

# Prisons and Prisoners in the History and Sociology of Knowledge (17<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century)

Call for papers

University of Fribourg, June 12-13, 2025

Organisers: Laure Piguet, Léa Renard & Alix Heiniger

The history of prisons is “a history of constant reform.”<sup>1</sup> Since at least the beginning of the eighteenth century, these repeated transformations (desired or achieved) (Morris, Rothman, 1995, vii) have been accompanied by the production of knowledge about architecture, physical constraints on the body, gender segregation, violence, sexual practices, proximity or, conversely, “punitive” or “redemptive” isolation. Examples include the well-known surveys carried out by social reformers or parliaments, the charity society surveys and the ordinary knowledge about prisons developed and circulated by prisoners themselves. The many studies on the history of prisons all mention this very strong link between incarceration and the production of knowledge. Michel Foucault, for example, briefly analyses the investigations into prisons and prisoners carried out in France from 1801 onwards as one of the “prison’s technologies” that supported the new worldview on crime, surveillance and punishment (Foucault, 1995, 234). Jacques-Guy Petit took a passing interest in penal statistics in his book on penal incarceration in France between 1789 and 1875 (Petit, 1990, 261-266). Patricia O’Brien considers that “at the core of the new punishment [from the early nineteenth century] was the claim to specialized knowledge made on behalf of the state” (O’Brien, 1996, 292). Yet very little research has focused specifically on this knowledge (see however Petit, 1995; Kaluszynski, 2013; Salle, 2014; Schull, 2014; Fink, 2016; Génard, Simioni, 2018; Heiniger, 2021), and even less, if any, has attempted to integrate it into the history of knowledge in general, and more specifically into the history of (social) science and statistics.

Against the background of this research gap, this conference proposes to take knowledge about prisons and prisoners as an object of study. Following Christian Jacob, we define knowledge as a “the totality of the mental, discursive, technical and social procedures by which a society, and the groups and individuals that constitute it, make sense of the world around them and give themselves the means to act on it or interact with it” (Jacob, 2014, 24). Therefore, we are interested in the reflexive activities of social actors behind (or within) the history of prisons: how can the techniques of inquiry developed to learn about the realities of confinement, as well as theoretical productions on incarceration, help us to understand the perceptions and means of social order in a given period? How did these reflexive activities not only contribute to the transformation or reproduction of social order, but also to the development of techniques of social inquiry in a broader sense? In other words, our general question is: how did prisons and prisoners contribute to the history and sociology of knowledge and science?

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<sup>1</sup> Alix Heiniger, Maurice Cottier, *A History of Constant Reform: Crime and Punishment in the Twentieth Century*, International Conference, University of Fribourg, June 6-7, 2023.

Proposals for contributions to the conference could address one of the following three areas:

### *1. Mapping knowledge about prisons and prisoners*

If John Howard's famous survey *State of the Prisons in England and Wales* (1777) caught the attention of historians (McGowen, 1995, 86-87; Scheerer, 1996, 351; Petit, 1995), it appears to be an exception in the field. Indeed, surveys on prisons and prisoners are neither part of the history of empirical sociology and social surveys nor of the history of statistics. One of the aims of this conference is thus to map the body of knowledge on prisons and prisoners between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries by bringing together scholars working on this topic and encouraging new research. We seek to learn more about the producers, their motives, the results of their efforts and the impact on the reform of and knowledge about prisons in general. The aim is also to move away from a state-centric approach to knowledge about prisons and prisoners (O'Brien, 1996, 292), and to observe the interactions between different individuals, groups, and institutions, as well as the dynamics and exchanges behind the knowledge produced (Karila-Cohen, 2010). Contributions on "militant knowledge" (Lamy, 2018), "statactivism" (Bruno, Didier, Prévieux, 2014), and on ordinary knowledge produced by prisoners themselves would be particularly welcome.

### *2. Observing work in prison*

One social activity that has been particularly observed in prisons is that of labour. Since the birth of modern prisons, labour has been seen – besides isolation – as the major vehicle of inmates' transformation and rehabilitation; a conception that is closely linked to contemporary theories of labour which see ("free") labour as a core societal value and a basis for individual emancipation and social integration. Work has thus been widely implemented in prisons and supported by different ideological or practical justifications across history (liberal, socialist, colonial). Discourses on prison labour must be contextualized and critically questioned against the background of "a state strategy to discipline racialized and poor segments of the population" (LeBaron 2018, 153), both in historical and contemporary configurations (for the former, see studies of workhouses e.g., Carré, 2016; for the latter, see Wacquant, 2009). The global history of labour (De Vito, Lichtenstein 2013, 2015) as well as critical theory (Rusche, Kirchheimer, 1939) question the links between "theories of punishment" and "theories of labour" (Anderson, 2016). In this perspective, incarceration can be analysed both as a form of social control and as a source of workforce (O'Brien 1982, 152ff; Stanziani, 2020). We are looking for contributions that explore the various forms of knowledge produced on the labour-punishment-reformation nexus<sup>2</sup> in different historical and geographical contexts in order to deepen our understanding of the variable functions assigned to work in prison, the functions it fulfilled, and its effects. This includes everyday knowledge (social meaning, interpretation and routines) produced by prisoners about their own work practices. Contributions seeking to understand the extent to which knowledge about work in prisons might have contributed to our general knowledge about work will be particularly valued.

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<sup>2</sup> Contributions on surveys of workhouses are also welcome.

### *3. Prisons as places of experimentation and prisoners as test subjects*

Prisons and prisoners have not only been studied to produce knowledge about incarceration and its effects, but also to obtain knowledge that can be generalised to the wider population. Maurice Pappworth noted that “[f]or many centuries the criminal has been regarded as an ideal subject on whom to perform medical experiments” (Pappworth, 1967, 60). Two case studies are well known: that of the smallpox inoculations administered to six prisoners in Newgate Prison in 1721 (Behbehani, 1983, 461-462) and that of the Illinois State Penitentiary in Stateville, where inmates were deliberately infected with malaria in 1944 by scientists from the University of Chicago to observe the development of the disease and to test drugs (Harcourt, 2011, 443-444). Beyond these cases, other experiments and their scale remain largely unresearched. As a matter of fact, the literature on the history of experiments on prisoners focuses largely on the United States (except for experiments carried out in concentration camps) (Capron, 1973; Washington, 2006; Hornblum, 1997, 2000, 2007). Allen M. Hornblum even suggested that the United States may be the only “industrialised” country to have continued to use prisoners as test subjects after the Second World War (Hornblum, 1998, xv). Contributions could explore the history of experimentation on prisoners outside the United States, as well as the history of such experimentation from the seventeenth century onwards. Contributions dealing with the impact of these experiments, and therefore of prisoners, on the history of science (including medicine and psychiatry) will be particularly welcome, as well as papers documenting these experiments from the prisoners’ point of view.

#### *Modalities of submission*

Please send your abstract (up to 500 words) together with a short biographical note by **15 November 2024** to the following address: laure.piguet@unifr.ch. We will inform you about our decisions by the end of the year. Particular attention will be paid to proposals’ novelty and to the use of new primary sources, original methods and/or data. Whereas we accept contributions focusing on historical configurations from the seventeenth to the twentieth century only, there is no geographical restriction: papers focusing on all regions of the world are welcome.

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