they effectively alleviated prison overcrowding, reduced unemployment, and achieved banishment due to their remote locations. While these colonies provided shelter and sustenance for inmates engaged in public works projects, they have been extensively utilized alongside labor camps. When managed correctly, they could avoid human rights abuses, and they sometimes serve as examples of progress in the evolution of penology (ibidem).

3.3. Solitary confinement practices

The book *Solitary Confinement: Effects, Practices, and Pathways Toward Reform* (Lobel & Smith, 2019) details how solitary confinement has been a persistent feature of prison systems worldwide for nearly two centuries. Despite its varied and frequent use, research consistently demonstrates that solitary confinement has widespread negative health effects.

Solitary confinement, institutionalized in prisons during the 19th century, persisted well into the 20th century in various jurisdictions. This peculiar system of punishment aimed to make inmates reflect inwardly, regret their sins, and embark on a religious process of self-transformation within the isolation of their single cells. The purposes of solitary confinement included discipline, protection, security, and prison administration (Lobel & Smith, 2019).

There are many forms of solitary confinement, but two models stand out. The Philadelphia system, which gained significant popularity in Europe and Scandinavian countries, was the norm for sentenced prisoners: developed at the Eastern State Penitentiary (constructed from 1826 and operational in 1829), it subjected inmates to total isolation in single cells day and night, with brief, solitary walks in the courtyard.

In contrast, the Auburn system, implemented at New York's Auburn prison in 1823, confined prisoners to solitary cells at night; during the day, prisoners engaged in hard labor alongside other inmates but were required to work in complete silence.

In 1866, 18-year-old Danish farmhand Henrik Nielsen arrived at Vridsløselille Penitentiary (Denmark), where prisoners were to be rehabilitated through a combination of strict isolation, labor, and religious instruction, in line with the philosophy of the modern penitentiary. However, it was soon discovered that many inmates suffered severe health problems due to solitary confinement (for example, Nielsen hallucinated and started hearing things). Even the prison governor acknowledged that this practice was the primary cause of these extensive health issues.

The international debate on the effects of solitary confinement was largely settled early in the 20th century when both experts and practitioners concurred that it was harmful and severely detrimental to inmates' mental health. However, it was not until the Penitentiary Congress in Prague in 1930 that international resolutions addressed the troubling aspects of solitary confinement: the congress stipulated that if solitary confinement was used, it should be of short duration and accompanied by adequate medical services. Additionally, the congress advised against using solitary confinement for long-term sentences. This

agreement signified the gradual international decline of the Philadelphia model and of the belief that prolonged solitary confinement could be a standard part of serving a sentence (Lobel & Smith, 2019).

3.4. A new perspective: restorative justice and rehabilitation programs

An early fundamental definition of restorative justice describes it as a "process that unites all parties affected by an incident of wrongdoing to collaboratively determine how to address the aftermath and its future implications" (Menkel-Meadow, 2007, p. 162).

Restorative justice encompasses a range of practices aimed at addressing harm and facilitating healing, such as apologies, restitution, and acknowledgments of injury: these practices seek to reintegrate offenders into their communities, sometimes alongside additional punishments, sometimes without. Typically, restorative justice involves direct dialogue between victims and offenders, often guided by a facilitator, and may include participation from the affected community: this process allows the offender to acknowledge their wrongdoing, make amends to the victim through emotional apologies and material compensation, and foster new mutual understandings, forgiveness, and commitments to better future behavior.

Restorative justice emerged as a social practice and movement in the 1970s, responding to criticisms of the criminal justice system being excessively punitive and ineffective at both deterring crime and rehabilitating offenders. In its most idealized form, it focuses on four key principles: repairing harm, restoring relationships, reconciling differences, and reintegrating both offenders and victims back into their shared community (ibidem).

