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A Symposium to Mark the Publication, by New York University Press, of Ian O'Donnell's Prison Life: Pain, Resistance, and Purpose

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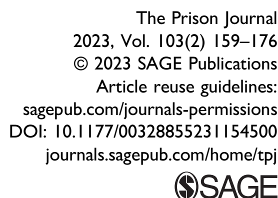
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A Symposium to Mark the Publication, by New York University Press, of Ian O'Donnell's *Prison Life: Pain, Resistance, and Purpose*

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Abstract

Recognizing the major scholarly contributions to criminology by the noted Irish criminologist, Ian O'Donnell, *The Prison Journal* invited seven contemporary corrections and punishment scholars to offer insights into O'Donnell's new book, *Prison Life: Pain, Resistance, and Purpose*. Offering contextually rich descriptions of prisoner life, the text features four case study prisons—H Blocks, Northern Ireland; Eastham Unit, Texas; Isir Bet, Ethiopia; and ADX Florence, Colorado, in pivotal time periods and through an individual's

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custodial career in each institution. The symposium discussants focus on O'Donnell's conceptual framework—the degree of prison *integration*, system and staff *regulation*, and *legitimacy*—and how these reflect the key interactions between punishment and society across time and culture.

Keywords
Prison Life: *Pain, Resistance, and Purpose*, Ian O'Donnell, prisoner life, regulation, integration, legitimacy

The Sociology of Punishment

David Garland, the well-known sociologist and observer of punishment scholarship trends, recently offered a comprehensive assessment of both the theoretical advances and problems in the development of the sociological study of punishment (Garland, 2022). Arguing that the last 40 years have been most significant in the migration of scholars into the field, he emphasizes the importance of classical thinkers; in particular, Durkheim, Rusche and Kirchheimer, Foucault, and Elias, in shaping the 1970s and 1980s groundbreaking theoretical work of academics like Stan Cohen. With America's advancing *mass incarceration* trend and *exceptionalism* in global imprisonment rates through 2010, Garland notes the movement in sociology of punishment scholarship from conceptualization and theory to a greater interest in understanding this policy and how to reverse it. Over the past decade, with scholarly growth in the field fueled by quantification, middle-range theory development, and a shift away from functionalism's generalizations, Garland declares the discipline is advancing—and needs to continue along this path—toward more localized, specific internal accounts and new theorizations coming from rich comparative studies, internationally, nationally, and regionally (Beckett & Beach, 2021; Lynch, 2009).

The Prison Journal is therefore privileged to "host" this symposium on Ian O'Donnell's important new book, *Prison Life: Pain, Resistance, and Purpose*. Clearly a catalyst for energizing sociology of punishment scholarship, O'Donnell's work echoes Garland's and other scholars' call for novel frameworks and concepts across prison cultural and political regimes—away from Anglocentric assumptions and to the study of punishment in the Global South (Sozzo, 2022)—and toward contrasting prisoners' experiences of freedom (Mjaland et al., 2021).

O'Donnell has been based at University College Dublin for almost a quarter century, having previously been Director of the Irish Penal Reform Trust and a Senior Research Fellow at Oxford University. He has made

major contributions to criminology through his many books, articles, and op-eds and was described as "the indisputable elder" of Irish criminology by Lynch et al. (2020, p. 11). His work has international appeal and *Prison Life* follows original and thought-provoking books about how prisoners in solitary confinement deal with the passage of time (O'Donnell, 2014), clemency decision making in death penalty cases (O'Donnell, 2017), and the relevance of "coercive confinement" as an organizing concept for penologists (O'Sullivan & O'Donnell, 2012).

The following seven invited review essays by contemporary corrections and punishment scholars discuss various aspects or center on one of the book's four case study prisons in their pivotal time periods: H Blocks, Northern Ireland; Eastham Unit, Texas; Isir Bet, Ethiopia; and ADX Florence, Colorado. Their commentaries offer insights into the application of O'Donnell's conceptual framework—the degree of prisoner *integration* and system and staff *regulation* and *legitimacy* in each milieu—and how the contextually rich descriptions of prisoner life reflect the key interactions between punishment and society across time and culture. O'Donnell brings each prison vividly to life through an exploration of how it shaped—and, in turn, was shaped by—one individual's custodial career. As he puts it in the book's final sentence: "punishment is about pain, and pain is personal" (p. 258).

