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**Informal dynamics of survival  
in Latin American prisons**

# The Blind Panopticon: Prisoners' subversion of the prison in Ecuador, 1875–2014

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## Introduction

**In August 2014 a film crew stumbled across a century-old bureaucratic archive in the main men's prison in Quito, Ecuador.<sup>1</sup> Roof-high stacks of paperwork crammed into a nineteenth-century vault. This decaying archive recorded the daily life of Ecuador's oldest penitentiary, *Centro de Rehabilitación de Varones, Numero Uno Quito* (CRSVQ1); originally titled *Penal Garcia Moreno* after the President who oversaw its construction. Whilst not an exact rendering of Bentham's original Panopticon, Garcia Moreno Prison was an attempt to enact its notions of surveillance, discipline, and control. Five pavilions radiate out from a central hallway and observation tower; its star shape allowing a guard to see each cell door from this central point. This prison was decommissioned in 2014 and replaced by a US style maximum-security prison complex several kilometres from Quito (see Tritton, this edition).**

This article draws on extensive archival research conducted for the documentary *Blind Panopticon* tasked by Ecuador's Ministry of Justice shortly after the prison's closure,<sup>2</sup> and in depth ethnographic fieldwork undertaken by both authors while the prison functioned, between 2005–2007. In addition to an extensive array of official records hoarded during 139 years of prison functioning, countless everyday items left behind by prisoners transferred without notice also became part of this archive. In addition, the prison itself, its very materiality, is itself an archive of events inscribed on its walls: its paintings, its smells, and its silences.

Here we describe how prisoners subverted the Panopticon of Quito during its existence. Bentham's utilitarian spirit lived on in the Panopticon till the end,

not through surveillance mechanisms but rather through prisoners' economic survival. In doing so, we challenge the notion of the self-governing prisoner as the product of neoliberalism.

## The Panopticon of Quito

Jeremy Bentham described the Panopticon, his idea of a perfect prison, as a circular building of cells surrounding a watchtower with windows covered by blinds.<sup>3</sup> From this viewpoint, a single guard could oversee the prisoners' daily life without being seen, making it impossible for inmates to know whether someone was observing them or not. Here, it was not so much surveillance but the feeling of being under surveillance that was important. As Michel Foucault explains, panoptic architecture projects its surveillance model onto society so as to discipline its population through observation, self-control, and isolation.<sup>4</sup> The Panopticon is therefore much more than a type of architecture; it is a power relationship through which the omnipresent gaze of the watcher modifies behaviours, corrects habits, and reconditions instincts. No true Panopticon was ever built, but several Panopticon-type buildings can be found in Latin America. In Cuba the now defunct *Presidio Modelo* (built in the 1920s) is the closest to a true Panopticon. In Colombia a cruciform: 'Panoptico' was begun in 1874 (now the National Museum), the same year the Panopticon of Quito was completed after a five-year construction period, coinciding with Conservative Catholic president Gabriel Garcia Moreno's second term in office. The Quito Panopticon therefore reflects the global spread of 19th century European ideas about modernity and discipline, and for Ecuador it represents the very first attempt at modernising a nation profoundly shaped by Spanish colonialism.

1. Jorge Núñez, who is a co-author in this paper, was the film crew's research coordinator and documentary scriptwriter. The other research team members were Lorena Cisneros, Boris Idrovo, and Juan Andrés Suarez.

2. Herrera, M. (Director) (2014) *Blind Panopticon* (Talandro Films).

3. Bentham, J. (1995/1791) 'The Panopticon, or the Inspection House', in Miran Bozovic (ed) *The Panopticon Writings*, London: Verso, p. 29-95.

4. Foucault, M. (1975) *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, NY: Vintage Books.

The panoptic societal model corresponds to the mentality of an epoch — the European society of industrialisation. It was these ideas of ‘progress’ that President Garcia Moreno had in mind for Ecuador. His penitentiary embodied his views about the Ecuadorian nation state with cruel clairvoyance: combining rationality and brutality in the service of a modernity that was Catholic, obsessed with Europe, imposed with whips and bullets, discipline, and blood. The construction of the Panopticon was the final stage of his personal and political project, blending enlightenment philosophy and despotism. Even after its name was changed to a ‘social rehabilitation centre’, Quiteños continued calling it Garcia Moreno prison, reflecting the perpetuation of the ex-president’s values and fantasies, long after he was assassinated.

