

The Prisoner's Role in Ethnographic Examinations of the Carceral State

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Prior to Bronislaw Malinowski's innovative approach, anthropologists utilized a detached method for studying a particular culture, remaining on the periphery of that culture and selecting members who were willing to become translators and sources of information. Anthropologists accumulated data and drew conclusions based on their observations and statistics gleaned from their informants. Although these men and women often provided much useful information, anthropologists quickly learned that they brought to the discussion personal biases that people typically have in explaining their own cultures.

Malinowski (1926) avoided this methodological constraint by becoming the first to employ the participant-observer approach. Between 1915 and 1918, Malinowski lived with the people of the Trobriand Islands. Not content to remain a disconnected observer relying on translators, he learned the Trobriand language and explored the various facets of the islanders' religion, magic, gardening, trade, as well as social organization. Although his choice of adjectives to describe the Trobriand Islanders he studied jars contemporary sensibilities, the participant-observation approach he devised remains the most effective and accurate methodology for investigating a given population.

Margaret Mead's seminal work, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), in which she emulated Malinowski's technique by becoming a member of the culture under investigation, soon followed. Mead also immersed herself in the society she was studying, focusing primarily on child care, adolescence and sexual behaviour. We can therefore conclude from Malinowski and Mead that without full immersion in a subculture, a complete explanation of its mores is impossible.

In spite of this, ethnographic examinations of the prison often have been reduced – and continue to be limited – to the pre-Malinowski method of relying exclusively on informants, whose descriptions and interpretations continue to be burdened with their personal biases. Efforts to examine a given cohort of state or federal prisoners using this superficial methodology – tours and visits – will therefore prove unsuccessful in describing fully both the physical treatment of those prisoners and their interior lives, which incarceration demands they keep concealed as a defence mechanism against the persistent attempts to co-opt or injure them.

The degree to which the public is frequently complicit in promoting and affirming this limitation, is evinced by a Canadian journalist who asked for and received permission to spend a weekend inside a Canadian prison in order to get a feel for imprisonment to augment a story he was planning. He was given a cell in a segregated part of the prison and was never in contact with any prisoners. As part of his preparation, he requested advice from other prisoners, including one of us (Huckelbury), on how to “do his time”, an illogical request, given his ability to leave at any time he wanted and the absence of any physical danger. And yet his comments both before and after his ‘sentence’ indicated that he thought his experience had provided an accurate window into the prison experience.

This is not to say that no valid information can be gleaned from conversations with prison staff and other appointed representatives, and given the nature of incarceration, opportunities for serious study are often limited to prison tours. In epistemological terms, why the observations and conclusions of the staff and tour members differ from those of the prisoners themselves is easily explained by the radical difference in perspectives. “[W]here perceptions differ, [we] can explain the difference by a difference in situation or perspective” (Becker, 1970, p. 312). Certainly the existential realities of prisoners versus tour members produce disparate interpretations. “Reports may vary because individuals are differently situated in space and time... One observer or the other may lack a requisite aid to perception [and] there may be a discrimination between ‘the same’ perception and interpretation of that perception” (Shapin 1994, pp. 31-32).

Prison tours can therefore never be more than cursory introductions to an institution that remains essentially opaque, even to those who fund its operations. Even staff members without a preconceived agenda frequently have their objectivity dulled by years of tedious routine. One of us (Huckelbury) has worked in a variety of prison assignments in which supervisors leaving on Friday have wished him a “good weekend” and promised to see him on Monday, as if they were both heading home from the office for two days of rest and relaxation. A few have even complained about the morning or afternoon commute, shopping and various other things prisoners cannot experience, thereby confirming Montaigne’s (1995) observation that “[h]abituation puts to sleep the eye of judgment”. If this inability to relate, to walk in the shoes and lives of the prisoners is often obscured from staff members who spend their working hours interacting

with prisoners day in and day out, then to think that prison tours could offer more than a brief look, similar to walking through a factory to see how the operation is run, is a mistake.

At the opposite end of the perceptual spectrum is the attitude encountered in the Texas Department of Corrections, where the staff consistently referred to the prisoner as either 'inmate' or 'the offender'. At Angola in Louisiana, the warden betrayed vestiges of the Old South by calling the prisoner 'boy' (Nagelsen, 2008). This depersonalizing refusal to acknowledge both identity and humanity functions in concert with the prison environment itself to produce an ethos that fundamentally ignores the profoundly destructive effects of incarceration. If prison staff, with years of experience, commit perceptual errors regarding prisoners, tour-centered interpretations of prison and prisoners' lives must display similar misconceptions.