Prisons, Particularity, and Human Dignity
Derek S. Jeffreys

Ian O'Donnell's *Prison Life: Pain, Resistance, and Purpose* is an important text in prison studies. Classic accounts of the prison from thinkers like Michel Foucault and Gresham Sykes have shaped how we think about prison life. They often focus narrowly on one prison, like Sykes did in New Jersey. Or, they discuss only specific European countries, as Foucault did with France and England. Based on this limited data, thinkers draw large theoretical conclusions about the carceral state or "the society of captives." O'Donnell rejects this approach, maintaining that it ignores the diversity in prisons around the world. He provides valuable theoretical tools with which to consider prisons, and displays a deep sensitivity to the particularity of institutions. The result is a fine book that illuminates essential relational dimensions of human dignity.

O'Donnell compares prisons by analyzing complex relationships between inmate *integration* (cohesion and solidarity among inmates) and *regulation* (the rules governing inmate life). He also discusses *legitimacy in prison* (how inmates and staff accept or reject regulations and rules). We need

these theoretical concepts because, otherwise, we would descend into a philosophical nominalism, an untenable claim that the prison as such does not exist. But this book attends to *difference*, moving the reader away from the propensity to identify an essence of the Prison prematurely and superficially.

We see a concern for distinctiveness in O'Donnell's rich portrayal of four different prisons—Isir Bet, Ethiopia, H Blocks, Northern Ireland, Eastham Unit, Texas, and ADX Florence, Colorado—and the individuals occupying them. This book contains wonderful photographs and diagrams that are especially helpful in the chapter on Ethiopian prisons. Although an outsider in Ethiopia, O'Donnell talked with a variety of people to get a sense of what was happening at Isir Bet. His treatment extends our geographic gaze beyond European and U.S. prisons.

I appreciate O'Donnell's concern for particularity because I have spent more than a decade offering philosophy lectures and volunteering in one maximum-security prison in Green Bay, Wisconsin. These years have taught me that each prison has its own complex character that takes time to understand. In O'Donnell, I see a willingness to acknowledge this truth. He is not someone who will be easily taken in by an official prison visit, but is a person who listens to the voices of inmates and staff. This is a difficult task, and with places like the federal U.S. supermax, ADX Florence, it is epistemologically limited because this prison is secretive and forbids outside visitations. However, O'Donnell works remarkably well with available materials about this institution (particularly the *Cunningham* court case and the horrifying story of inmate Jack Powers), and his account matches what others write about it.

Through his analyses of particularity in prisons, O'Donnell draws attention to relational dimensions of human dignity. A person's dignity includes her relationship and solidarity with others and her desire for knowledge and truth. Often, prisons target these dimensions of dignity while proudly purporting to meet basic material needs. Or, inmates live in materially substandard conditions, yet display remarkable capacities for solidarity with others.

We see these paradoxical features of prison life at the ADX Florence supermax. Inmates there may eat better than their counterparts in Isir Bet and have access to a greater number of television programs. However, they suffer profound psychological and spiritual damage because they are painstakingly subjected to a destructive social isolation. It intentionally targets their inner life, particularly by confusing their relationship to time and space. As O'Donnell recognizes, the architecture and politics at ADX Florence attack a key aspect of what it means to be a person: our need to relate to others.

O'Donnell highlights a person's desire for knowledge and truth when discussing inmate education in the H Blocks in Northern Ireland. He tells the remarkable story of how IRA inmates developed a powerful solidarity. At times, they lived in horrible material conditions, but built educational structures through which inmates learned the Irish language and read books. O'Donnell acknowledges that the IRA accomplished such a feat by sometimes threatening staff and their families. Nevertheless, the access to education was impressive. This example contrasts unfavorably with a U.S. prison system that often hinders inmate education, regulating reading materials and intentionally depriving inmates of educational opportunities. Many incarcerated people want to seek the truth about themselves and their world but are stymied by petty regulation, bureaucratic inertia, and attempts to control their minds.

By noting these dimensions of human dignity, we should not gainsay the significance of decent material conditions. However, O'Donnell challenges readers to think more profoundly about the human person and the "pains of imprisonment." His book inspires us with its remarkable stories of resilience among prisoners who seek education and human solidarity. This is an outstanding work from a mature and sensitive scholar who understands the complexities and rewards of writing about prisons.

