

Narrative: What is the purpose of incarceration?

Claire Potter, The New School

Intellectual Rationale and Teaching Value: In the late twentieth century, changes in criminal sentencing in the United States resulted in heightened levels of judicial confinement, a phenomenon sometimes known as mass incarceration. Using an interdisciplinary humanities approach, students at The New School will ask: what is the purpose of incarceration? What have been its goals across time, cultures and states? Are prisons similar in their purpose to other “total institutions” (Goffman, 1961) such as concentration camps, black sites, penal colonies, asylums, treatment centers, juvenile homes, stockades, boarding schools, ghettos, and workhouses? In addition to punishment, incarceration has been a vehicle for collecting debts, conveying shame, forcing contemplation, articulating reforms, extracting information, protection from self-harm, assembling a labor force, and restraining dissenters. Sites of incarceration can also be sites for protest and ethical connection.

Calls to greatly reduce, or abolish, incarceration in the United States, often do not address these many purposes, and are often not specific about what a post-incarceration society, or incarceration that did not rely on violence, would look like. When we examine incarceration outside a US context, do other purposes reveal themselves that can illuminate the American experience?

Why people become incarcerated, what those who are confined think and experience, what designers of prisons intend, and how the purpose of prison might by humanitarian under some circumstances are the four main intellectual threads that guide our fifteen-week inquiry. Anchored by a primary text that centers a clear purpose for incarceration, each section highlights ambiguities, failures, secondary effects, and outcomes for which this purpose may – or may not -- not account.

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Our question, and the national conditions that prompt it, also connect this course to the NEH's new initiative, *The Common Good: The Humanities in the Public Square*. Because it speaks directly to questions of liberty, reason and civilization, removing living souls from social life can be seen as both a reproach and an incitement to a publicly-engaged humanities. Following Michele Foucault, our investigation is not centrally concerned with "whether the prison environment [is] too harsh or aseptic, too primitive or too efficient, but its very materiality as a vector of power," its function as "a technology of the body." At a time in which many college and university students in the United States are calling for the abolition of mass incarceration, it seems fitting to ask: *what is the purpose of incarceration?*

Course Design: Modern incarceration draws on, and was invented in opposition to, restrictions on human freedom such as captivity, confinement without trial, torture, and forced servitude. In the first section of the course, our question will be: what is the difference between incarceration in a prison and techniques for restricting human freedom that are extra-judicial or have a purpose other than punishment? Lectures will introduce students to the rise of modern incarceration, from its origins under feudalism to contemporary models that can be public or for-profit. In these weeks, students will also become familiar with narrative modes -- including the captivity narrative, the slave narrative, the statement of conscience, the confession, the novel, the memoir, and the letter -- that will recur throughout the course. Our central text is *The House of the Dead* (1862), Fyodor Dostoyevsky's account of his years at hard labor in Siberia.

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Dostoyevsky will raise questions about dissent, symbolic power and physical punishment that students will expand on in part two of the course. Here our focus will be: how does incarceration punish, on whose behalf, and who benefits? In these weeks, lectures will focus on forms of incarceration that have a clear and urgent purpose when conceived, but which may then become transformed, thwarted, or repurposed. Is it possible for the punishments associated with incarceration to relinquish any real relevance to their original purpose? Our principle text for this section of the course is Mohamedou Ould Slahi's *Guantánamo Diary*, a memoir written by an accused Mauritanian terrorist who has not been charged or tried for a crime, but has been incarcerated and interrogated the United States since 2002.

In the third part of the course, we explore the ways that individuals who have been incarcerated answer the question: how did I get here? Lectures will not only explore the idea of reform, and how societies and states have imagined that sites of incarceration can change people; but also the reverberations that incarceration has on a single life, a family network, and a community. This section is anchored by Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* (1905) a meticulous self-examination of the convict's own vanity, his faith, his crimes, and his failures as an artist, gentleman, husband and a father. "Nobody, great or small, can be ruined except by his own hand," Wilde states, about his conviction for sexual acts with men. At the same time, it is not altogether clear that Wilde believes this, giving students ample opportunity to explore topics like confession, blame and remorse.