Restorative justice was initially practiced and subsequently theorized, most notably by John Braithwaite. Advocates of restorative justice proposed that creating structured settings for offenders and victims to meet and discuss their experiences would allow offenders to acknowledge their wrongdoings, offer apologies, and make amends; in turn, victims could find it in their hearts to forgive and regain a sense of security. Facilitated dialogue would create opportunities for restitution. Through structured shaming, taking responsibility, and recognizing the harm caused, offenders could be successfully reintegrated into their communities: this process would also help victims overcome their fear and trauma from the incident (ibidem).

Even though restorative justice has proven to contribute to the reduction of recidivism with its numerous positive effects (development of empathy, mutuality, fellow feeling; enhancement of community building and democratic participation), there are empirical assertions that it does not fulfill its own promises (ibidem).

There are arguments from a legal standpoint that restorative justice unduly pressures and influences participants into forgiveness (victims) or admission of guilt and acceptance of stricter conditions (offenders) compared to what formal legal rights and regulations would allow in traditional justice systems; other critics argue that this practice fails to ensure fairness or equality in justice outcomes.

There are anthropological criticisms suggesting that concepts within restorative justice theory are culturally contingent rather than universally applicable; additionally, concerns have been raised that ideals of community are socially constructed and can be exploited for negative purposes.

Finally, there are political arguments asserting that restorative justice processes could be exploited, corrupted, co-opted, and distorted to facilitate oppression, increased state

surveillance and regulation, and inappropriate social control (ibidem).

However, it is important to also make a brief reference to rehabilitation programs.

Incarceration can influence inmates' criminal behavior in multiple ways: prisons may have a criminogenic effect by fostering criminal networks, enhancing criminal expertise, or diminishing inmates' ability to reintegrate into the labor market due to social stigma or the erosion of human capital. However, there is growing evidence indicating that prison facilities prioritizing rehabilitation can lower recidivism rates, although it remains uncertain which specific factors are most effective. Rehabilitation programs focusing on education, job skills enhancement, or targeted psychological support are frequently suggested as possible explanations for these positive outcomes (Arbour, Lacroix, & Marchand, 2021).

The main goals of these programs are to transform inmates' time in prison into a valuable opportunity for self-reflection, to enhance their sense of responsibility, and to develop skills that will aid in their transition back into the workforce. To this end, prisons have formed collaborations with other government entities, such as the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and the Ministry of Labour, to provide customized programs that align with labor market demands. Additionally, social organizations and external agencies are often involved in creating and implementing various other types of programs.

The impact of these programs may vary among inmates: identifying which inmates gain the most from participation is crucial for allocating resources effectively, ensuring they yield the greatest benefits (Ibidem).

4. Factors shaping prison culture

The experience of life in prison is profoundly influenced by several factors, including the architecture of penitentiary facilities and the demographics of inmates. The architecture of prisons plays a crucial role in determining the level of security, the degree of control, and the quality of daily life for inmates. The layout of cells, the design of common areas, and accessibility to amenities such as recreational areas and healthcare services can significantly impact the well-being and management of the prison environment.

Additionally, the demographics of inmates, which include factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, and the type of offense, have a direct impact on social dynamics and prison management. The presence of a variety of inmate profiles can influence the formation of social groups within the prison, as well as power dynamics and interpersonal relationships among inmates and with prison staff.

These factors, along with others such as prison policies, inmate treatment, and available resources, contribute to defining the living conditions and rehabilitation opportunities within the prison system.

4.1. Establishments and prison architecture

The design of carceral spaces plays a crucial role in shaping the objectives of a prison system and the lived experiences of those within it. It largely dictates how the goals of the criminal justice system are manifested materially (Moran, Jewkes, & Turner, 2016). The way prisons are designed significantly influences how the aims of the carceral system are translated into the realities of imprisonment. This involves defining who prisoners are and

what they symbolize in the perceptions of those who create the facilities meant to confine them. "[…] The design of a jail or prison is critically related to the philosophy of the institution, or maybe even of the entire criminal justice system. It is the physical manifestation of a society's goals and approaches for dealing with arrested and/or convicted men and women […]" (Wener 2012, p. 7).

