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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE CORPORAL REPERTOIRE OF PRISON PROTEST IN SPAIN AND LATIN AMERICA

The Political Language of Self-Mutilation by Common Prisoners

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ABSTRACT: By means of case studies and historical information regarding penitentiary institutions in Spain and Latin America, the author offers an interpretative view of protest in prisons. Taking into consideration the concept of “prisonisation”, this paper discusses the “prisoner body” treated as a typological category. In a manner of speaking, this perspective enables the author to establish differences in the nature of the arsenal of collective actions employed by prisoners, and thus to put forward his own conceptual definition as “bioprotest”. There is a subtle asymmetry in the bodily-harm aspect of prisoner protest, which needs to be examined in light of the dominant cultural frameworks. On the one hand, we have “political and ideological prisoners”, whose non-violent corporal arsenal (hunger strikes, in particular) is often a sufficient to make themselves heard. On the other, we have “common prisoners”, who are often unable to break free of the cultural stigma of criminality which clings to them, and therefore feel compelled to add a more sacrificial (corporal) aspect to their actions – mainly by way of self-mutilation.

KEYWORDS: bioprotest, common prisoners, hunger strike, Latin America, non-cooperation, penitentiary institutions, political prisoners, prisonisation, prison protests, riots, self-mutilation, Spain.

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1. Introduction

This paper continues an analysis begun some years ago. Specifically, it uses the interpretative baggage provided by previous research into the protests that developed in Spanish prisons during the Late Modern period and applied to the analysis of conflicts in various prisons, particularly in Latin American countries, soon after the start of the 21st Century (Oliver Olmo 2005, 2009).

The disorder and riots which occasionally occur in prisons are complex events, in which we see the conflictual interaction of the structural circumstances of confinement (material conditions, institutional diversity, power relations and state organisation) and the possibility of human action – e.g. the rage of the prisoners and the charisma of the leaders, official indifference or the administrative problems which may arise (Carrabine 2005). This is attested by the empirical studies conducted in specific prisons in Europe and America.

There is no shortage of rigorous analyses of Latin American prisons, such as those of Argentina, Venezuela, Mexico and Brazil, which are notorious for their chronic conflicts, shot through with spectacular riots: the fact that the Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro prisons are controlled more by the inmates than by the guards (Darke 2013) largely accounts for the outbreak of brawls and riots, without a doubt. Yet the referential sociological and criminological studies regarding the various types of prison disturbances have been carried out primarily in the English-speaking world. Especially interesting is the model put forward by Boin and Rattray (2004), based on the proposals formulated to date – particularly the interpretative theory of Useem and Kimball (1987), which demonstrates that the breakdown of the prison administration and governance structure is the most significant factor that may be generated by a context of disorder and disturbances. If specific studies of conflict are complemented by investigations of penitentiary sociology in prisons in the UK and USA, characterised by harsh but orderly regimes, or even reformed and subject to innovative treatments, we can better understand the importance of control over the processes of adaptation of inmates to the reality of their incarceration. What was, long ago, sketched out by Sykes (1958) in his now-classic study has, gradually, been enriched by innovative examinations – notably that of Cohen and Taylor (1972), who analysed the survival strategies of long-term prisoners; Toch (1992), who studied the effect of stress on prisoners; Liebling and Arnold (2004), who suggested that staff and inmates are involved in collective participation; and Crewe (2009), who indicated the limits of individualisation as a submission strategy.

This article does not fully analyse prison revolts as a whole. The focus is on prison riots, integrating the phenomenon as a cultural and political key. I do not linger over the

multifaceted causality of each of the riots – which are viewed as being dynamic and context-dependent – but on the expressiveness and subjectivisation of this type of collective action which is normally headed by common prisoners, bearing the hallmarks of a reclamatory (and therefore politically exploitable) protest. Each case studied is worthy of specific attention in its own right. In this article, though, I highlight a general phenomenon, which is shown through an observation of all cases as a whole. Indeed, if we use a conceptual tool which is widely known in the circles of prison sociology – prisonisation – then we can immediately deduce the full reality of a dissymmetry already noted in the historical experience of contemporary penitentiary systems: the major difference which exists between “common prisoners” and “political prisoners” in experiencing incarceration (and the consequences of prisonisation, with its effects on the inmates’ bodies and “souls”). This has a crucial impact on the repertoire of actions employed in prison protest.

We must speak of an essentially corporal arsenal of available actions, which defines both the initiatives of so-called “common” prisoners and those led by “political” prisoners, because the prison that holds the prisoners’ bodies allows for nothing else. In the context of prison biopower, the prisoner’s body becomes the most important tool in prison protest, expressed in the form of bioprotest. In addition, this corporal repertoire is skewed (sometimes tragically and terribly) by the aforementioned dissymmetry: whilst the tactic most commonly employed by both groups is the hunger strike, it is “common prisoners” who most frequently use the violent bodily form of protest, which is expressed by means of self-harm. Why is this so, one wonders?

To understand the profoundly political significance with which common prisoners wish to imbue the language of their protest, in terms of methodology, it is essential that we look at the sacrificial experience of the actions of common prisoners in comparison with the cultural framework that, historically, has been constructed around the presence of prisoners for political or conscientious reasons. First, though, in order to arrive at this understanding, we need to consider the cultural weight of a major social misunderstanding.

2. The incomprehensible language of prison protest in today’s penal culture

The collective protests carried out by prisoners demonstrate that prisons are “complex institutions” where very different and indeed contradictory means of regulating and imposing order are employed (Sparks, Bottoms, and Hay 1996). Collective actions in prison, despite their variety, tend to be described derogatively as

“disturbances” or “riots”, though a large portion of the research projects in social sciences aim to explain them not as irrational reactions in a hostile and explosive environment, but as the conscious, deliberate actions of those who have no political voice (Carrabine 2005).