One of us (Huckelbury) has spent the last thirty-five consecutive years in maximum security prisons and seen a wide variety of tours come through the facilities where he was imprisoned: legislative committees, law enforcement groups, criminal justice classes, curious citizens and court-ordered diversion programs. The majority of these tours permitted no contact with prisoners and resembled a flock of sheep being herded by uniformed staff acting as border collies to keep predators and undue influences at bay. None gathered sufficient or accurate information to reach a valid ethnographic conclusion, other than prison is not someplace they want to go.

One notable example was a diversion program, modeled on the 'Scared Straight' philosophy of intimidation, at the New Hampshire State Prison. Young men with early arrest records and probation sentences came into the prison under court order and suffered verbal abuse intended to frighten them into a conversion experience. The hype and implied threats did not work for two simple reasons: the audience knew the prisoners could not hurt them and they were going home at the end of the show. Since the performances of the prisoners were not indicative of the reality behind the walls – and the tour members knew it – even this tour came away without a valid concept of imprisonment and its effects, as subsequent post-tour questionnaires confirmed.

Complicating ethnographic analysis inside prisons are the unequal – and often incomprehensible – restrictions a given facility places on access to its prisoners. One of us (Nagelsen) arranged interviews in eleven separate prisons as part of research for a book on prison writing and the conditions

that produce it (Nagelsen, 2008). The subsequent tours spanned the carceral spectrum from being escorted directly to the scheduled interview to a broader, more general exposure to the physical plant itself, albeit with the standard security provisions prohibiting contact with any other prisoners.

An interview scheduled with two prisoners in Soledad, a prison in the California system, offered Nagelsen a unique opportunity to meet with a group of prisoners who were part of the Arts in Corrections Program. One-on-one interviews with prisoners in the California system are prohibited – these encounters may take place only if the prisoner is involved in a group.

While there, Nagelsen was able to speak with a number of prisoners, but under the constant supervision of the head of security, and it was patently obvious that most of the men were expected to act as though they were entertaining guests for the day. The lieutenant was cordial as he ushered the visitors through the prison, much as a docent providing a tour of an art museum might: he stopped to point out the highlights along the way, relating the history of Soledad, answering questions about the number of prisoners, how the population had changed over the years, and explaining the day-to-day life of the prisoners. But once the interaction with the prisoners began, the tenor in the room was akin to that of a new kid on the block: the prisoners were thrilled to see a new face, to have something different to engage them for the morning, and the benefit for the prisoners was just that – a gap in the boredom of prison. In Soledad, there was at least an attempt to provide a window, which was not the case in other prisons.

As part of a national conference in corrections, Nagelsen also entered the prison in Graterford, Pennsylvania. This was an amazing feat, as there were two hundred twenty people attending the conference. The warden graciously arranged for the attendees to spend the day at this facility listening to prisoners talk about their contributions to the Mural in Arts Project in Philadelphia. After listening to a number of prisoners talk about the impact art has had on their lives, the group was invited to the cafeteria for lunch with the prisoners involved in the program. It was a wonderful day, filled with upbeat stories that demonstrated the rehabilitative powers of arts in corrections. The prisoners were preaching to the converted and everyone left feeling great. But the invitees only saw what the powers that be wanted them to see. They were only allowed access to the chapel and the cafeteria; the view was circumscribed; access was limited, and there was never any doubt, at least as far as most prisoners were concerned, that they had better mind what they said and did or they wouldn't have the opportunity to

participate again. This became clear when Nagelsen in later correspondence with prisoners learned more of the inside protocols associated with taking the program.

And yet, noted researchers like Loïc Wacquant (2002) persist in treating abbreviated, controlled exposures to the prison subculture as reliable. Describing the Los Angeles County Jail's treatment of its prisoners, he expresses his physical aversion to "the instantaneous and irresistible negation of self endured by the prisoners" (Wacquant, 2002, p 378). True enough, but another telling entry into his daily log reveals the limitations of his research: "Nothing is theirs here. It's obvious in the manner we walk by without addressing them... *We do as if they were mere pieces of furniture*" (ibid – our emphasis). Treating research subjects as furniture is hardly conducive to an accurate ethnographic characterization. Even worse is the prisoners' eventual acceptance of their imposed status and the pathological adjustment to it, subjects ignored by Wacquant and others, whose contact with their research subjects has been restricted by the authorities controlling the tour.

Wacquant does, however, bring a vivid description of the physical plant to his analysis, providing a comprehensive picture of the racial composition of the jail's prisoners and the gangs that prey on them, even quoting the warden's boast that the jail is "the largest penal colony in what used to be called the Free World" (ibid, p. 372). Wacquant's subjective response to what he sees adds poignancy to the professional detachment: "A sentiment of embarrassment, of 'dirtiness', to have infringed on the dignity of human beings by the mere fact of having been there and seen that place, and thus to have treated its denizens as one might the occupants of a zoo. But it takes that, it is indispensable to go see, touch, feel" (ibid, pp. 381-382). His research was disappointingly limited to tactile impressions of the environment's design and construction, omitting a more empathetic touching and feeling of the prisoners themselves, which would have provided a more expansive database, along with a far more complete analysis of both the prison subculture and the larger culture that produces and sustains it.