The architecture of a prison reflects the penal philosophy of its society, encapsulating its beliefs about the purpose of incarceration and its intended functions: viewing prison buildings as manifestations of political and economic priorities enables us to see their aesthetics as rich with cultural symbolism.

For most people, the exterior architectural features of prisons make them immediately recognizable as places of detention and punishment within their cultural context. Mid-nineteenth-century prisons, for example, were designed to look like fortified castles or Gothic monasteries, with facades that conveyed the dangers of offending and the state's retributive power. In contrast, twentieth-century prison architecture reflected ideals of modern, 'rational' justice and authority (Moran et al., 2016).

During the 1960s and 1970s, prison designs, while still embodying authority and efficiency, adopted the austere, functional styles characteristic of high modernism. By the late twentieth century, prison architecture evolved to include higher walls, tighter perimeters, and enhanced surveillance systems, responding to past escapes, riots, and security breaches, and aligning with the 'new punitiveness' emerging in broader criminal justice policies. The changes in prison architecture over time have been intended to communicate the nature of the imprisoning state and the legitimacy of its power to incarcerate (ibidem).

In his *Institutional Settings: An Environmental Design Approach (1984)*, Spivack (cited in – Jewkes, 2018, p. 321), asserted that *hard architecture* (such as barred windows, concrete walls, hard-surfaced floors, dull colors, and indestructible, uncomfortable furniture) not only undermines the self-esteem of prisoners (or patients) but also affects how staff perceive and interact with those in their care. This type of architecture can shape certain identities and behaviors.

Traditional penal aesthetics, featuring cage-like interiors, bolted-down furniture, and vandal-proof surfaces, send clear messages to inmates, labeling them as *animals* or *potential vandals*. However, even seemingly benign aspects of institutional design and decor can have detrimental effects on vulnerable individuals. The harsh glare of gloss-painted walls, reflections on glass, contrasting material textures, and deceptive finishes (such as a wood-grain facade on a metal door) can disorient and disturb those who are confused, agitated, or mentally distressed. Additionally, an environment lacking variability can be particularly harmful, especially for those who have experienced trauma. Architectural theorist Charles Jencks argues that an *antiseptic*, *all-white*, sensory-deprived environment can stunt brain development and deprive the self of the richness it needs to shape its own identity (ibidem).

One significant limitation in modern prison design is that architects rarely, if ever, consult with current prisoners about practical design considerations. They seldom seek input on how the building's design might support or hinder the inmates' personal growth and self-identity (ibidem).

Empathetic engagement in prison design is rare, largely because most architects cannot envision themselves or their loved ones in prison. This detachment, combined with the strong influence of their previous prison designs, contributes to the slow evolution of prison architecture.

In popular culture and media, prisons are often portrayed negatively, and prison architects are just as susceptible to these perceptions as anyone else (ibidem).

As a result of these barriers to empathetic design, prison environments tend to generate only negative connotations, reinforcing the identity of prisoners within narratives of otherness and punitive punishment (ibidem).

According to studies conducted by Maggie Keswick and Charles Jencks on hospitals, which are identified as architecturally similar to prisons, a so called "architecture of hope" could be made possible by incorporating exceptionally positive qualities, such as natural light, spaciousness, openness, intimacy, scenic views, connection to nature, and a home-like atmosphere (ibidem).

4.2. Inmates' population trends in Europe

The fourteenth edition of the World Prison Population List (Fair & Walmsley, 2024) by the Birkbeck Institutional Research Online (Birkbeck University of London) indicates that over 10.99 million individuals are incarcerated worldwide, encompassing both pre-trial detainees and convicted prisoners. Data for Eritrea, Somalia, and North Korea are unavailable, while figures for China are incomplete. Additionally, the statistics exclude prisoners held by non-recognized authorities and pre-trial detainees housed in police facilities not counted in national prison population reports. Consequently, the actual number of incarcerated individuals likely exceeds 10.99 million and may surpass 11.5 million (Fair & Walmsley, 2024).