Wilde's narrative, although focused on his own transformation, leads us to the question question that will guide part four of the course. If there are ethical and existential transformations that incarceration facilitates, can a prison, jail or concentration

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camp also a privileged site for understanding human nature? Does the deep contemplation that prison makes possible create the possibility of moral insight that has been previously obscure? Here our primary text is Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947), and lectures will focus on the historical evolution of forms of incarceration have supported political programs of terror, expropriation, war or genocide. Secondary readings for this section will emphasize ethical decision making, community building, cruelty, kindness and whether such sites of incarceration could function without the complicity of the prisoners themselves. During these weeks, we will also take a class trip to Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, PA, once the nation's first true penitentiary, and now a hands-on history site that demonstrates how a particular purpose for a prison – contemplation leading to penitence – led to a specific architectural vision and set of practices.

The final three weeks of the course will ask: are there ethical statements and acts of conscience that acquire particular force when made from a site of incarceration? And finally, under what conditions is incarceration an ethical choice?? Our final primary text will be Sister Helen Prejean's *Dead Man Walking* (1994), an account of her work fighting the death penalty in the United States. Bringing the execution of humans into our conversation allows students to think about whether a lifetime of incarceration might nurture, rather than destroy human values, and whether there is value in facilitating reconciliation between offenders and those they have harmed. Secondary readings will draw on work from intellectuals who have resorted to self-incarceration as a means of preserving their humanness in the face of violence, as well as those who have recognized that incarceration can be a force in creating ethical connection and social change.

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Faculty Preparation and Plan of Work: Preparing for this course will expand my current expertise in the fields of crime and punishment by an intensive program of reading about incarceration that emphasizes a global perspective, as well as one that emphasizes the fields of ethics, philosophy and geography. My plan of work is to re-engage the scholarly literature on incarceration as a comparative and global phenomenon, build a final syllabus and website for the course during the period May – December, 2017. The course would be offered first in spring 2017, and again in fall 2018.

For over twenty years, a significant portion of my teaching and scholarship has been focused on the history of crime, violence and incarceration in the United States. I first became aware of prisons as contested and complex sites when I was writing my first book, *War on Crime: Bandits, G-Men and the Politics of Mass Culture* (1998). During the 1930s prisons were known to be sites of political corruption that nurtured criminals like John Dillinger and Clyde Barker, and their crimes bolstered calls for prison reforms that might rehabilitate offenders rather than make them more accomplished, and embittered, felons. A major focus of my current book on late twentieth century anti-pornography campaigns in the United States is the creation of new sex crimes associated with child porn that, along with the War on Drugs, caused incarceration rates in the United States to escalate. In courses such as *Violence and American Identity*, *Colonialism and Its Consequences in the America*, and *The New South*, the study of incarceration is an entry for students to understand how the modern state cultivates citizens through criminal laws, punishment, reform and spatial segregation.

In my years as Chair of American Studies at Wesleyan University, I helped students create a college in prison program that put my scholarship and teaching in a new

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light. Upon coming to The New School, I was able to collaborate with public historian Liz Sevckenko to create the Humanities Action Lab (HAL), a network of colleges, communities and universities, which will be completing the first phase of its initiative on mass incarceration in 2015-16. Both of these experiences have engaged me in conversation with scholars and students about the viability, economics and ethics of incarceration in the United States. Last year, we were able to create an interdisciplinary undergraduate cluster of courses in Incarceration Studies from a network of a dozen faculty members in the humanities, the arts, and the social sciences. I envision this course as a broad ranging introduction to incarceration as a literary, historical and philosophical phenomenon.

Dissemination of Results: I plan to teach the course in an “open” classroom style in the auditorium at the Jefferson Market Library, a location of the New York Public Library that is adjacent to the site of the former Women’s House of Detention, where community members can join New School students at will. I will also build a course website that makes the materials of the course, and its lectures, available for free and on a YouTube channel. While many incarcerated people have no access to the Internet, others in minimum security – do, as do people who have been released and may be contemplating a return to school. This will also make the course available to other university teachers. As a Distinguished Lecturer for the Organization of American Historians, I will develop a lecture on the topic of the enduring question itself, making the findings of the course available to schools and organizations that wish to book me as part of that program. Finally, throughout the course, students will participate in an online community with students in the twenty other schools of the HAL network on our Ten Legs platform.