A caveat is in order here. On rare occasions when prisoners are permitted to speak to tours, the selection process frequently winnows those whose narratives are not congruent with the administration's or the tour guide's. This often reduces the prisoner to little more than a shill for the system that controls his every move. As Wacquant relates, the deputy escorting his tour indicated a prisoner near them washing a wall. The deputy then summoned

the man with a harsh order, "Trustee, come here!" After a brief introduction, the prisoner was permitted to tell Wacquant how much he enjoyed washing walls and described the benefits that accrued from that position, such as a quieter dormitory and a large-screen television (ibid, p. 378). This type of selective intimidation does nothing to further ethnographic studies of prisons and jails, other than to reinforce stereotypes of both the guard and guarded.

As an example of what can be accomplished, even by a layman, when the focus shifts to the prisoners themselves, consider Norman Mailer's (2009) descriptions of his research for *The Executioner's Song* (1979), his Pulitzer Prize-winning book about Gary Gilmore's execution. "[T]he elements of the story are so exceptional and painful and funny and occasionally noble, and occasionally sordid" (Mailer, 2009, p. 27). His understanding of Gilmore, the murder he committed and his subsequent death by firing squad were enhanced by his epistolary relationship with Jack Abbott, another prisoner at the time. "[T]here are numerous echoes of [Gilmore's] prison experience, and part of my understanding of that experience has come from [Abbott's] letters" (ibid). At the same time, Mailer recognized his limitations in plumbing the psychological depths of prisoners like Abbott and Gilmore. As he testily admitted to Abbott in a letter, "[j]ust as I don't know what it means to be a convict, you the fuck don't know what it is to be a Jew" (ibid).

These two competing methodologies, then, illustrate the necessity for immersion into the subculture under examination, whether the working poor or nouveau riche, prisoners or police officers. Even the best intentioned observers will find their work restricted to only observations (e.g. Wacquant's zoo analogy) if they rely on the standard tour offered by prison officials. The subsequent reactions and conclusions will be descriptively accurate but not definitive.

The fundamental problem with using prison tours as vehicles for ethnographic research therefore remains the restricted contact with the prisoners themselves, making participant observation impossible. One potential solution to the dilemma is securing employment inside the prison, perhaps as part of a sabbatical project or graduate study. This strategy puts the investigator into direct contact with both prisoners and staff, providing a more balanced data collection and objective evaluation (Conover, 2001).

Our experiences and research have led us to conclude that only prisoners know precisely what happens when the cell doors slam shut behind them,

and they therefore must be the primary source for ethnographic studies inside prisons, an approach actively discouraged by modern tours. And yet, given the profound scepticism of many prisoners regarding the attitudes and motivation of the public in general, gaining and maintaining the trust of those men and women can present an insurmountable challenge. As Steven Shapin (1994, p. 36) puts it, “[t]he distribution of trust is therefore coextensive with the community, and its boundaries are the community’s boundaries... those who cannot be trusted to report reliably and sincerely about the world may not belong to our community of discourse”.

Given the perceptual and philosophical dichotomy of observer and observed in the context of prison tours, as well as the reluctance of prisoners to permit any outsider to colonize their minds, it continues to take trained academics and professionals to gain the trust of those prisoners over time in order to evaluate, organize, and place their experiences in an intelligible and accessible format to educate the public.

The revelations of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo came as shocks to most Americans, most of whom believed their government’s policies were reasonable responses to external threats. This naive worldview is also prevalent in discussions of domestic prisons, thus requiring a dedicated messenger to correct the philosophical and existential errors. The messenger is, however, only as effective as his information. For those seeking to encourage critical analysis of the prison, they must look beyond the quotidian tours offered by prisons and jails.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Gilmore was the first person executed (1977) following the resumption of capital punishment in the United States after a five-year moratorium.

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Charles Huckelbury was sentenced to life imprisonment – 35 year minimum – at the age of 27 and has spent the last 28 years in prison. Awarded second place in Prison Life's fiction contest in 1995, he won the PEN American Center first prize for fiction in 2001. A regular contributor to the *JPP* since 1997, Charles joined the Editorial Board in 2001 and is now an Associate Editor. He was one of four featured writers in Shawn Thompson's *Letters From Prison* (Harper Collins, 2001). His new book of poetry, *Tales From the Purple Penguin* (BleakHouse Publishers, 2008) has received rave reviews from students and academics.