

**Prison Worlds:
An Ethnography of the Carceral Condition
by Didier Fassin
Cambridge: Polity Press (2020) 302 pp.
*Reviewed by Dean C. Roberts***

What is immediately apparent in this work is that Didier Fassin, a professor of Social Science at Princeton, is remarkably intelligent, and singularly committed to his purpose: an examination on the metamorphoses of the meaning of punishment within any society, but specifically, French society.

The idea and institution of “prison” is still a recent invention, less than 200 years in its formalized function, yet it has become the universal system of punishment. How can we understand the place that the correctional system occupies in contemporary societies? What are the experiences of those who are incarcerated, as well as those who work there? Didier Fassin posed those questions in 2009 and committed to finding an answer. Going in, perhaps, bright-eyed and naïve, he nonetheless went in committed.

I will truly penetrate the world of prison, to grasp its ordinary – and sometimes not so ordinary – reality, through the interactions and tensions between the prison population and prison staff.

At first, the reader may feel put off by the tightly crafted format of this book. I encourage you not to feel overwhelmed by the small font and seemingly full-page blocks of text. The story underneath is as remarkable as it is personally relatable through an evolution eerily similar to Canada’s own journey through justice and penal reform. However, there is a lot of intensely intellectual terminology used, and I found myself needing to really stretch my knowledge and keep a dictionary on hand.

Almost unheard of in North America, the author received unfettered access to a French Short-Stay Prison (sentences of up to four years) for four years continuously. Going in completely unbiased, his experience wound up convincing himself of the need for France to change their collective view on prisons, while documenting his own transformation of perspective, opinion, and the human condition towards prisons as a whole.

Prison Worlds follows the logical progression as the author’s own understanding and insight unfolds as it happened. Realizing at first, that to understand the evolution and composition of any prison, he needed to first

analyze the way in which penal policy, police practices, and court decisions lead to an increasingly large, differentiated proportion of the population being sent to prison.

Having outlined the prison context through a quick introduction and a history of prisons in France, the author then goes on to address what he describes as the central issues:

1. The reign of constraint and violence, on both the individual and institutional levels;
2. The frictions between the law and rights in terms of work, education, social welfare, and treatment of non-nationals;
3. The issues surrounding order and security;
4. The normalization of punitive practices and the ambiguities of internal justice; and
5. The aleatory application of sentence adjustment and support on release.

Each chapter follows the personal stories of incarcerated men, and highlights these five principles or needs. The author powerfully connects immediate prison reality to social attitudes, governing policies or prejudice, and political interests being put before over actual change.

Not to say that prison is the sum total of all avenues towards incarceration; the author does a deep dive into the history of asylums, orphanages, and prisons used in France through the same 200-year progression. What is interesting is that as study and understanding developed, social sciences rigorously addressed mental illness, welfare, housing, and childcare, until prison remained as the only form of incarceration acceptable. The carceral paradigm, which for a time penetrated the worlds of mental health, social assistance, and abandoned children, has retreated to a single function: punishment.

The chapter that stands out most for me is “A Well-Kept Public Secret”. It concentrates on the double standards of economics and race that pervade the population of France and the microcosm of its prison system in ways surpassing even those of the United States. The author refers to the overrepresentation of ethnic and racial minorities in French prisons as an example of what has been called a “public secret”, that is, “what is generally known, but cannot be spoken”; a phrase that was coined in Michael Taussig’s

1999 expose of the Colombian drug-trafficking crisis. In his own words, the author mirrors these same concerns on page 59, where he states:

Thus the public secret around the overrepresentation of minorities in prison testifies both to a quandary in the face of an uncomfortable fact and an ethical concern with regard to divulging it. The prison management does not want to know about it, and the staff prefer not to speak of it. Only the inmates have no hesitation in pointing it out.

Unfortunately, this phenomenon is not exclusive to the USA or France. It is an inconvenient truth that Canada is facing right now. Over the last two decades, the Correctional Investigator of Canada's federal penitentiaries has been sounding the alarm on overrepresentation of Indigenous over non-Indigenous prisoners. However, similar to the way that France responded, instead of addressing the problem, it has steadily increased. As of the 2019-2020 Commissioner's Report, Indigenous peoples represented nearly a third of all federal prisoners. Yet, First Nations Peoples make up only 5% of Canada's overall population – an alarmingly disproportionate statistic, yet mostly ignored by the public and media (Zinger, 2020).

