

Prisons and the Political: An Introduction¹

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In recent years there has been a vast expansion in the historiography of colonial and post-colonial incarceration. Interest in the history of British colonial institutions of penal confinement emerged through discussions of the foundation of Australia as a penal colony in the late eighteenth century. The Antipodean literature has become enveloped since in more wide-ranging work on colonial – and post-colonial – penal institutions, especially in Africa and Asia. Academic dialogue has been grounded in theoretical concerns about the nature and meaning of confinement, in thinking about colonial social categories such as ‘race’, gender, ‘caste’ and class, in discussions of the multivalent relationships between power and resistance, in disentangling the complex slippages between discipline, punishment, and the body, and in considerations of the complexities of governmentality and ‘modernity’. The development of ‘subaltern studies’ as a means of writing (or recovering) histories of illiterate and disenfranchised inmates, the close study of published memoirs, and even the archaeological excavation of historic penal sites have become central to analyses of ‘the convict voice’.

This collection develops the literature on the history of confinement in the British colonial context, through a close analysis of what we have chosen to term the

politics of incarceration. As well as focusing on the incarceration of ‘political’ offenders, by this we also mean the construction and contestation of penal regimes in contexts where categories of ‘race’ and social differences relating to class, gender, and, in the South Asian context, caste took on particular meanings with respect to the imperatives of colonial development and administration. The articles presented here range from the West Indies to South and central Africa, the Mascarenes, South Asia, and Australia, from the second half of the eighteenth century through the 1970s. Though covering a broad geography, and straddling a lengthy time span, the collection as a whole reveals perhaps surprising synergies in the political economy of imprisonment in regions of British dominance. Debates about jails, transportation, corporal and capital punishment were linked inextricably with the exigencies of social control, social hierarchy and the desire for cheap labour. Moreover, colonized communities and their sympathizers responded to the politics of incarceration in similar ways. Their resistance against and engagement with a variety of regimes involved the promotion and contestation of social and political hierarchies, especially with regard to the relationships between ‘race’, gendered forms of identity, and the state, alongside intense debates about morality, informed by both religious and political precepts.

Some of the essays presented here focus explicitly on prisoners sentenced to jail or other forms of punishment for what the colonial state defined as political offences, and there is no question that they experienced incarceration in quite different ways to ‘ordinary’ offenders, in part because of the socially variegated nature of the colonial penal repertoire, and in part because they very often vigorously sought to set themselves apart from their ‘ordinary’ counterparts (Alexander, Causer, Hynd, Sherman). And yet, as Paton reminds us in her study of the Caribbean convicts

shipped to penal settlements in Australia, what constitutes a 'political' offence is no simple matter, particularly in colonial contexts where crimes against ascribed status, harsh labour regimes or economic hierarchy and appropriation might be understood as overtly anti-colonial acts (see also Anderson). The political dimensions of incarceration should not be delineated by the categories of colonial states: they must be understood in their broadest sense, to include not only the experiences of educated social elites and members of rebellious political movements but the means through which penal regimes developed and protected the political economy of colonial states.

It is clear that debates over the nature and meaning of punishment took on new forms in the colonial context after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, followed by slavery itself in 1834. In her study of colonial Mauritius Anderson argues that imprisonment became bound up with the politics of both enslavement and indentured labour migration. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the British inherited a separate institution for the punishment of *maroons* (runaways) and, later on, created a Vagrant Depot for the confinement of indentured labour deserters. Causer, Paton, and Reid show further how political debates over penal transportation in the Canadian, British, and Australian contexts became aligned with the issue of emancipation. It is especially significant how often during the first half of the nineteenth century comparisons between imprisonment and enslavement emerged in the speeches and writings of transported convicts. Reid's close study of the lecture tour of returned convict radical John Frost, and Causer's analysis of the writings of the Canadian *Patriots*, is instructive in this respect. Indeed, as Paton shows in her essay on transportation from the Caribbean to Australia, there was a substantive overlap between enslavement and convictism.

A number of the essays reveal the special place of punishment as a means of bolstering colonial regimes during times of crisis (Alexander, Causer, Hynd, Paton, Sherman), but it is also clear that imprisonment became a powerful means through which colonized populations imagined and represented the injustices of British rule. Echoing the nineteenth century radicals who imagined England as a prison and the convict colonies as a 'bastard England' (Causer, Reid), twentieth-century nationalists in Africa and India promoted their cause through the metaphor of colonies as carceral institutions. As Alexander shows in her analysis of prison memoirs, imprisonment was experienced by almost all of Zimbabwe's future leaders, so providing a sort of shared experience, means of education, and set of discursive referents for objectors to colonial repression. A similar process was at work in late colonial India, as Sherman's analysis of the relationship between nationalist politics and hunger-striking shows. Indeed, prison experiences were used as moral critique and political weapon against an at times hesitant and unsure colonial state. And yet it is also clear that prison did not necessarily produce social cohesion. The varied response of hunger-striking Indian nationalists to colonial efforts at forced feeding produced as much disunity and ambivalence as solidarity (Sherman); Zimbabwean detainees struggled to discipline one another in the face of the constant 'goadings' and 'prodding' of the prison regime.