When examining struggles carried out by prisoners, there is a tendency not to attach any importance to the reason behind those struggles, because, in today’s punitive culture, this “language” of protest is neither heeded nor understood. Thus, it is almost enough, for authorities attempting to quash a protest by prison inmates, to play to the public’s preconceived ideas about prisoners. It should be noted, though, that the authorities are not above censoring information which could be damaging to them. In fact, they have many tools at their disposal – not least the breathing space they are afforded by the relative obscurity of the penitentiary system.

In addition to walls, razor-wire fences, armed guards and advanced tele-monitoring systems, prisoners are surrounded by an overpowering aura of criminality and marginalisation. Many journalists who report on conflicts involving groups of prisoners make no distinctions, contenting themselves with simply parroting clichéd lines about “terrifying prison riots”. Thus, a predetermined message is put across by the mention of violent clashes, shrouded in an atmosphere of terror, which also tends to include added details about the rioters’ unhinged, sadistic, filthy and obscene behaviour. Ultimately, the reports received by the outside world create an especially horrific, repugnant representation of the conflict which, as well as creating uncertainty as to its awful outcome, imposes the logical view whereby it becomes predictable, and even necessary, to put down the rebellion by force (Rivera Beiras 1996).

If we do not know the details of the conflict or the reasons for the protest, if there is no weighing of information about the causes and instigators of unrestrained violence in prison, it will remain practically impossible to understand the language of the fighting inmates. When – against a backdrop of fear, repulsion and criminalisation – we see images of bodies piling up against bars or climbing onto roofs, waving their hands as improvised placards or exhibiting grisly wounds, it is incumbent upon us to make a social interpretation of these calls for attention. What can we perceive, what can we feel, when presented with the dramatic image of those who harm themselves to gain a voice to raise in protest; who stitch their lips closed in order to speak; who make cuts on their necks, arms and stomachs simply to make themselves seen? How can we understand them?

The acritical acceptance of prison as a humanised, civilised social reaction to crime helps render it attractive and make it less threatening, because it sweeps under the rug the vengeful function of prison – i.e. hurting the person who inflicts hurt. It makes

allowances for its most uncivilised consequences, and makes its most inhumane aspect palatable. After over two hundred years of penal policies, prison has won out completely over other punitive practices, to the point where it has no significant abolitionist opposition, no rivals or alternatives. When we focus our study on modern punishment, based on the critical focal approaches of penalism, criminology and penal sociology, such as the work of D. Garland (1999), R. Matthews (2003) or J. Pratt (2002), in addition to that of Foucault (1994) (and the contributions of post-Foucault historiographers), we can understand the civilising transcendence of the cultural triumph of the prison paradigm.

Towards the end of the 20th Century, it was becoming evident that the prison system was failing to deliver on nearly all its legal objectives (of prevention, rehabilitation, etc.). Nonetheless, this unsustainable institution formed the central tenet of western penal justice systems, owing to the ideological and cultural functions it had imposed on the social order (Mathiesen 1990). We speak of the West in general, but it is historically transcendental that the almighty USA has also become a penal/penitentiary global superpower, to the point where the last quarter of the 20th Century could be remembered as the period of the “second great confinement” in the history of the USA (Simon 1998). This was even before the peak of that other implementation of incarceration during the 1990s and 2000s, which filled US prisons with immigrants, with its devastating results in terms of civil rights (Bhui 2007; Bosworth and Kaufman 2011; Hernández 2013).

With regard to a “total institution” (Goffman 1961), this means that it has achieved resounding historical success, as it has surpassed objectives of legitimisation that were far more advanced than any penal law envisaged. Prison has become culturally inescapable and indispensable, and so it has generated a sociocultural attitude that overlooks or plays down the effects of institutional violence, with an assumption that pain inflicted upon the condemned man is as even-handed as his resentment is inevitable (Oliver Olmo 2013).

It is well known that, with the amount of hatred attached to penal practices, normalised society runs obvious risks, in view of the possible boomerang effect of institutional violence: because it creates disturbed, tormented human beings; because of the never-ending chain of violence generated by the desire for revenge; or because the rates of repeat offending and multiple repeat offending speak for themselves. No society, however wealthy, is free of these risks; nor can it ensure calm in prisons or shield itself from the hatred and violence that harsh penal practices are capable of unleashing both within and outside of penal institutions. Yet modern penal culture persuades us all to look the other way and accept that, in spite of it all, prison is the

inevitable penal solution. It should also be noted that today, prison is being used as a punishment for increasing numbers of crimes and misdemeanours.

Thus, in the collective imagination today, the social majority, in addition to detaching itself from the wearisome and disagreeable problem of prisons, has also turned its back on the painful situation that, in human terms, prison inmates could be experiencing, and has overlooked the fact that in practice, prisoners are deprived not only of their freedom but of other rights as well. If the image presented of the prisoner is as someone deserving of an afflicted half-life, it will be more difficult to accept the idea of a subject who protests and rebels.

3. Complaints that result in protests and their importance in the history of prisons

Complaint – that most natural and above all most human of abilities – which may break out at any moment in prisons, may also begin to escalate at any moment, until everybody is involved: particularly the prisoners themselves. Protest in prisons clashes headlong with the contradictory essence of prison, given that prison is, ultimately, deeply paradoxical: on the one hand, it is a human institution – perhaps *too* human (as it has gradually come to conform to the process of penal civilisation) – and on the other, it is still an unnatural and dehumanising practice. Devised to deprive the condemned of freedom and administer civilised punishment throughout the entirety of a human life, prison has a tendency to further castigate inmates who complain. Under these conditions, and in the context of this life of punishment, the boundary separating complaint from protest becomes decidedly tenuous.