The author draws many parallels to the influx of Arab and African immigrants into France over the last three decades and the overrepresentation of that same class of people in its prisons. I feel it is important to note that, once Didier Fassin identified the disparity between the ethnic minorities of France and the predominately white, middle class, he uses it as a platform for all his other issues. The data research and statistics are powerful and show a concerted effort by the French government, and their political policies and policing methodology, to target and further impoverish the marginalized. However, he does not share data on how the rest of the prison population fares.

The last key issues he addresses are the lack of systems in French prisons to prepare prisoners for reintroduction to society – commonly known as “parole” in North America. This is still a relatively new practice in France and the data the author cites shows an average of only 1% to 4% of prisoners even receive early release. The greatest complaint of prisoners, and even staff, is the idea that “prison time” is pointless. There is no value to it, no purpose beyond the separation from society, and thus, no restorative process has been developed.

It is therefore not shocking that France's recidivism rates are astronomical. The author's research has shown that 61% of those who were sentenced to time in prison re-committed an offence within five years of release, whereas, only 36% of those given a suspended sentence, probation, or home monitoring, re-offended. The author states that even the guards and authorities know that "prison breeds prison".

Unfortunately, the political attitude remains to "get tough on crime", and as a result sentence structure and application have been increasing not decreasing. The same politically motivated policymakers use mass media to steer social awareness or fervour to support their political gains and not what is in the best interest of the country. The author summarises his findings on page 266, where he notes:

These studies indicate that individuals who are imprisoned are generally more likely to re-offend than those given alternative penalties... the empirical work of social scientists therefore runs counter to the common sense of policymakers... thus, at the same time as declaring their wish to avoid recidivism, those in power have introduced measures that encourage it.

The short takeaway is how much easier it is to enter prison than leave it. More precisely, the author posits that it is easier for the state to put a person in prison than to prepare those locked up for a successful return to society.

Twice through the period of the author's study, the elected government in France shifted from the extreme right to the extreme left. Laws, policy, and procedures were amended and changed radically. Yet neither political shift changed the rate of incarceration or recidivism. He suggests that this is because the purpose of prison was never in question. The idea of the safety of society and the function of the safety of society are vastly different models. Imprisonment reveals the naked truth of its sole meaning: the retribution of a wrong as a form of socialized vengeance. Virtually the only reason people are locked up now is for a retributive purpose. If the best interest of society were intended, then alternative sentencing and restorative, rehabilitative measures would have become the norm and not the exception.

Didier Fassin asks how an institution so often criticized for its dysfunctional nature, the high cost to benefit ratio, ineffectiveness in combating crime, and failure to live up to democratic values, maintained itself for more than two centuries while appearing to the majority as the

only possible solution? The answer, he suggests, is that prison offers the common citizen a socially acceptable moral solution: that within most societal awareness, punishment trumps social integration.

He closes with a reflection on the meaning of ethnographic practice as a way of understanding prison. He describes ethnography is an exploration of “other people”, and acknowledges that no ethnography can ever give a sufficiently accurate description of the anguish of incarceration, the torments of a first night in prison, the slow attrition of long sentences, and the harrowing pain of solitary confinement. The anthropologist must restrict himself to an account of facts. His hope for this entire work is to humanize the understanding of prison.

Not to be confused by the humanity of prisoners, Didier Fassin focuses on revealing the implement of prison as a reflection of its society. He states that, ultimately, society can be judged on the state of its prisons and the way it treats its prisoners. And to do that one must first know it.

I found this book both enlightening and moving. The weaving of narrative stories to highlight facts carried the flow of ideas quite well. Even for a layperson, to live in, with, or among the many thousands of people that make up the prison world comes across as a daunting task. This work not only enlightens, but also provokes questions about the various perceptions and priorities that form the basis of our societies.

REFERENCES

Zinger, Ivan (2020) *Office of the Correctional Investigator Annual Report 2019-2020*, Ottawa: Office of the Correctional Investigator. Retrieved from <https://www.oci-bec.gc.ca/cnt/rpt/annrpt/annrpt20192020-eng.aspx#s10>

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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