Irish Republicans and Strategies of Resistance Cormac Behan

Toward the end of Ian O'Donnell's book studying four prisons across three continents in different time periods, he concludes: "While resistance may be futile it can still be mounted. It is minimally dialogic, a whisper to a shout. Even against mighty odds, human agency is never fully extinguished" (p. 231). This review essay focuses on Republican prisoners serving time during the 1990s in the H Blocks in Northern Ireland. While bricks and mortar remain constant, strategies of resistance can change. In the 1990s, although ostensibly under the regime of the same custodians, the mode of resistance was in stark contrast to the years of confrontation between 1976 and 1981, when prisoners resisted the British government policy of *criminalization*, engaged in the *blanket protest*, and eventually a *hunger strike*, which led to the death of 10 prisoners.

In 1990, while still rejecting the label of *criminal*, IRA prisoners who saw themselves as prisoners of war (POWs) adopted the *Charter for Frelimo Communities* (named after the liberation movement in Mozambique and designed to evade detection by prison authorities). Covering both ideological

and practical issues, the *Charter* (which is reproduced in the book) was “a manifesto, a set of guiding principles” (p. 247). It guaranteed freedom and protection from physical abuse and harassment, and the right to exercise religious beliefs. The distribution or promotion of pornography and fascist and racist literature were banned. Influenced by Paulo Freire’s writings—in contrast to the 1980s IRA command structure in the prison—the Frelimo (IRA) wings were based on participation and community decision making. Prisoners contributed their weekly allowance to the community for collective necessities. For those who transgressed the principles of the *Charter*, there were a range of sanctions—not imposed by the prison regime but by “Camp Staff” (prisoner leadership)—with the ultimate punishment being expulsion from the Frelimo communities.

Rejecting the Northern Ireland Office’s “offer” of the “opportunity to serve their sentences free from paramilitary influence” (p. 31), IRA prisoners eroded the power, authority, and confidence of prison staff. It was a war of attrition—both outside and inside. “Each victory prepared the ground for the next offensive. This was methodical, attritional, painstaking work. They gained a concession, consolidated their position, then pressed ahead” (pp. 38–39). Over time, prisoners got to wear their own clothes, did not have to do prison work, their cells were not locked, the punishment block was decommissioned, and prisoner leaders were allowed to move between prison blocks. Prisoners in the Frelimo wings answered to their own leaders and lived communally. The power of the prisoners was met by an increasingly disillusioned staff, who knew that the penal regime was being molded, not just by internal dynamics, but by the political momentum outside. By August 1994, prisoners had control of their living arrangements, as prison staff were withdrawn from the wings. “It was special category status or more in all but name” (p. 68). (On August 31, 1994, the Provisional IRA announced a “cessation of military operations.” The ceasefire ended in 1996, and was reinstated in 1997).

The appointment of a vice-OC (Officer Commanding) for education indicated the importance of education in Frelimo communities. The *Charter* encouraged prisoners to “develop their personal and intellectual abilities to their fullest potential and to place these at the service of the community.” Recommended readings included classics of left-wing literature. New prisoners had to undertake a compulsory jail history program, including the place of prison in the republican struggle. The prisoners published their own magazine (*An Glór Gafa/The Captive Voice*; each issue sold over 7,000 copies outside) and collections of poetry. In their desire to promote cultural identity, Irish language wings were established. The *Charter* and, in particular, the approach to education was driven by one of the four prisoners highlighted in the book:

Laurence McKeown, who spent 70 days on hunger strike. He later wrote how Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* influenced, not just political programs, but created a more inclusive and collective command structure. By creating their own communes which were "partly utopian and partly pragmatic" (p. 49), IRA prisoners diluted and eventually circumvented the penal regime.

While the *Charter for Frelimo Communities* provided the framework for communal living, O'Donnell contends that it was much more: "The life that IRA men created for themselves in the H Blocks did not mirror what they left behind; it was more deliberately political and aspirational. They transformed their lives in prison with a view to transforming the political arena outside the prison" (p. 239). The 1990s in the H Blocks is a relatively under-researched period in a prison with a rich history. Along with the studies of other prisons in this elegantly written and sophisticated analysis, O'Donnell demonstrates that by looking more closely at unique institutions during different time periods, we can learn much about the experience/s of prison life, agency, and diverse strategies of resistance.