The history of prison is riddled with stories of complaints which have turned into protests. These scenarios have occurred in all epochs and all places, and they continue to occur. Prisoners have resisted and fought in a relatively explicit, political manner, or in a surreptitious, clandestine manner, or even in a humorous manner, by way of a rebellion conveyed through gestures, rumours, jokes and songs – those “weapons of the weak”, that “art of resistance” so eloquently described by the historian James C. Scott (2003). While it is undeniable that, from time to time, explosions of rage and eruptions of violence are provoked, prisoners normally take action in feeble, almost muted ways – or in any case, in ways which are formalised and controlled: from the famous prisoner protests in Spain during the *Antiguo Régimen* (Old Regime) in the presence of “visiting judges”, which managed to bring about a review of conditions in public jails, to the forms

and petitions which prisoners now have the right to address to the penal and judicial authorities.

Prisoner protests have been a reality not only since the “birth of the modern prison” resulted, in many countries, in the major penitentiary reforms of the 19th and 20th centuries and the legislation affording them a certain ability to assert their own rights (Rivera Beiras 1997). The incarcerated have been complaining since the dawn of time, and almost anywhere that there have been structures of opportunity to help their voices resound more loudly. There were complaints and protests in debtors’ prisons and remand prisons, in forced-labour camps and at military tribunals, and in the many other forms of incarceration to which people were condemned during the *Antiguo Régimen* by special judiciaries (religious inquisitions, university inquests, etc.) in Spain, for example. As well as being prevalent in modern-day prisons, complaints and protests are historical constants in all kinds of forms of incarceration: in the oldest forms, such as those mentioned above, and the most recent – e.g. Juvenile Detention Centres and Alien Detention Centres, which have, *de facto*, become special kinds of prisons.

As has also been documented in Spain’s prisons for many years, two means of protest have been particularly prevalent: lodging a formal complaint and staging a collective protest (which has frequently resulted in a riot). Complaints tend – and continue – to be lodged on an individual basis: it has always been so by necessity, so the authorities can accept it as a sort of right to appeal for the “wretched”. Normally, prisoners have expressed two main concerns: physical hunger, denounced by hapless prisoners, pleading for relief; and the “hunger for justice”, expressed by those wanting to declare their innocence, or demand the hearing of a court case which risks being delayed for a long time whilst they languish in prison for precautionary or preventive reasons. Sometimes, prisoners ask for a retrial with a view to having their case reviewed after a lengthy incarceration.

On the other hand, collective protest and riots have tended to occur for another two reasons which could render the inmates’ lives even more insufferable: mistreatment by guards and problems with prison food (in fact, there have been frequent instances of protests against restrictions or prohibitions on having wine with meals, or angry rejection of spoiled or bad food – e.g. throwing it to the floor). There are historical accounts which relate such events, occurring in the heat of the attempts at penal humanisation made by erudites and philanthropists – particularly in the late 18th Century, and later, during periods of historical change which also gave rise to expectations of penal reform and new punitive agreements (Oliver Olmo 2001).

Since the 19th century, with the historical development of penal/penitentiary systems, when prisons were becoming increasingly populated by the victims of political

persecution – i.e. as the image of the “political prisoner” as opposed to the “common prisoner” became more widely accepted, particularly in the 20th century – new forms of protest also began to emerge. So too, ultimately, did a new culture of anti-prison resistance which would counter institutional violence in prisons – often very effectively – demonstrating that prisoners could break through the barriers of criminalisation and marginalisation if they managed to make themselves visible and gain prestige for their cause. The repertoire of available protest techniques was changing and expanding – though as we shall see, not without contradictions, and always with great difficulty, with significant sacrifices having to be made.

4. Prisonisation and bioprotest: imprisonment and the bodily grammar of protest

Above all else, deprivation of liberty is a traumatic experience, which is experienced in an environment designed and regulated for precisely that purpose. In any case, it is an overly institutionalised and painful existence, where there can be no personal respect. Prison structures a regime of bio-power which totally dominates the prisoners’ lives, subjugating and dominating their bodies (going so far as to actually mark them physically), whilst also disciplining their spirits, confining them, forcing them to accept the institution’s expectations of them, which explains why the most significant mark left by this psychological imprisonment is one of frustration, or mortification and internal “self-mutilation” (Goffman 1961).

Many studies have been conducted in penal and penitentiary sociology as to the effects of prison life: effects which are both psychological and physical – in brief, vital effects. On the one hand, prison, as a bodily experience, tends to leave very clear traces. The marks that freedom deprivation leaves on prisoners’ bodies are the signs of the reality of the punishment. In Foucauldian terms, we would say that those marks hold the “semiotics of prison punishments” (Germain, Rodrigues de Andrade, and Serbali 1995). In the scars, mutilations and amputations suffered by prisoners, in their tattoos and even their postures and expressions – including in the new anatomical forms that inmates seem to acquire after a prolonged period in a regime of total incarceration – we can see a reflection of the true power that is exercised in the act of penalising and incarcerating people, by the subjugation and domination of their bodies.

Yet it must not be forgotten that this physical reflection of the institution on the inmates’ bodies is the external manifestation of an emotional, mental change that goes much deeper. Prisoners are obliged to adapt, psychologically, to the prison environment,

developing improvised or pre-established strategies, acclimatising to the institutional regime and taking account of their relationships with other prisoners and with their informal groups. Thus, they begin to assume a kind of life, as new as it is difficult – ultimately, the only kind of life it is possible to lead in an environment as harsh as prison. Behaviour which would be considered perfectly appropriate to ensure one’s own safety in prison would be deemed profoundly inappropriate “on the outside” (Manzanos 1991). By the effect which has become known as “prisonisation”, inmates gradually acquire various behavioural norms and codes of communication which are unique to the prison environment (including aesthetic aspects, in terms of style of dress, or tattoos), all of which produces in the prisoner an effect of re-identification, ultimately turning him/her into an institutionalised man/woman.