Prison population rates show significant variation across different regions of the world and even within the same continent. For instance:

- in Africa, the median rate is 50 for western African countries, compared to 243 for southern African countries;
- in the Americas, the median rate is 220.5 for North American countries, while it is 310.5 for Central American countries;
- in Asia, the median rate is 90 for countries in Southern Asia (primarily the Indian subcontinent), whereas it is 166 for countries in Southeastern Asia;
- in Europe, the median rate is 73 for Western European countries, but it rises to 267 for countries straddling Europe and Asia (such as the Russian Federation and Turkey);
- in Oceania, the median rate is 184.5.

Analyzing the International Statistics on Crime and Justice of 2010, it is possible to focus on current trends in data regarding the European prison population.

Among the 45 United Nations member states in Europe with available data, the prison population increased in 30 countries and decreased in 15 between 1997 and 2007. Notably, 12 countries experienced a rise of more than 50% in their prison populations; conversely, in the 15 countries where the prison population decreased, nine saw reductions of over 20%.

Examining the more reliable metric of prison population rates, there was significant growth over the decade, closely mirroring the changes in total prison populations. The rates increased in 30 of the 45 countries and fell in 15.

In contrast to Africa, the Americas, and Asia, where prison population rates increased less sharply than total prison populations, European countries exhibited a different trend due to

relatively stable or declining national populations. Specifically, prison population rates rose by at least 50% in ten countries (Figure 1), only two fewer than the number of countries with at least 50% increases in total prison populations. Additionally, rates increased by at least 25% in 18 countries.

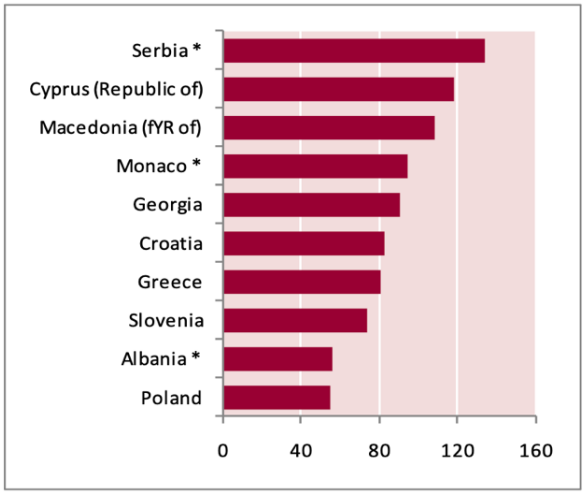

Figure 1. Largest increases in European prison population rates (per 100,000 of the national population) 1997-2007 (%).

Conversely, prison population rates decreased in 15 countries, with eight experiencing declines of more than 20% (Figure 2). These decreases were comparable in magnitude to those observed in total prison populations.

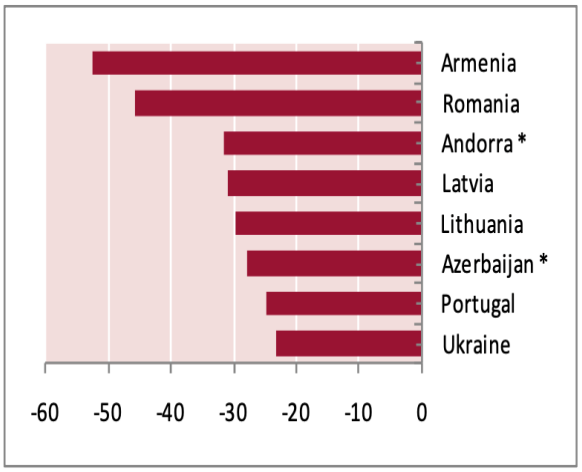

Figure 2. Largest decreases in European prison population rates (per 100,000 of the national population) 1997-2007 (%).