Prison Life and Safer Prisons
Kimmett Edgar

Ian O'Donnell's *Prison Life* offers a fresh perspective on prisons, finding differences among them based on the ways prisoners live together (*integration*) and the style of management by the authorities (*regulation)*. These dimensions provide a structure to reconsider some of the enduring problems in prisons.

The Nelson Mandela Rules (United Nations General Assembly, 2015) introduced into international standards the principle that prisons should be safe. Looking through the lens of regulation and integration inspires ideas about the conditions required to create and maintain safe prisons.

O'Donnell's analysis shows that regulation aids safety when the governance is legitimate and accountable, and when it upholds the humanity of those confined. Regulation destabilizes prisons when it is arbitrary, makes disproportionate use of force, or is designed to abuse or degrade. *Prison Life* focuses on regulation across four prisons on a continuum from the highly controlled ADX Florence—to the tense stand-off of the H Blocks—then the Eastham Unit where regulation was delivered through *building tenders (BTs)*—and, finally, Isir Bet, where regulation was a last resort when conflicts could not be resolved by prisoners, or behaviors caused severe harm.

O'Donnell describes styles of regulation that make prisons less safe. The Eastham Unit illustrates a state's abrogation of responsibility for governing

a prison. Turning disciplinary functions over to hard prisoners meant that the management of behavior was itself violent. In ADX Florence, the high staff numbers followed a policy of coercion that was deliberately degrading and abusive.

Together, the selected prisons expose a gap in the peace-making role of regulation. In terms of the typology offered by Ben Crewe (2014) , staff in ADX Florence and the H Blocks were *present* (in high numbers) and *heavy* (oppressive). In Isir Bet and the Eastham Unit, they were *absent*. There are no examples of staff who were *present* and *light* (supportive). As O'Donnell writes: "In none of the case study prisons were relationships with staff warm, personal, or interactive" (p. 243).

Dynamic security promotes safety as it enables staff to prevent victimization, offering protection that obviates the need for prisoners to use violence to defend their interests. Staff who get to know prisoners as individuals gather intelligence that enables them to anticipate situations that can escalate into violence. ADX Florence and the Eastham Unit show what is lost when dynamic security is unachievable.

Extreme measures of regulation, such as lockdowns and the use of force, can restore peace if they are used proportionately and for short duration. As O'Donnell argues, when force is persistent or abusive, it loses its legitimacy and demonstrates a failure to regulate the prisoner community.

The prisons profiled in the book show how integration supports safety when the values of the prisoner community favor harmony and cooperation. If the ethos condones brutality and is laissez-faire about exploitation and assault, then safety is unachievable. In the Eastham Unit, the norm was that conflicts would be settled by force. Further, the force was frequently delivered by fellow prisoners; threats to personal safety were disproportionate and arbitrary. In contrast, Isir Bet dormitories had *order keepers* whose duty was to resolve conflicts while keeping to a written code that had been developed by consensus, with the aims of promoting cooperation and social harmony.

A measure of integration is how people in prison see their peers. For Gresham Sykes, it was a reasonable assumption that other prisoners present a pervasive risk. This certainly fits O'Donnell's description of the Eastham Unit, where other prisoners were stratified into the vicarious *guards* (brutal and arbitrary) or potential *predators*. But, other examples of integration show a potential for harmony. In the H Blocks, *political solidarity* defined other prisoners as comrades. Harmful behavior was more likely to be directed against the state than one's peers. In Isir Bet, other residents were *co-workers*, whose help was needed for subsistence.

Activity also affects safety. Isir Bet's prisoner community provided activities that reinforced social harmony. People needed to work together

(cooperatively) to meet their basic needs; work made the time pass (idle time may have created opportunities to exploit others); and the economy created incentives to treat others decently. In contrast, the activities in the Eastham Unit were degrading and exploitative. Among the "jobs" was the *BT* role, where recruitment was based on the capacity for brutality.

As I have tried to show in this review essay, *Prison Life* introduces methods and analyses that broadened and enriched my sense of how to study prisons. As a kaleidoscopic rendering of that world, the book is a *tour de force*. By shifting the lens through which we see prisons, *Prison Life* makes a significant contribution to criminology. It should also be required reading for anyone setting out to run a prison.