I shall use the concept of *prisonisation* in the sense that was originally intended when the term was coined by Donald Clemmer (1940), and since widely accepted and enriched by penal sociology. However, it must be clarified that prisonisation is far from a psychiatric syndrome or psychological maladjustment. For the incarcerated person, it is a process of internalisation of the role of a prisoner and of the general culture which governs prison life. This leads some authors to speak of acculturation and enculturation (Grove and Torbiörn 1985). It is a psychosocial process of adaptation to an environment which is profoundly abnormalising, wherein the fact of being totally regimented, of having all decisions made for you, lends itself to the potential for infantilisation, dependency and the assumption of a lack of responsibility on the part of prisoners, in turn bringing about a sort of “adaptive duality” towards the institution: either submission or aggressive self-affirmation (Valverde 1997). Prisonisation, therefore, is not synonymous with resignation, but rather assimilation to the abnormal reality of prison life. With it, logically, the institution cannot guarantee internal order – far from it. Prisonisation can be better understood by using the image of a sort of pressure cooker which, though it contains and chronicles daily occurrences of violence, is liable to explode at any moment if its valves are disturbed.

To begin with, there is a higher risk of aggression amongst those prisoners who have assimilated prison culture than those who make a conscious effort to resist it, thus preserving a “non-prisonised” identity for political or similar motives, or because they feel themselves to be not guilty, because they feel they are different, and in all cases because they refuse to be labelled as common prisoners, marginalised and criminalised (González Salas 2001). Secondly, many violent riots which break out in the most overcrowded and insecure prisons – in Latin America, for instance – also need to be analysed as the consequence of another of the most dangerous aspects of prisonisation: the existence of groups of prisoners with their own codes who, from time to time, clash

in an internal war for control of resources and influence, though on occasion these eruptions of violence may also be accompanied by demands and collective protest actions, and condemnation of the prison guards' corruptness (Oliver Olmo 2005).

All indications are that these prison riots reflect a background of conflict and institutional violence which runs far deeper. Thus, it is understood that Amnesty International (AI) considers certain famous killings of prisoners – such as the events in the Brazilian prison of São Paulo in 1992 – to be extrajudicial executions. The same organisation is quoted in the report on Jamaica published by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, with regard to the circumstances surrounding the 1997 and 2000 riots in the St Catherine Adult Correctional Centre and the Kingston General Penitentiary, when several inmates were killed or assaulted. Additionally, besides the investigations by organisations such as Equipo Nizkor, Human Rights Watch and AI (which have occasionally had to report the excessive use of force to quell prisoner protests in various countries, such as in Moldova in 2004), investigators from the UN Human Rights Commission have been obliged to look closely at the extremely bloody way in which prison riots are put down in Latin America via physical elimination of some of the participants in the revolts, as happened in the riots caused by the clashes between the infamous “Maras” group in a few prisons in Guatemala, or the most significant prisons in Brazil.

The 2001 riots were the most populous in the history of Brazil, involving over 25,000 inmates in 29 precincts in São Paulo. The events were repeated in 2002 (though with less intensity), again in the State of São Paulo. Yet what warrants the closest examination in the case of Brazil is that, seemingly, all these riots were coordinated by an organisation whose express goal is to combat the appalling conditions in Brazil's prisons. This collective calls itself the “Primer Comando da Capital” (PCC – First Command of the Capital), and was founded in 1993 by inmates in Taubaté Prison. During the course of the 2002 riots, the PCC was also responsible for a grenade attack in front of the offices of the prison administration of San Pablo.

Curiously, when claiming responsibility for the attack, the PCC said: “This is another warning. We are not playing games. Put an end to oppression in prisons”. Although it is highly relevant, the case of the PCC in Brazil is not the only one to show a polyhedral reality in a response to the power in prisons, where objective condemnation of the poor conditions and mistreatment is combined with violent struggle for informal control (Oliver Olmo 2005).

Depending on the situations of conflict or institutional violence and competition between prison subcultures, prisoners' attitudes constantly oscillate between identifying with the institution and rejecting it, but internalising the sentiment of being

“against something” (Goffman 1961). This attitude should not necessarily be interpreted as an adoption of violence and hostility – in fact, it does not need to be expressed by direct verbal conflict. It is much more complex.

It is clear that anti-prison resistance may have more than one dimension and occur in various ways – even without the need for physical confrontation. Patricia O'Brien's research on prisons in France in the 19th Century demonstrated that the manifestations of resistance to the penitentiary system were not exclusively (as Foucault says in *Discipline and Punish*) those adopted by the prisoner resistance groups who clash with the institutional body of the prison, but also alternative forms of language and cultural identity, as well as different ways of behaving towards the institution, all of which led to the creation of distinct subcultures within the prison system (O'Brien 1982).

In any case, in terms of the central theme of this article, any prisoner exhibiting prisonised behaviour, even if s/he expresses it in the most submissive and escapist way, when faced with the prospect of a long and desperate incarceration, will find it very difficult to prevent prison from marking him/her, both physically and mentally, whether or not s/he has taken part in protest actions. On the other hand, the bodies of prisoners who rebel against the institution tend to bear unmistakable and long-lasting marks from the clashes – particularly scars from the injuries caused by repression or self-mutilation. Sometimes, these scars are a clear manifestation of the messages in the prisoner's memory, with reflections, judgments and evaluations of the protest, expressed as a “bio-protest”. This is the conclusion that can be drawn from a 2005 interview with a Spanish prisoner known as “Carlos” who had been sentenced to over 30 years in prison and who cut himself many times as a way of making himself heard by the penitentiary authorities:

“(...) when you've finally exhausted all your avenues of argument – I mean, you've used every type of verbal complaint by all kinds of written communication... every way that you can think of to make your situation known... and it has been absolutely no use at all. There comes a moment when you have to resort to shedding your own blood, using your own body to make a statement. In order to fight, to take a stand against these injustices, against the treatment that you're enduring. I've had quite a few of those moments. Ultimately, your body... the marks that are left on your body are clearly visible, and you have to carry them with you for the rest of your life. Personally, when I think back on all those situations I've faced in my life, I don't remember them with shame – I remember them with pride, because it was a way of saying 'Here I am... I am alive, and I want to take a stand against this situation.’” (Garreaud and Malventi 2006).