### ‘Blinding’ the Panopticon

*It is absolutely true that prisoners stubbornly resisted the new disciplinary mechanism in the prison; it is absolutely correct that the actual functioning of the prisons... was a witches’ brew compared to the beautiful, Benthamite machine. (Foucault, Power)<sup>5</sup>*

The Panopticon of Quito never fulfilled Bentham’s notions of an impeccable control machine. It was inaugurated in 1875 with only 71 inmates. Because the capital city did not have enough prisoners at the time, authorities of neighbouring prisons were summoned to hand over inmates in order to occupy its 270 cells. In stark contrast, at its closure in 2014 the prison was operating at five times its capacity making a mockery of the notion of solitary contemplation and order. Four to five men regularly shared a cell built for one (approx. 2m by 2.5m), but sometimes as many as eight were crammed in. Daily life in such close quarters constituted an entirely different type of punishment than the reformatory isolation envisaged by Bentham.

The prison population steadily rose throughout the 2000s. In 2002, the ‘two-for-one’ rule of early release was repealed, effectively doubling sentences. The second cause of overcrowding was the so-called war

on drugs, which, like the Panopticon, reflects politics and priorities forged in an entirely different national context; politics fundamentally underpinned by neoliberal doxa, in which crime and punishment can be understood as a matter of supply and demand.<sup>6</sup> In 2003, Ecuador signed a bilateral agreement with the United States of America committing to drug war policies. Performance indicators included an increase in the number of persons detained for drug trafficking.<sup>7</sup> A similar agreement was signed in 2005 making clear Ecuador’s commitment to increasing arrests of drug offenders.<sup>8</sup> By the end of the 2000’s, the prison population had nearly doubled; by 2007, one in three prisoners was incarcerated for drugs offences.<sup>9</sup>

Overcrowding put tremendous strain on the aging Panopticon. In contrast to Bentham’s orderly vision, by 2014 the sewers had collapsed; water stoppages and electric cuts were regular events. When the Panopticon’s archive was discovered in the dome of its watchtower, ironically, its windows were boarded up from the inside. No longer a site of surveillance and discipline, the watchtower was instead used as a store-cupboard, holding decades upon decades worth of bureaucratic paperwork: the Panopticon was, quite literally, blind.

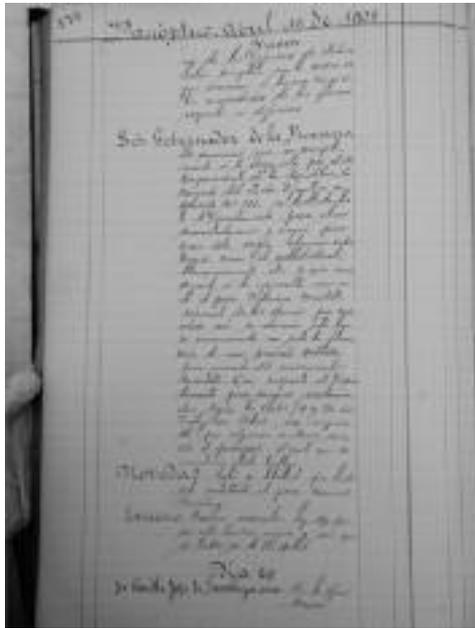
## The Panopticon of Quito never fulfilled Bentham’s notions of an impeccable control machine.

### Physical reconstruction: Inmates as Rebuilders

During 139 years of functioning the Panopticon of Quito was reconstructed, adapted and remodelled many times. The archive contains hundreds of requests by inmates asking to bring in construction materials. Each physical intervention responded to systemic failings, from not having enough beds due to overcrowding, to installing kitchens in cells to deal with food shortages, to adapting facilities to offer medical care. From the early 1900s the prison record shows that high-ranking government authorities were deeply invested in running and refurbishing the Panopticon. Yet, from the 1970s onwards, the archive reveals that inmates became responsible for most repairs and renovations. The image below is a prison diary entry from April 19th 1905 recording a request from

5. Foucault, M. (2000) ‘Questions of Method’, in *Power: Essential works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, J. D. Faubion (ed.), New York: The New Press.
6. Wacquant, L. (2009) *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*, Duke University Press.
7. Edwards, S. (2011) ‘A short history of Ecuador’s drug legislation and the impact on its prison population’, in Metaal, P., & Youngers, C. (2011) *Systems Overload: Drug Laws and Prisons in Latin America*, Transnational Institute/Washington Office on Latin America.
8. Pontón, J., & Torres, A. (2007) *Cárceles del Ecuador: Los Efectos de la Criminalización por Drogas*, *URVIO: Revista Latinoamericana de Seguridad Cuidada*, 1: 55-73, p. 63.
9. Edwards (2011) (see n.6), p. 55.