A Village Within a Town: Negotiating Life in Isir Bet Prison, Ethiopia
Bethany E. Schmidt

> *Isir Bet is located in a large town, close to a football stadium and surrounded by residential areas … Normal life continued right up to the entrance gate, with children playing, traders touting for business, three-wheeled bajaj taxis dropping off and collecting passengers, and locals going about their daily activities*. (p. 128)

Isir Bet stands apart from the other prisons discussed in this book in several respects. It is in the Global South; it is highly *relational* and *porous* ("an intensely sociable place"; p. 131); its power was formally transferred from keepers to kept without opposition (staff maintained perimeter security while prisoners negotiated order within the compound); its *peaceful cohabitation* through cooperation was a shared ethos; and, materially, it was much poorer. The resultant environment was arguably safer, more harmonious, and survivable than elsewhere. These qualities offer rich and textured insights into how differing forms of prison/er governance reflect their socio-historical and political surroundings, and shape everyday life in the establishment. Prisoner interdependence and mutual reliance mirrored local norms; social organization in this rural Ethiopian province required compromise and problem-solving in the management of scarce resources. The close examination of these distinctive penal features is, as Martin and Jefferson (2019) note, key to disrupting stereotypical and reductive accounts of prisons in Africa.

The chapter opens with an excerpt from the Isir Bet prisoners' code—an impressive, deliberative document that outlines an agreed-upon set of mutual expectations to ease the burden of captivity. It is a civility guide of sorts (for instance, taking someone else's possessions or making noise

during the evening news may result in a sanction). Fairness and transparency are maximized by minimizing arbitrary discretion and individual power. The code, O'Donnell explains, was "not intended to replace state law, but rather to complement and amplify it" (p. 142); it was a beneficial creed for both prisoners and staff. Democratically elected prison leaders became representatives tasked with upholding and reinforcing this constitution. Isir Bet, in this regard, is a fascinating case study in cooperative society building. In the absence of formal regulation or intervention, prisoners pooled resources for the collective betterment of prison life. Comparatively, there were high levels of prisoner integration, safety, autonomy, and perceived legitimacy.

The prison was an intensification of life outside: "a tightly spatially constrained and bustling village" (p. 127). During the day, prisoners were able to move freely around the compound to work, shop, eat, relax, or socialize. They chose "where, how, and with whom to spend their time" (p. 165). O'Donnell describes prisoners here as "displaced citizens for the duration of their confinement" (p. 163), but emphasizes that "they were not reduced to weak, dependent creatures who must ask permission to do anything" (p. 166). It seemed prisoners placed more trust in their own arrangements than in the law of the land, in part due to legacies of justice system tampering by power holders with financial or political sway. The illegitimacy of the legal environment outside of the prison perhaps enhanced the legitimacy of the prisoners' code and the level of adherence to it, especially as it was recognized by the prison authorities.

O'Donnell is careful not to essentialize or romanticize. He makes clear that Isir Bet is likely not very representative of prisons in the region, and he highlights some familiar, enduring, and problematic penal characteristics common to other jurisdictions; namely, the plight of women and the reproduction of inequality. Although the men's side of the prison offered a range of economic, vocational, and educational opportunities (a rounded life), the women's unit was a woeful afterthought. Women appeared "bored and underemployed" (p. 141), often with children in tow, but with little assistance from the state or partners. They not only "occupied a peripheral place in a system designed for men" (p. 141), but they also faced greater hurdles upon release due to gendered stigma. Likewise, despite the effort of the code to flatten hierarchies and promote mutual aid, wide income disparities meant that some prisoners were able to pay for better accommodation, nutrition, and clothing. While some level of equitability could be written into the treatment of prisoners, it was not enough to eradicate economic stratification.

There is much to learn from this book, particularly for scholars (and practitioners) unacquainted with prisons outside of the West. It should be evident that the best-resourced prisons are not necessarily the most orderly or

"humane" ones. In Isir Bet "there was no great antagonism" (p. 244), O'Donnell concludes. There was no attempt to supplant the administration, nor was there routine victimization. Instead, prisoners "devised and put in place … the kind of neighborhood self-government they were familiar with when at home … which paralleled and intersected with the official system" (p. 222). This case study raises critical questions about penal variations in legitimacy, order, and the experience of punishment, and does well to confront Eurocentric notions of "good governance."