In view of the fact that the bio-power exercised in prisons allows total control of inmates' lives, any action against that power directly involves their bodies. In fact, almost

all means of exerting pressure in prisons involves the use of the prisoners' own bodies and their component parts, including (perhaps inevitably) those parts which symbolise the most painful, dirty and dramatic aspects of the inmates' situation. At times, in the arsenal of tools used during collective protest, we find blood and excrement: two substances which most strongly denote a degree of psychological upset – either as the expression of mental disturbance or as anomie – although we must not lose sight of the fact that on occasion, they are also used as a delaying tactic to postpone or prevent transfers and sanctions.

There is an extensive body of literature, and particularly cinematic works, that illustrate such behaviour, but the best-known and most recent real-world example was staged by a collective of prisoners applying pressure for political reasons: the group of Al Qaeda prisoners at the US military base on Guantánamo Bay, who added to their protest repertoire the tactic of throwing “cocktails of blood, vomit and urine” at the guards, as the latter told the journalist Vicente Romero for a report on the Spanish “TVE” programme *Informe Semanal*, made in 2008.

Thus, protest becomes bio-protest when it expresses the communicability of the body involved in it. Bio-protest is expressed through a bodily language which carries cultural and political meaning. As a form of expression, it will have a greater chance of success if it takes place within the cultural framework of the political prisoner, who tends to use non-corporal means of collective actions (communiqués, press releases, negotiation with the penitentiary and judicial authorities, requests for arbitration, etc.), or one spectacular form of action which belongs to the repertoire of non-violent corporal protest: hunger strike, well-known examples of which are strewn throughout history, particularly from the 19th Century onwards (Cadoux 1984).

5. Greater legitimacy in political prisoners' protests

Oftentimes, with a greater or lesser degree of talent and expense, literature and cinema on prison-related topics have reproduced narrative structures where the epic story of a hero/villain is at the forefront. Particularly prevalent are stories including the figure of a “non-prisonised” prisoner, who keeps his/her identity intact despite the institutional culture of the penitentiary and the various criminal subcultures. That prisoner is sometimes forced to resist and confront a felonious and corrupt prison governor, unfair and brutal wardens, and bands or “mafia” of extortionist, abusive fellow inmates. This is the narrative structure that currently underlies the legitimising story of political prisoners and “ideological prisoners” (i.e. prisoners held for their ideas – an

image which is frequently presented in clear opposition to that of the “other” sort of prisoner, the “common prisoner”). The same image is essentially conveyed by historians studying the past of political prisoners, with the idea of the hero/villain being transferred to that of the vanquished/victors, champions of democracy/defenders of dictatorship, or oppressed/oppressors.

In the same way, and partly because of this sort of intellectual practice, the modern prison has become a cultural artefact which is ever-present in the area of social relations and, of course, societal control and penal policies. Prison culture has been woven from many different threads, with many different types of rhetoric and many different narratives – including those produced by historians. Historical studies of prison systems, which narrate the lives of inmates and focus on the ways in which they express their complaints and protests, tend to be written from an overbearing political perspective – i.e. one which emphasises those meanings which are not discernible within the cultural framework of conventional political relations, contrasting them (precisely to make them all the clearer) with the rest of the dark omens of the prison world (that is, with the other prisoners). Whether intentionally or not, the cultural legitimacy of a political prisoner is enhanced by a comparison with the conventional image of the common prisoner (as a crook, a thug, a killer, a prostitute, a drug addict, etc.). This practice, which we can define here as a general historical trend, has also included the adoption of stances radically unfavourable toward political and ideological prisoners, taking the side of the common prisoners or promoting joint initiatives to struggle alongside them (as happened, for example, in Spain with some highly ideological prisoners – particularly anarchists – or with conscientious objectors: groups which, along with prisoner support associations, have made a concerted effort to re-politicise the condition of the common prisoner, deconstructing this label and preferring instead to call them “social prisoners”).

In any case, both in the past and in the present, there is more than sufficient evidence to define the prison system which distinguishes political prisoners and those who have learnt from that system. It becomes abundantly clear that, though an important element in political practice is rationality, political prisoners are paradoxically also forced to use their own bodies as the centrepiece for their resistance and their struggle (though it must be recognised that we are talking about a body with a mind of its own: one which resists and struggles because it is capable of cognition). This rationale enables us to distinguish between “forms of resistance” and “forms of struggle”, though, obviously, the latter tend to arise because of the former.

Above all, to mount a resistance in prison is to make a great deal of effort to avoid becoming “prisonised”. This is very difficult, culturally, for a “common prisoner”, but is less challenging for a political prisoner, because the latter has a whole cultural

framework on his/her side. A political prisoner is already manifesting resistance simply by the fact of being able to identify himself/herself publically as a political prisoner, by virtue of the fact that s/he is able to preserve and cultivate group connections, facilitating contact with the outside world, and preventing the onset of apathy, routinisation and physical deterioration or the distortion of his/her self-image (e.g. in terms of personal hygiene). The existential tools most commonly employed by resistant prisoners include the establishment of “communes” to share resources and means of subsistence, and conscious strategies of non-cooperation with the prison regime – at least in terms of those practices that are not absolutely obligatory; thus, they are able to manifest opposition without automatically triggering a repressive reaction.

There are many historical examples of the forms of struggle utilised by political prisoners, even in situations of extreme domination – e.g. in the concentration and extermination camps during the Second World War (the Spanish Republicans interned at Mauthausen offer a good example), and in the prisons run by the bloodiest dictatorial regimes. A useful example here occurred under Argentina’s last dictatorship, where political prisoners managed to compensate for the lack of news from outside by communicating with one another using a silent language (creating a special code of signs), or with Morse code and certain similarly spontaneous slang (Rubano 1994).