Ecuador's former Vice-president to convert an occupied cell into a make-shift treatment office for alcoholics and homeless. The entry begins as follows: 'Sir Province Governor: In response to the order given by the Republic Vice-president, who is currently in charge of Executive Power by fiat No. 333, the Department for the treatment of chronic alcoholics and homeless is ready.'



Garcia Moreno Archive, 2014 (photo by Núñez)

Inmate-led prison reconstruction reflects a particular relationship between the building and its inhabitants. Rather than being spaces of surveillance, cells were literally privatised. By the 2000s, cells were privately owned — bought and sold in a commercial market administered by inmates democratically elected by their peers.<sup>10</sup> This property market (and in fact, the widespread commercialisation of space in prison) was run with the consent of prison authorities. Rather than disciplinary classifications according to offence, status (remand versus convicted), time served, or age, inmates organised themselves into pavilions depending on how much they could afford to pay. Inmates' regular contributions to their pavilions paid for extensive communal repairs and renovation of the wing, ranging from repainting, and plastering, to the construction of a gym, TV watching space, a toilet block, basketball hoops in the yard, and so on.

Cells were remodelled and redesigned, limited only by inmates' finances and imaginations. Some were richly decorated, especially those belonging to

international drug traffickers. One had a mirrored wall to give an increased sense of space and was tiled throughout. A water heater had been installed; the kitchen was well equipped with a microwave and blender. A television and games station were suspended in a corner above the bunks. All in a 2m by 2.5 metre space! Few cells were so richly decorated but all had been subtly remodelled, depending on the owners' style, with everything from photos of nude women, religious iconography, paintings, graffiti, photographs of loved ones, national flags and more. There was not a cell without a secret hiding place. Even after decommissioning, they continued to keep their secrets: hosting drugs, weapons, photos, mobile phones and chargers.

The physical reconstruction of Garcia Moreno's prison by inmates converted the Panopticon of Quito into a social model far from surveillance, self-discipline, and control. It moved Ecuador's imprisonment's centre of gravity from bureaucracy towards a growing informal economy that expanded well beyond the carceral system. During its 139 years the Panopticon of Quito went from the European surveillance society to precarious neoliberalism, from an institution meant to discipline an emerging labour force, to one in charge with imprisoning the impoverished and unemployed under the war on drugs. And yet, all this painstaking renovation and collective effort carried out by prisoners gave them back a sense of purpose in life and the vital illusion of a meaningful existence.

### Subverting work as rehabilitation

*No man of ripe years and of sound mind, acting freely, and with his eyes open, ought to be hindered, which a view to his advantage, from making such bargain, in the way of obtaining money, as he thinks fit: not (what is necessary consequence) anybody hindered from supplying him, upon any terms he thinks proper to accede to. (Bentham 1843: Letter 1)*<sup>11</sup>

Bentham envisioned the Panopticon's prisoners in stark contrast to functioning members of society. While a free citizen must not 'be hindered... in the way of obtaining money, as he thinks fit' (see the Bentham's quote above about credit), a prisoner in the panoptical must work for the sake of discipline rather than profit. And yet, Bentham's imagining of the Panopticon is still underpinned by a utilitarian approach to prisoner's work.<sup>12</sup> Bentham proposes that inmates not be given any work, but rather those most likely to be 'most for his

10. Núñez, J. (2006) *Cacería de Brujos: Drogas "Illegales" y Sistema de Cárceles en el Ecuador*, Quito, Ecuador: FLACSO, Ecuador; Abyayala.  
 11. Gregory, C. (2012) 'On money debt and morality: Some reflection on the contribution of economic anthropology', *European Association of Social Anthropologists*, 30, 4: 380-296.  
 12. Bentham, J. (1995/1791) (see n.3) Letter IX.

advantage', and yet 'Nor do I see why labour should be the less reforming for being profitable'.<sup>13</sup> In the 19th century European model of the Panopticon work was compulsory. Like Bentham's model, work was meant to reintroduce prisoners into the discipline of industry. Nonetheless, prisoners often worked without actual salary or employment benefits. Even in contemporary prisons, payment may be paltry in comparison to the real economy. In that system, refusing to work may be a strategy of resistance for inmates.<sup>14</sup>