Legitimacy
Gorazd Mesko

After reading Ian O'Donnell's *Prison Life: Pain, Resistance, and Purpose*, I took international Erasmus+ students on a visit to Slovenia's Ljubljana Prison. Situated in center-city Ljubljana, the prison houses individuals serving sentences of up to 18 months. The touring students— mainly criminology, criminal justice, or security studies undergraduates—were first-time visitors.

The tour began with a lecture by the Deputy Director General of the Slovenian prison administration. A theologian and restorative justice expert, he focused on the aims of punishment and imprisonment statistics, along with his views on life and prison work. Following the lecture, a senior prison officer and a counselor led a 90-minute facility tour, explaining the daily routines, duties, and tasks of prison officers and rehabilitation programs—as well as the roles of officers, pedagogues, social workers, and other staff.

After leaving the prison, a small group of students seemed confused. Usually very talkative, the students were quiet for the next 25 minutes during the walk back to the Faculty of Criminal Justice and Security. In class and turning to their first experience in a prison as visitors, our discussion drew on the contents of O'Donnell's book and some of its basic premises and issues for debate.

Prison is an environment of mainly unhappy people who have had a conflict with state authorities due to their criminal activity. The prisons O'Donnell included in his study differ from prisons in Slovenia which are mainly located in old buildings, dating from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or reflecting Communist post-World War II architecture (with some exceptions for context, building type, and procedures). O'Donnell's two key theoretical dimensions—*integration* and *regulation*—gave us a good framework for reflection on our prisons. We quickly (perhaps too hastily due to first

impression bias) concluded that Ljubljana Prison resembled Isir Bet prison—with prisoners preparing their own food, and attending therapeutic sessions and school, while spending time in quite a small building that meets the Council of Europe requirements. One prison officer had revealed that each inmate develops his own survival strategy and emphasized that every prison differs in the type and number of prisoners. In addition to the "iron rules" that regulate daily routines, informal relationships develop as in every human group. A debate developed regarding inmates as "thinkers, writers, innovators, and survivors" (p. 6).

On the one hand, a well-integrated prison can serve as "a buffer against environmental uncertainty" (p. 7). A simple rule applies—affiliation and loyalty to one's prisoner group. On the other hand, regulation is externally formulated and imposes aspects of prison regime, state legislation, and policy. The most critical perspective in this regard is the implementation of these rules. The class learned quickly that prison staff and inmates often meet somewhere in the middle between the formal and informal structures to keep and maintain the required order.

In comparing the Ljubljana prison with other prisons in Slovenia, we learned that there were different building types (from very old to new, from dormitory style to modern western prison architecture). As well, there are different security regimes, and some prisons also have pretrial detention (remand) inmates. A comparison of these prisons illustrates characteristics presented by O'Donnell regarding the history of prisons (e.g., the non-colonial heritage in Ethiopia) and specific demographic arrangements of prisons (e.g., H Blocks), as well as levels of security, etc. The Slovenian prison system *most resembles* the Ethiopian case (*high integration* and *reasonable regulation*), but in a different social environment with a different history. Even in a short-term prison, inmates are offered treatment programs that have almost disappeared from the Western penological map. The "empathy gap" (p. 10) was also emphasized in our debate because prison officers who spend much time with inmates often play the role of 'naturalistic therapists' aiding them when in distress.

As a scholar of penology, my reflection was about *legitimacy*, as this has been the subject of my research for over a decade. O'Donnell puts it briefly and clearly—*legitimacy* is the perception that those who wield authority do it rightly. Our research (Hacin et al., 2019; Mesko & Hacin, 2019) shows that in addition to legitimacy, self-legitimacy is essential. As a simplified psychological concept, self-legitimacy represents two sides of one's professional self-esteem—"what others think about me and my work" and "how I perceive myself and my work." The more legitimate the prison staff, the better the quality of life in prison. Yet, given the nature of prison environments, staff-inmate relationships are very fluid and fragile. Therefore, prison staff

must be very cautious in implementing formal legal norms in a humane and respectful manner.