In terms of recent history, it is possible to use information regarding recent episodes of conflicts and struggles conducted by political prisoners in various parts of the world to draw a map of “hot spots” in global geopolitics. Examples include the hunger strikes by the Islamic prisoners at Guantánamo (who were eventually force-fed), those by the “Chilean and Mapuche political prisoners” and by the Sahrawi inmates held in prisons such as Oukacha (Casablanca), Ait Melloul (Agadir) and El Aaiún (according to the Moroccan Association of Human Rights). Similarly, we must not forget the pressure exerted by ideological prisoners who are recognised as such by human rights organisations including Amnesty International; nor the importance and extent, in the virtual sphere, of the protests by certain prisoner collectives organised through social networks with a significant presence on the internet (as is the case with Islamic prisoner support networks; the prisoners belonging to the Anarchist Black Cross (ABC) Federation; those who are being punished for declaring themselves conscientious objectors to military service in various countries in Latin America, Turkey, Israel, etc.). There have also been frequent hunger strikes by political prisoners in countries such as Mexico (where “Zapatista” prisoners employ a combination of “self-starvation and sermonising”), Colombia, Cuba, Paraguay, Argentina, Iran (on the part of Kurdish prisoners) and Israel (with prisons bursting at the seams with Palestinian political prisoners).

Of the most salient characteristics of political prisoner struggles, two could be classified as absolutely fundamental. Firstly, such struggles are relatively organised and have some form of external support (by way of groups set up specifically for that purpose), and their own mechanisms for communicating and distributing propaganda. Secondly, they make use of a wide range of collective actions designed to disrupt the agenda of the authorities involved, through corporal and non-corporal methods. The latter include communiqués, press releases, the publication of pamphlets and reports, or attempts at mediation and negotiation with the penal and judiciary authorities. The former include the staging of fasts and hunger strikes, collective refusal by prisoners to leave their cells (“self-seclusion”), etc. Furthermore, they sometimes commit acts of defiance and disobedience (such as measures of “non-cooperation”), but only in favourable situations which prevent or minimise the enormous human and organisational cost brought about by the use of any repressive measures.

It is fairly rare for political prisoners to use violence or to take part in riots and uprisings, except in extreme situations and in areas of very serious conflict, where they are used as a way of presenting an ultimatum to the authorities, or supporting an escape plan (as happened at the Al Fursan prison in Ramadi, Iraq, in December 2008, when nine Al Qaeda prisoners managed to escape after killing several guards). For “common prisoners”, on the other hand, the opposite tends to be true: it is not easy for them to avoid violence.

6. More obvious torment in protests by common prisoners

Much like the hunger strike, the tool of “non-cooperation” (which is so beloved of collectives of political prisoners) tends to be insufficient for protests staged by prisoners jailed for ordinary crimes. Furthermore, for these inmates, it is much more difficult to avoid the risk that a very robust protest (such as barefaced defiance of the guards’ authority) will ultimately unleash an uncontrollable spiral of violence and repression. If there is still any doubt regarding the existence of two distinct “species” of prisoner in modern jails – if some reject that distinction, arguing that typically the regime and the treatment of the prisoners makes no such distinction – they will learn how wrong they are when the threat of an uprising occurs and they see the measures taken by the authorities to suppress that action.

With common prisoners as well, it is possible to establish a difference between “forms of resistance” and “forms of struggle”. For them too, because of the influence of the cultural framework of the political prisoner, “resistance” is anything which manifests a refractory attitude to the processes of prisonisation – something which, in the case of common prisoners, is not at all easy and tends not to be widely implemented. As it happened in Spain during the transition from the Francoist dictatorship to democracy,

the norm, for those who manage to avoid prisonisation, is to adopt a lifestyle which is atypical of institutionalised life, whilst using the institution's own mechanisms to express complaints and demands (Lorenzo 2014). Furthermore, it is clear that common prisoners are mounting a struggle when they support or promote episodes of protest within the prison, including actions which, though carried out on an individual basis, actively encourage the unleashing of collective responses. As explained above, there is precious little available to them as an effective way of communicating, given that they are surrounded by physical barriers and are, by virtue of their incarceration, indelibly branded as criminals. It should also be remembered that for the institution, it is very easy to justify harsh repression.

Common prisoners can symbolically reduce the obscurity of penal institutions and the aura of criminality surrounding them when they take collective action through opportunist structures which provide them with support or the means of garnering support. This is similar to that which happens with political prisoners, though for common prisoners the sacrifices involved tend to be greater. On these occasions, it is possible for common prisoners to construct structures of true mobilisation, with networks of support groups which usually include family and friends, in addition to human-rights defence organisations or avant-garde professionals in areas such as law, social work or criminology. Examples of this have occurred on a number of occasions in a very relevant way – e.g. in Spain during the transition from the Francoist dictatorship to a democratic regime between 1976 and 1978, when common prisoners staged protests in many of the country's prisons, demanding that they be extended the same amnesty measures that Adolfo Suárez's government had offered to anti-Franco political prisoners.

The common prisoners in Spain who rose up during the transition to democracy had a hostile relationship with leftist organisations, which only viewed the existence of political prisoners as unjust. Yet they were able to construct a communicative platform using coherent political language, which depicted them as victims of dictatorial legislation. Their struggle was extremely difficult. They were subjected to both legal and underhand repression, violence broke out amongst their own ranks, and alarming instances of self-mutilation were seen. They drew upon a varied and contradictory repertoire of collective action, using corporal and non-corporal methods, violent and non-violent actions, managed to organise the COPEL (*Coordinadora de Organizaciones de Presos en Lucha* – Coordinating Body of Prisoner-Protest Organisations), inspired solidarity from their families and friends, and gained the support of political forces which brought their cause to the attention of the institutions, initiating a process of penal reform which – though unsatisfactory for its proponents and especially for its

protagonists – succeeded in bringing the penal system out of the “long night” of the Francoist system, and into the new democratic “day” (Lorenzo 2006). The experience of COPEL, and of other prisoner movements in a number of European countries, helped to create a culture of anti-prison resistance that survives today (Rivera Beiras 2006, 891 onward; Lorenzo 2014).

