

Prison spaces and beyond: the potential of ethnographic zoom

**Mahuya Bandyopadhyay,
Andrew M Jefferson and Thomas
Ugelvik** draw on research experiences
in non-Western, non-Anglo American
prisons to reflect on prison spaces



Introduction: zooming in – and out

Andrew M Jefferson

The ideas featured in this brief article were presented under the title 'Prison Spaces' at the *Prison Ethnography Symposium*. This broad, inclusive title was partly the result of Ugelvik's resistance to the idea of presenting the Norwegian prison as one exotic, exceptional specimen amongst others, in a format resembling the butterfly collector's or botanist's proud display of his/her rare discoveries. The tension between on the one hand displaying and revealing prisons which have rarely been subject to empirical study (in their own terms) and on the other fearing and resisting engulfment by the dominant (Anglo-American) framing of prison studies is one familiar to founding members of the *Global Prisons Research Network*. This tension is likely to continue to haunt us until the non-Western/non-Anglo-American prison becomes better recognised both for itself and for the contribution it might make to critical scholarship more broadly. To date members of the *Network* have sought to illuminate prisons in parts of the world formerly considered unreachable by prison scholars (either because they were too dangerous or too 'underdeveloped' to meaningfully study) and to do so

from, as it were, the inside, that is to say via ethnography or more accurately via quasi-ethnography.

In the two pieces below a glimpse is given of how ethnography can allow the curious and studious scholar both to zoom in on local political and cultural versions of incarceration and to zoom out bringing the nuances of confinement into focus and capturing global spectres of social control. Mahuya Bandyopadhyay, whose ethnographic work has focussed on India (see Bandyopadhyay 2010), problematises totalising tendencies, arguing that ethnography produces a view (based on fragments) which complicates readings of prison spaces. Thomas Ugelvik takes the prison as a place of mobility control, where state power is exerted, as his point of departure to discuss two problematic ideas; firstly the romanticisation of mobility and movement in the global arena and secondly the idea that the power of the nation-state is waning. Both scholars hint at the potential of prison ethnographies to elucidate much more than simply prison life and encourage us to experiment with the zoom function of the ethnographic optic.

Totalities and Fragments – the untapped potential of quasi-ethnography

Mahuya Bandyopadhyay

Prisons are typically thought of as

spaces of despair, hopelessness, and dehumanisation. This is how most of us know prisons and maybe even think they ought to be as they are institutions of punishment and for holding those who have in some way transgressed social and legal boundaries. Yet the growing field of prison ethnography narrates prisons and prison life in culturally specific representations and provides a more subtle reading.

In the Indian prison I have studied, the porosity of the institution, the individual and collective efforts at dealing with dehumanisation and the many scripts of subversion in most institutions offer striking evidence of the limits of myopic readings of the prison as purely dehumanising. So, for example, when human rights are not ensured, prisoners make continual individual and collective attempts to escape complete dehumanisation. These efforts contaminate the established picture of the dehumanised prison. Prison ethnographies thus complicate assumptions about prison spaces and relatively free spaces in many different ways. Here I will consider briefly the paradoxical process through which prison spaces are construed as complex via ethnography.

Two common features of prison ethnography are the total institution and the fragment. On the one hand the total institution is a powerful conceptual tool (even as we resist its hegemony) for understanding organisations that both confine and separate. On the other, in ethnography, the object of research

and representation is often experienced as a fragment; sometimes as a tangible artefact that has been carried from the 'field site', or in the form of interactions that are converted into fragments through recording, writing notes, and the researcher's analysis. Based on my own experience as a prison scholar I wonder whether prison ethnographers may be at a juncture where we need to reconsider what we seek to represent through our prison narratives as we grapple with the (quasi)totality of the institution through a (quasi)ethnography of fragments. Perhaps the 'eclipse' may be resisted through research that addresses not just the concerns of prison researchers and criminologists but which speak to a larger audience. From the Indian perspective prison ethnography is interestingly poised to elucidate the politics of everyday life at a variety of levels. It can reflect on the binaries that the prison space creates, for example: agency vs. denial of selfhood; self-assertion vs. dehumanisation; rehabilitation vs. punishment; freedom vs. surveillance etc. But it can do much more. Prison ethnography also has the potential to narrate the many manifestations of totality beyond prison walls, challenging the special character of the total institution and revealing the numerous prison-like conditions in society.

The prison as a mobility control technology

Thomas Ugelvik

Two truths – or perhaps it is better to call them myths – persist about how the world has changed in the era of globalisation. These are, first, that everything and everyone can move around freely at any time, that we are living in a world where it is possible to go to sleep in New York, wake up in London and be in Oslo by lunch-time. And second, that as a result, the power of individual nation-states is waning, that we are living in a post-national world where the state has abdicated and surrendered its power to other agents and organizations. I will argue that prison ethnography can be used to

discuss and nuance these two myths.

Studies within the broad globalisation paradigm seem often to emphasise movement, flow and borderlessness as the norm so much that they risk assuming that immobility and borders are things of the past. It is often easy to forget that mobility is a contested resource that is far from equally available. It is perhaps better to say that globalisation produces significant new forms of immobility and closure for some categories of people alongside the increased mobility of others: what Ronen Shamir (2005) has called a 'mobility gap'. Understood as part of a wider immobility regime, the prison is perhaps the mobility control technology that has the longest pedigree.

The second globalisation myth is that the nation-state is losing its power. Ulrich Beck (2002) has even argued that the state in a certain sense no longer exists, that it is a zombie, that it is looking alive, but is really dead. Others have argued that the state is hardly dying, it is just thriving in new, less well recognised ways (Neumann and Sending, 2010), that we are living in a time when new challenges force the state to actively go looking for new ways of reproducing itself. Surely, the prison is one of the oldest working forms of nation-state power. As a technology of movement control that can be studied at the level of everyday practice, I propose that the prison is part of a wider field of technologies of statecraft through its administration of different types of bodies in time and space. From this perspective, the prison is part of a wider field of border control technologies, together with international police databases, agencies working with deportation of unwanted foreigners, immigration detention centres, and so on. But the state remains very much present, with the prison's established technologies of immobility very much central to its new projects.

Under globalisation the presence of large numbers of unwanted immigrants indicates the fact that nation states are no longer able to completely regulate the number or

flow of foreigners entering a country. Border control and immigration administration practices should in such a context be understood as the enactment of sovereignty, and thus as important tools in providing an identity for the state, a newly necessary part of its craft of governing (Schinkel, 2009). To grasp this, we need to reposition the prison conceptually as part of this wider field of interconnected technologies of immobility and understand that the ways into and out of the prison may lead from and to other forms of immobility. Prisons are no longer institutions belonging exclusively to specific nation states, just as crime and justice in general should not be understood as phenomena on the national level. In conclusion, we need to see that the prison is a technology of mobility control, and we need to understand that it, as such, is part of a wider international regime of practices, policies and systems whereby states increasingly exert power through the administration of and control over mobility. ■

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