During the five-year period from 2002 to 2007, prison population rates rose in 32 of the 45 European countries and fell in 14. Increases of more than 20% were recorded in 13 countries (Figure 3), while decreases of over 20% were noted in seven countries (Figure 4).

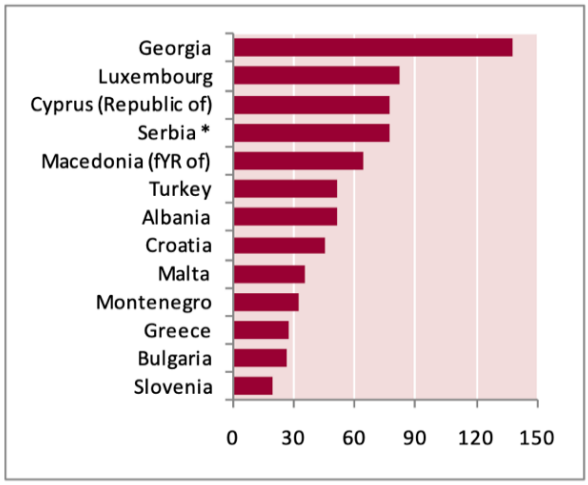

Figure 3: Largest increases in European prison population rates (per 100,000 of the national population) 2002-2007 (%).

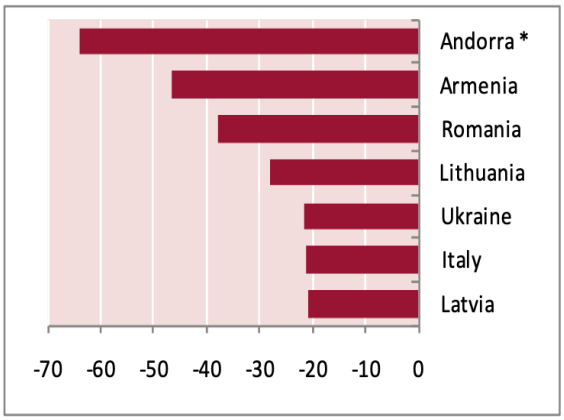

Figure 4. Largest decreases in European prison population rates (per 100,000 of the national population) 2002-2007 (%).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the future of prison culture hinges on a paradigm shift from punitive to rehabilitative and restorative models of justice. Historically, prisons have been institutions of punishment, often exacerbating issues such as recidivism, mental health problems, and social disenfranchisement. However, a growing body of evidence supports the efficacy of rehabilitation-focused approaches, which emphasize education, mental health treatment, vocational training, and the cultivation of life skills. By addressing the root causes of criminal behavior and providing inmates with the tools they need to succeed outside of prison, these approaches promise to foster meaningful change.

Humane treatment and the preservation of human dignity are gaining recognition as essential components of a modern prison culture. This involves rethinking the physical and psychological environments of prisons, making them more conducive to positive change. Support from broader societal systems – including healthcare, education, and community organizations – is crucial in ensuring a seamless transition from prison to society.

Collaborative efforts can help address the stigma that formerly incarcerated individuals face, promoting their reintegration and reducing the likelihood of reoffending.

Furthermore, the principles of restorative justice, which focus on repairing harm and fostering dialogue between offenders, victims, and the community, are being increasingly adopted. These principles not only aim to hold offenders accountable in a constructive manner but also to empower victims and strengthen community bonds. Implementing restorative practices within the prison system can lead to profound personal transformations and promote healing on a broader scale.

As we look towards the future, it is evident that transforming prison culture is not just about reforming the institutions themselves, but also about changing societal attitudes towards crime and punishment. By prioritizing rehabilitation, fostering humane conditions, leveraging technological innovations, and embracing restorative justice, we can create a prison system that not only deters crime but also contributes to the overall well-being and safety of society. This holistic and progressive approach promises to reduce recidivism, aid in the reintegration of former inmates, and ultimately build a more just and equitable society for all.

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