Although the historical construction of the distinction between political- and common prisoners has been both negated and fostered by prison institutions, contact (which is sometimes inevitable) between these two groups of inmates often gives rise to opposing perceptions of identity. Despite deepening the chasm between the two, this can sometimes also encourage mutual learning. This phenomenon accounts for other processes of politicisation of common prisoners, seen again in 1970s Spain as well as in the same country during the “Second Republic” era: in the spring of 1936, the *Frente Popular* government declared an amnesty for those political prisoners who had taken part in the October 1934 insurrection (Oliver Olmo 2013). This was, in essence, the same demand which mobilised the common prisoners in other countries and in other historical contexts – e.g. in Argentina under Raúl Alfonsín, when the military dictatorship lost power and democracy was restored in 1983 (Oliver Olmo 2005). In these processes, mutual “learning” and potent anti-prison ideologies were present (particularly anarchist and far-left factions). Hence the discourse produced by the common prisoners on these occasions was highly political, and we can cite examples of solidarity with prisoners which even go beyond national borders, for instance the hunger strike (accompanied by prison yard protests and “self-seclusion”) staged by Italian, German and Spanish prisoners in December 2008 against life sentences without parole and the increasing harshness of sentences in general (Protestas 2008; Anarchist 2008).

On other occasions, reformist political initiatives promoted by the rulers or by official agencies incite protest, with a view to accelerating their implementation, extending their reach or furthering their impact. This has occurred in many countries – e.g. in the Czech Republic in 2004; in Bolivia under the leadership of Evo Morales (discussed later on), and in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez (for Czech Republic, Fajkusová 2004; for South and Central America, Oliver Olmo 2005). In Venezuela in 2011 and 2014, conditions in the prisons – which had always been overcrowded and violent – became extremely agitated and mobilised when enquiries and studies began on a wide-reaching and profound reform of the penal system (EFE 2011; Human Rights Watch 2014). The continuous protests carried out by common prisoners and their relatives in Venezuela are also due to political reasons. According to the National Prisons Monitoring Authority, there were 81 hunger strikes in 2007. In October 2008, following a mass hunger strike by prisoners in April and another in August (involving some 8000 prisoners), Venezuelan

prisoners carried out a coordinated action with family members (whom they “abducted” during a visit) and humanitarian organisations to appeal for flexibility in the justice system, better conditions in prison, the cessation of mistreatment during transit, etc. In order to follow the news about the activism developed by common prisoners in countries like Colombia and for knowing the importance reached by the corporal actions’ catalogue, see webs like *Movimiento Nacional Carcelario* (National Prison Movement) (2016).

Hence, we can also cite historical examples where common prisoners have been able to successfully make use, with a certain degree of transcendence, of non-violent, non-corporal means of protest. However, the truth remains that normally, in order to be able to operate within the structures of the same cultural frameworks used by political prisoners, common prisoners are forced to use their own bodies ever more drastically to make themselves heard. This has led to the inclusion of frightful self-mutilation amongst corporal actions. “Stitched lips” and gory cuts become an extra sacrifice by which the common prisoner attempts to overcome his/her own lack of legitimacy.

7. The political language of self-mutilation

Self-mutilation is not uncommon in the repertoire of collective actions employed by prison inmates. During the prisoner protests in Spain during the transition to democracy, bloody wounds on COPEL prisoners’ necks, arms and stomachs were prevalent (Lorenzo 2014). Around the same time – the prison uprisings in Spain gained momentum around 1977 – Mike Fitzgerald, reviewing the collective actions taken by prisoners in Great Britain and the US during the 1970s, concluded that the most common form of protest in prisons in developed countries at that time was “individual self-mutilation” (Fitzgerald 1977, 119). Of course, although other interpretations differ from the one offered here (Biggs 2004), the phenomenon of self-mutilation by prisoners merits careful examination by researchers in the social sciences beyond the bounds of criminology (Bourgoin 2004; Marzano 2007).

It should come as no surprise, then, that there have been many reports of prisoner protests accompanied by self-cutting (and self-mutilation) around the globe. In November 2005, in Moldovanovka Prison, Kyrgyzstan over 20 deaths occurred during the course of numerous protests. The primary methods used by the prisoners there to make their demands heard were hunger strikes and self-mutilation (the international press highlighted the fact that the prisoners made hideous “cuts to their veins and

abdomens”). The same year, something similar happened in Ecuador. Yet it was in Russia that self-cutting by prisoners became most widespread and transcendent, leaving it patently clear that prisoners had more than sufficient reason to complain. On 29 June, news agencies reported on a shocking and precipitous collective protest at Lgov Prison in Russia (Mass 2005). The prisoners had slashed themselves with razors *en masse* the day before. Headlines declared that “Hundreds of prisoners mutilate themselves to protest mistreatment”, and expressed surprise at how “unconventional” this method of protest was – at least in terms of media coverage and public opinion in general. As it took place simultaneously in ten different sectors of the prison compound, it was clear that the action had been coordinated and supported from the outside. Indeed, family members demonstrated at the prison gates to show their solidarity with the prisoners; the next day, an organisation called the “Human Rights NGO” demanded an investigation into the affair, because in any light, it seemed a terrible situation that at least 250 prisoners should have cut “their veins and necks” to protest against unhygienic conditions and beatings they endured at the hands of the guards. The effects of the protest were immediate, as two days later the public prosecutor’s office convened an emergency inquest to look into the accusations made by the prisoners.

More spectacular still, were the protests in Bolivian prisons that took place in October 2006 (with a precedent in 2004). The Bolivian prisoners, who had united to form the *Movimiento Nacional Carcelario*, stitched up their lips, crucified one another, buried one another up to their necks and otherwise mutilated themselves. A further 8000 prisoners in 19 institutions launched a hunger strike and, in order to ensure notice was taken, radicalised the protest in that way. Their demand was that their trials be fast-tracked given that 70% of the prison population had yet to be sentenced. The families of the prisoners, who had also taken part in the protests, feared that chaos would reign supreme in the jails and that a wave of prison violence would be unleashed. The press, alarmed, reported that in order to prevent repressive measures being taken by the authorities, prisoners’ family members were erecting plastic tents outside the walls of certain prisons, and that the inmates had threatened that if the Justice Ministry would not listen to them, they would cause themselves physical harm (Stefanoni 2006). Finally, they succeeded in bringing about a change in the law.