In Garcia Moreno prison the exact opposite occurred. Larco notes that, unlike panoptical prisons in France, United Kingdom, and the United States, Quito's Panopticon lacked work-based rehabilitation policies. In her view this was understandable due to the agricultural focus of Ecuador's economy; Quito had no urban industry in which to train inmates.<sup>15</sup> In fact, for most of its history, work was neither compulsory, nor available in Quito's Panopticon. Very few prisoners had access to workshops, training, or formal paid labour. During the second half of the 20th century, prison work became an entrepreneurial response to extreme precariousness, a refusal to starve to death rather than an initiative to set up shop. However, in an ironic twist, work was, for inmates, a choice in utilitarian terms. Avoiding work was possible, but only in the sense that destitution can be considered a choice. During the 2000s, the prison estate provided for only a bare life: a space to sleep was provided, but no mattress, covers, or pillows. Basic food was available twice a day, but without owning a container, inmates could not collect it. Medical care was available, but most inmates had to pay for treatment and medications. Inevitably, some died from lack of medical treatment.

By the 2000s, almost all inmates were involved in some sort of business, supporting himself, and in many cases, also his family. Work was not a strictly bureaucratic relationship; its aim was not discipline, but survival. Echoing the marketisation of cells, Garcia Moreno Prison housed a number of small businesses,

owned and run by inmates. Some cells were converted into small shops, selling everything from tobacco to eggs, hot chocolate to batteries. When Quito's Panopticon was decommissioned in 2014, its corridors were filled with fizzy drinks machines, and telephone cabins (the archive records that inmates sought and were granted special permission to sell phone cards), as well as small food stalls, selling coffee, tea, hamburgers and soda. Some larger food stalls sold three-course lunches. In addition, many were micro entrepreneurs. Documents in the archive, from the early 70s to its closure in 2014, tell of a long list of jobs and businesses: Grocer, laundryman, pool table owner, messenger to the street and office, food seller, picture painter, electrical technician, seafood salesman, artisan and craftsman, cook, deliveryman, secretary of the evangelical church, librarian, vendor of phone cards, cigarette seller, shopkeeper, hairdresser, language teacher, gym instructor, cell painter, kebab seller, event organiser, sports coordinator, confectioner, incense salesman, porter, toilet manager, watermelon segment seller, elementary school teacher, herbal tea seller, restaurant owner, etcetera, etcetera. Although the hurly burly of industry has little in common with the quiet notion of solitude and discipline that

Bentham intended, he might have approved of the sheer scale of industry.

Holding all this economic activity together, the Panopticon of Quito evolved into a financial laboratory of everyday debts and tax credits. Everything became a monetary exchange; everything was bought and sold on credit. There was no barter: debt was king.<sup>16</sup> Over the course of 139 years the inmates converted their prison into an inverted stock exchange. Like any other financial market-like assemblage, the Panopticon gave the illusion of an endless cash flow, but it was inverted because the illusion depended on slowing down monetary circulation instead of speeding it up.<sup>17</sup> Money passed from hand-to-hand in slow motion as though mimicking prison time, and in doing so, the

## Echoing the marketisation of cells, Garcia Moreno Prison housed a number of small businesses, owned and run by inmates.

13. Ibid. Letter X.

14. De Vito, C. G. & Lichtenstein, A. (2013) 'Writing a global history of convict labour', *International Review of Social History*, 58: 285-325.

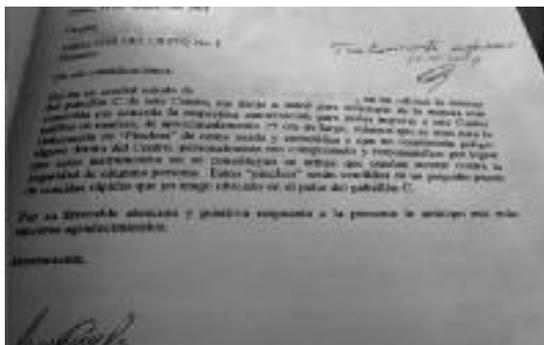
15. Larco, C. (2011) *Visiones Penales y Regimenes en el Estado Liberal de 1912 a 1925*, Tesis doctoral Programa de Historia, Universidad Andina Simon Bolivar, p. 39.

16. Both archival and ethnographic data suggest that even the most mundane material exchanges in Garcia Moreno prison were highly mediated by a complex credit/debt system known as 'refile.' See: Núñez, J. (2005) *Cacería de Brujos: Drogas Ilegales y Sistema de Cárceles en Ecuador*, Maestría ABYA-YALA Publicaciones and FLACSO sede Ecuador, Quito.