The authors of this collection also draw out the significance of the co-existence of physical punishments with incarceration which, although a feature in metropolitan Britain too, seems to have been a peculiarly important feature of the colonial penal repertoire. In the British colonial context there was an especially uneasy transition from corporal punishment to 'modern' forms of imprisonment, with the physical brutality associated with practices of overseas transportation, hard labour, flogging, forced feeding, and indeed public executions forming part of colonial

punishment throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries. During the second half of the nineteenth century, as Anderson shows, the Mauritian colonial regime remained determined to harness the prison workforce to productive ends, despite opposition from London. Penn's study of John Montagu's penal reforms in the mid-nineteenth century Cape Colony demonstrates the use of productive labour as the central means of rehabilitation as well as punishment. Causer and Reid both illuminate the centrality of flogging within convict Australia, as also to its representation at home. Sherman reveals the brutality of the colonial response to hunger-striking prisoners. Hynd shows further how corporal penal practices were adopted by independent states in Africa (as also, of course, elsewhere), leaving an unsettling legacy of the supposed 'civilizing mission'. Her close reading of public execution in Malawi during the colonial and early independence era, particularly in relation to discourses of 'civilization', is effective in revealing the extent of colonial contradiction and hypocrisy as well.

The racial politics of colonial states were bolstered through institutions of confinement, with white prisoners kept entirely separate from Africans and Asians. As Sherman shows, these distinctions were central provocations to resistance for political prisoners in India. Where segregation was a more complex affair, as in the Australian penal settlements, the government eventually regarded the transportation of non-Anglo Celtic convicts as a threat to its imagined status as a place of European settlement rather than tropical production, and so it came to an end (Paton). Penn offers us a view of an African colonial penal system not yet ordered by racial hierarchy, in which 'Hottenots, Bushmen and Free Blacks', 'Natives from the Border Tribes', 'Europeans', 'Emancipated Slaves' and 'Prize Negros' were made to work, not always amicably, side by side. The related category of gender was an important

constituent of the politics of colonial confinement too. Imprisonment and transportation were spaces in which a division between public and ‘domestic’ labour could be promoted, effected, and managed (Anderson). Moreover, radical opponents of transportation believed that because convicts became sexually degraded, the punishment compromised ‘masculinity’ (Causer, Reid). And yet for male prisoners jails and penal settlements were also places where masculinity was developed and expressed as a means of coping with the humiliation and social disruption that defined incarceration and transportation (Alexander, Causer). Reid explores how the Chartist Frost represented the suffering of imprisonment – real and metaphorical – as a means of ‘manly self-making’, while Alexander shows how the politics of masculinity were linked intimately to the politics of ‘race’, with physical resistance against confinement a consciously effected violation of colonial racial etiquette.

Two of the essays here address specifically prison memoirs as genres for understanding the history of incarceration (Alexander, Causer), so taking forward in significant ways existing literature. The point here is not to measure the ‘truth’ or otherwise of contemporary accounts, but to unpick them as forms of representation with their own personal and political agendas, and to explore them as sources that allow the public and political to be situated in the concerns and social relations of everyday life. African prison memoirs for instance are strongly revealing of individual and social meanings of ‘race’ and masculinity in the years leading to independence (Alexander). Memoirs could be used to construct their own forms of social hierarchy (Causer), reminding us that the need to ‘read against the grain’ of other constituent parts of the colonial archive remains vital to theorising about practices of confinement in a variety of historical contexts.

Finally, *Prisons and the Political* is significant in exploring some of the complexities of the relationship between metropole and colonies (Hynd), as well as the many linkages among colonial spaces themselves (Penn). These were played out through the circulation of penal ideas and policies, but also through more tangible developments like the networks of global transportation that existed during the nineteenth century (Anderson, Causer, Paton, Penn). Though there are clearly important parallels between the politics of incarceration across the British globe, it is important also to recognise the inconsistencies within and variability of such a broad range of penal regimes. For instance, whilst Indian administrators were sensitive to the social necessities of caste, Mauritian ones were not (Anderson). Moreover, colonial regimes across Africa produced quite different penal outcomes (Alexander, Hynd, Penn). And yet this collection suggests that there was something peculiarly colonial about the politics of punishment in the age of Empire, for the politics of social difference and repression informed the politics of confinement in significant ways. Thus, in the colonial context, imprisonment could never be anything but political.

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