2008 saw hunger strikes, escape attempts and self-mutilation in other prisons throughout the world – in Panama and Greece, for example (Amnesty International 2008; ALB Noticias 2008). The violent youth and student protests which gained notoriety that year in Athens and other major urban centres in Greece had the precedent, and contributing factor, of a series of prison protests which, in the months leading up to the

breakout of the social crisis, had been supported and stirred up by anarchist and far-left collectives, and involved over 3000 prisoners in several jails.

In order to understand all of this, an analysis which helps overcome prejudices imposed by today's punitive culture is needed. The first step is not to attach too much credence to what is said by the journalistic literature about these events and to pay attention to the extremely scant scientific production dedicated to prison issues (Lorenzo 2014). Without any sort of critical attitude, and with obvious propagandist purposes, the press usually foregoes a rigorous analysis of self-harm by prisoners. It plays down the phenomenon, simply dismissing it as a common occurrence in prisons. It presents the tactic as being merely one more form of making oneself heard – a sort of infantile urge which sporadically seizes a few prisoners who are just seeking attention (Carrabine 2005).

Nothing could be further from the truth. Self-harm on the part of prisoners must not be viewed as a gruesome but typical fact, nor as a pathological constant in prison life; even if this is the view that is almost always conveyed by the official (or officious) discourse produced by penal policymakers and the majority of operatives in the prison system (from criminologists and psychologists to educators and prison authorities) (Rivera Beiras 2006, 891 onward). In fact, the officially published data preclude such an interpretation. A study conducted by "*Instituciones Penitenciarias*" on the mental health of inmates in Spanish penitentiaries published in 2007 shows that the percentage of previous self-harm attempts of prisoners upon entering prison was 3% and it descended to 2.7% one year after imprisonment (Dirección 2007, 7-8, 14). There is not a significant statistical difference. This can be seen as the minimum anticipated rate of self-harm in prison as a symptom of prisoners' mental illnesses. The issue here is much wider: this article does not deal restrictively with life and insanity in penitentiary institutions, although this too would be a topic worthy of careful study and the publication of *Instituciones Penitenciarias* reveals a psychiatric diagnosis for only 25.6% of inmates. Here the argument is about politics, because we wish to discover and understand the hidden and repressed signs of discipline.

Self-mutilation is equally not an automatic, compulsive reaction that suddenly occurs when faced with unbearable domination. In a regime of such absolute bio-power as occurs in prison where in structural terms inmates' lives are reduced to a sub-existence, situations of extreme domination may arise, causing very varied responses ranging from resignation to mute resistance, the use of organised violence or a violent explosion of pent-up rage. As seen from the examples past and present, self-cutting and self-mutilation, which form an important part of prisoners' arsenal of collective action, tend to arise within structures of political opportunity which allow them to occur – particularly

during periods of profound social and political change. It is not at all uncommon for these actions to be carefully organised by groups with anti-prison ideology and with the support of collectives of prisoners' family members, groups of legal professionals and criminologists with progressive leanings, and human rights institutions.

Self-mutilation forms part of a language designed to politicise prisoners' complaints: a corporal grammar which must be understood to be clearly political when used as part of the repertoire of collective protest actions. Whilst it is certainly true that such acts demonstrate desperation, by helping to increase the reach of the statement, they also connote rationality, calculation and strategy (as is suggested by the fact that the wounds tend to be inflicted in such a way as to be non-fatal).

It would not be correct to regard the vast majority of instances of self-harm as expressions of loneliness and desperation, or even of delirium because, lamentably, the desperation, depression and psychosocial stress caused by prison life tend to claim their victims in other ways – for instance, through suicide (which is itself often provoked either directly or indirectly by institutional violence). Certainly it is also true that self-harm can be an individual strategy employed by prisoners wishing to escape from a situation which is becoming unbearable – e.g. so that they will be taken to the infirmary or hospital, to prevent or delay the enactment of sanctions or transfers, or indeed as the starting point for an escape attempt. In general, though, prisoners who stitch up their mouths or make cuts on their necks, wrists or stomachs, who swallow blades or use burial or crucifixion as a means of self-harm are very clearly attempting to politicise their cause. Many of them continue in this way even when they act in an isolated, individual and sudden manner, because by harming him/herself, the prisoner evokes the memory of past struggles, and attempts to “remind” the institution of the available arsenal of collective protest, and the politicised language that accompanies it. In that sense, self-mutilation is at once the product and the failure of the prisonisation process.

Common prisoners who join in struggle are aware of the fact that the only means of communication and demand available to them that are understood in modern social systems are those used by political prisoners (as well as illegal immigrants). Yet at the same time, they are also aware that their status as common prisoners counts against them. Punitive culture has turned what was an informal definition – that of a “common prisoner” – into an indelible, de-politicising label and a stigma of criminality. Thus, the hunger strike (the weapon of choice for political prisoners, along with flat-out non-cooperation, albeit to a lesser extent) is frequently insufficient for the purposes of common prisoners. They feel compelled to manifest signs of greater sacrifice, of added torment, a more visible form of suffering, so that their very bodies amplify their ability to communicate, de-criminalise and, ultimately, politicise their cause.

Self-harm by common prisoners, in addition to signs that symbolically link the suffering of the inmates' bodies and the sacrifice of the prisoner who is protesting, thus becomes a political language designed to counter the deficit of communicative capability linked to incarceration for non-political offences – a deficit that is culturally imposed by the resounding success of the modern prison system, and with it the process of criminalisation and stigmatisation of the common offender (the criminal).

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