17. The slowness of Garcia Moreno prison's financial flow functioned like a hire-purchase system (rent-to-buy), in which a prisoner could enjoy the use of a commodity that paid in regular instalments, but during the repayment period ownership remained with the seller. This credit system created a multiplicity of debt tallies that outlived the actual exchange of items.

Panopticon allowed its inhabitants to extract value from the neoliberal model of mass incarceration.<sup>18</sup>

In its archive, the Panopticon of Quito synthesises the dialectics of penal bureaucracy and the free-market. The image below is an official request by a prisoner to bring in sticks to sell ‘pinchos’ (meat skewers). The application reassures the prison warden that the requestor takes full responsibility for the everyday use of long pieces of wood assuring him that they ‘will not constitute in any manner a weapon that may endanger others.’ Similar requests abound in the prison archives:



Garcia Moreno Archive, 2014 (photo by Núñez)

Paperwork trails reveal the long, convoluted institutional process of starting a business. Firstly, prisoners needed authorisation from the committee of inmates. Next, an official request was made to prison administrators in which inmates had to declare their will to rehabilitate through self-employment and demonstrate the need to support their family by it. This entrepreneurial rhetoric was accompanied by a series of protocol phrases aimed to show remorse for the crime committed. Then the request entered the bureaucratic labyrinth of the prison, and was judged by prison authorities on the basis of institutional prejudice: a request to open a laundry is denied because the institution considers that this right is reserved for homosexuals!; an orange seller is denied access to a pavilion to avoid fights with his enemies.

This market-prison did not produce workers, at least not in the sense given in Europe or North America, but a precariat of entrepreneurs. Inmates’ work was risky — people set up a business in the hope to get paid (but debt was equally likely). The logic was not completely cutthroat. Inmate entrepreneurs committed to a monthly payment to the medical emergency fund for the homeless in prison. The medical fund functioned as a charity run by inmates and prison bureaucrats who allocated money on

a first-come, first-served basis. Like the physical remodelling of this prison, this adaption responded to institutional failings.

## Conclusion

The Panopticon works through surveillance: being potentially overseen at any moment, inmates were supposed to self-discipline. Whilst the Garcia Moreno Prison imported European enlightenment ideas about the prison system to Ecuador, these notions were never fully realised. In Quito, inmates ‘blinded’ the Panopticon from within. They not only rebuilt Garcia Moreno’s infrastructure, but also subverted its logic. Our ethnographic and archival research has just begun to explore the historical depth of this prison archive and its postcolonial overlaps and divergences with Bentham’s enlightenment philosophy.<sup>19</sup> Bentham’s utilitarianism was echoed in Quito’s Panopticon, not because of his surveillance model but because of his stance regarding interest rates and debt.<sup>20</sup>

Garcia Moreno’s prison archive constitutes a rich field site to historicise and critically study the self-governing prisoner and its alternative modern realisations. The Panopticon of Quito never succeeded in breeding a disciplined labour force. The inmates won that battle the very moment they blinded the Panopticon and shifted the centre of gravity from surveillance to survival. Our analysis illustrates that the prison was shaped by the ideology of the time: first by utilitarianism, and later by neoliberalism. The notion of the self-governing, entrepreneurial prisoner is far from contemporary but arguably has historical roots in Bentham’s utilitarianism. Here we find more continuity than change. While Bentham imagined the prison through the lens of industrialisation; in Ecuador it took on quite a different character. The resulting prison model became a cultural machine of precariousness that forced inmates to work, struggle, and survive or face destitution. Prison entrepreneurship can neither be considered clearly a form of resistance to the prison regime (there being none), nor as compliance with it. As the archive shows, prisoners had to re-frame survival as rehabilitation, presenting themselves as willing participants in the corruption of Ecuador’s prison system. At the same time as entrepreneurship bowed to the prison authorities, it subverted prison discipline.

18. Núñez, J. (2007) ‘Las cárceles en la época del narcotráfico: Una mirada etnográfica’, *Nueva Sociedad*, 208.  
19. Currently the Ecuadorian Ministry of Justice has custody of the archive rescued from Garcia Moreno prison. Government authorities have said repeatedly the archive will be made available to the public, but, in our knowledge, nothing has been done on this regard yet.  
20. Gregory, C. (2012) ‘On money debt and morality: Some reflection on the contribution of economic anthropology’, *European Association of Social Anthropologists*, 30, 4: 380-296.