Ian O'Donnell's book excels for his actual international study visits to prisons, thus presenting the dynamics of prison life and work to readers in a genuine, exciting, and creative way. A gem in contemporary penological literature, *Prison Life: Pain, Resistance, and Purpose* is a must-read for anyone who studies criminology, penology, or criminal justice, including prison practitioners, administrators, and policy makers.

Life is full of coincidences, such as O'Donnell's meeting with Father Moran who introduced him to Isir Bet prison (p. 127). In our case, our prison lecturer was a former priest, theologian, and restorative justice expert who emphasized in his talk the same norms and values and perspectives that are the basis of O'Donnell's work. Back to my penology students again …. I have not yet concluded the debate with them. We are meeting several times to discuss other themes raised in *Prison Life*, including compliance, porosity, autonomy, freedom to roam, prisoner and staff self-conception, written constitution, bodily integrity, and threats to psyche.

The Form and Texture of Prisons

Mary K. Stohr

In Ian O'Donnell's *Prison Life: Pain, Resistance, and Purpose*, case studies of four prisons are featured: Eastham, Texas (1972–1982) and ADX Florence, Colorado (2001–2011) in the United States, the H Blocks in Northern Ireland (1990–2000), and Isir Bet in Ethiopia (2010–2020).

A centerpiece of O'Donnell's study is that not all *societies of captives* (Sykes, 1958) are similar, nor are Sykes' findings generalizable. Rather, O'Donnell asserts that Sykes' findings were not necessarily applicable to other countries or states. Rather, their contexts were different, and so their operation vis-à-vis *integration* and *regulation* varied. Beaumont and Tocqueville (1964) first documented these differences when they juxtaposed the reformist prisons of New York and Pennsylvania with the "barbarous" prisons in New Jersey and Ohio. They concluded that the variations in prison operations were linked to the "… want of unison in the various parts of government in the United States (Beaumont and Tocqueville, 1964, p. 49). *Vive la différence* was not likely a worldview they subscribed to given the deleterious consequences for the incarcerated in the most poorly run prisons, nor does it appear to be a view held by O'Donnell.

Some of the book's strengths are its recounting of the four prisons' descriptors and histories. Even for an American with some familiarity with

U.S. prisons, a review of these facts was useful. As valuable as those reviews were for a Westerner, with the privilege and cultural blinders that often entails, learning about the H Blocks in Northern Ireland, and especially Ethiopia's Isir Bet prison, was a revelation. Isir Bet was novel particularly in its openness and autonomy for male inmates, features that resemble modern Western European prisons (e.g., see Daems & Robert, 2017; Ruggiero, 1995).

I would caution against the oft-repeated belief (which O'Donnell mentions but acknowledges might be incorrect) that the removal of the brutal control through the *BT system* in Texas led to greater violence. As the BT system and its concomitant violence were sub rosa, the latter was not documented. Therefore, there is no way to determine whether violence was greater afterward and every reason to believe just the opposite. As O'Donnell notes, even murders under the BT system were dismissed as suicides.

It is worth noting that three of the prisons no longer exist in the form O'Donnell studied. He notes that the H Blocks closed, the Eastham prison still exists but without the BT system, and the Isir Bet prison was transformed by political violence in Ethiopia. Only ADX Florence is reputedly the same, but given the decrease in its population and the cited court case, it is certainly possible that even this prison is not as rigid in its operation as it once was.

Speaking now as an American corrections scholar and parroting O'Donnell's recognition of the dissimilarity of prisons, it would be a shame if all prisons in the states were judged by these extremes. Certainly, there is every reason to believe that the U.S. remains an outlier in its use of incarceration (Walmsley, 2018) and its near reverence for penal harm (Clear, 1994). However, as O'Donnell notes as regards ADX Florence, these prisons were "an outlier of an outlier" (p. 176) and not representative of corrections in the states now or perhaps even 50 years ago (when Eastham operated on the BT model). For instance, about 80% of U.S. state prisons are minimum and medium security (Stohr & Walsh, 2022), and have been for decades. As such, persons incarcerated in most American prisons have much more autonomy, opportunity to engage in activities, and contact with staff, inmates, and the larger community. Such prisons have more programming, including those focused on education and rehabilitation, and some are evidence-based. Since 2008, the numbers of people incarcerated in U.S. prisons have markedly decreased. This is all by way of saying that an accurate picture of American corrections now as represented by ADX Florence or Eastham in the 1970s is more mixed than these two "outlier of outlier" prisons.

This is not to say that studying prisons of the past as outliers (as perhaps the H Blocks and Isir Bet were as well) is not beneficial, as they provide hints about how prisons should be operated safely and humanely. It also illustrates

that all countries, or at least these three, are capable of producing innovations in correctional practice for both good and ill. As O'Donnell remarked in the beginning of the book, "While the fact of confinement may be constant, its form and texture are not" (p. 1).

Appreciating Penal Variation With Comparative Penology

Ashley T. Rubin

At the heart of Ian O'Donnell's *Prison Life* is a critique of prison sociology's fundamental features, associated with one of the fathers of the field. O'Donnell challenges Gresham Sykes' claim in *The Society of Captives* that prisons share "basic similarities which … override the variations of time, place, and purpose" (p. 258) and, more generally, the tendency of reducing prisons to ideal types. Instead, O'Donnell calls for an "idiographic turn" in penology to counter this "procrustean tendency in prison studies" (p. 6).

In many ways, *Prison Life* is a welcome and overdue contribution. If we take seriously the foundational point of punishment and society, viz., that punishment reflects (and shapes) the broader society, then we should of course expect prisons to vary in important respects over time and place since societies vary over time and place. Likewise, one of the important themes in punishment and society research over the past two decades has been the ways in which descriptions of penal eras having overarching orientations as punitive or lenient, rehabilitative or retributive, profoundly overstate reality. Important state-level and organization-level case studies show exceptions to ostensibly national trends even within the extreme case of the United States under mass incarceration. Numerous articles have given us a vocabulary for understanding the variegated features of penality in any given place and time. Other studies have shown us important gaps between theory and practice, rhetoric and reality, that belie such trends. For prison sociology to not reflect some of these themes is rather embarrassing.

And yet, part of me wants to defend prison studies, especially our classics, because theory generation requires boiling down to certain essentials in order to make statements that can be true across time and place. (Indeed, our theories can be true at one level and misleading at another. Likewise, some macro-level theories are fundamentally at odds with theories based on microlevel studies–a challenge across the sciences.) That said, we can boil down too much and lose important nuance. In our writing, research designs, and theorizing, we always face trade-offs between offering simplicity or elaboration, utilitarian parsimony or rich texture. As a field, we have room for both; as long as we recognize the limitations of each type of research project, we

can see how they can complement one another in ways that are generative for the field. To the extent that we have erred too much on the procrustean side, we should welcome more idiographic approaches.

Returning to Sykes, we need not agree with his specific conclusions to accept the claim that certain basic similarities exist; the challenge is either to be more specific about our scope conditions for where those similarities should exist or identify a more accurate compilation of those similarities. Internationally, comparative case studies are an excellent way to work toward either or both of those tasks.

As a project, *Prison Life* offers a useful model for moving past a certain amount of intellectual stagnation characterizing prison sociology, punishment studies, law and society, and related fields. Although more people than ever are studying within these fields, high-level theoretical development has stalled (with notable exceptions). Much new research, exciting and well-conceived though it is, drills down deeper to refine existing theories and concepts rather than offering their own theories. The pyramid of types of research is becoming lopsided—we have a host of excellent ethnographies and case studies, and much conceptual development, but disproportionately few full-on theoretical frameworks. For a thriving field, we need a great mix of research types.

Comparative case studies on an international scale, like O'Donnell's, offer an exciting way forward. This is especially true of studies, like O'Donnell's, that move beyond our standard list of a few countries in the Global North and bring in comparisons to countries in the Global South (in this case, Ethiopia) and those more ambiguously situated (in this case, Northern Ireland). Comparative research—whether internationally or historically comparative, or both—allows us to truly test general theories in ways that case studies cannot (and often are not intended to). Scholars can set out to revisit, interrogate, and explore foundational tropes in our fields and come away with new theories and theoretical insights. Thus, while O'Donnell's project may have been born out of a discomfort with Sykes' generalization of prisons, what it produces moves beyond Sykes to a new way of describing prisons and locating them within a matrix of possibilities. In an overpopulated field, this is an impressive contribution.

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