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Entangled Staff-Inmate Relations

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Where there exists power exercised by the few or only one against the many, privilege is born and proliferates, even against the will of the power itself; but on the other hand it is normal for power to tolerate and encourage it... the more the area of power is restricted, the more it needs external auxiliaries; the Nazism of the final years could not do without them...¹

In my research on prisons in the global South I have drawn inspiration from two interrelated aspects of accounts of the Nazi concentration camps.² The first concerns the means by which those detained at the camps were able to create and maintain professional and interpersonal relationships and carve out meaningful existence³ in even the most hostile and desperate of settings. The second, and main focus of this article, relates to the depth of inmate involvement in prison management and prison routines. At Auschwitz these two themes, of everyday survival and prisoner organisation, came together in the figure of the prisoner functionary. Primo Levi describes how as many as one in ten prisoners participated in running the camp, working among other things, as cleaners, cooks, medical staff, messengers, interpreters, clerks, guards, barrack wardens, labour squad leaders, even camp chiefs and tragically, gas chamber

orderlies. While these prisoners typically managed to extend their lives by just a few months and gained little in return beyond extra food rations and (in the case of the head prisoner functionaries: the *kapos*) cigarettes and relatively easy work, they made up the majority that survived the concentration camps. Levi was ultimately concerned with the exceptionally brutal and totalitarian character of the camps that led so many prisoners to collaborate, and the ambiguous moral position occupied by those that ‘... [today] might be alive in the place of another.’⁴ However, his wider observations relating to the depth of staff reliance on prisoners at Auschwitz are of wider application. Comparable trustie prisoner systems existed and/or exist today across the globe, in countries as politically and culturally distinct as Russia⁵, China,⁶ India,⁷ the USA,⁸ Sierra Leone,⁹ England and Wales¹⁰ and Brazil, my own research

1. Levi, P. (1989/1986) *The Drowned and the Saved*, London: Abacus (p.27).
2. In particular, Frankl, V. (2004/1947) *Man's Search for Meaning*, London: Rider; Levi, P. (1987/1947) *If This is a Man*, London: Abacus.
3. I borrow this expression from Bandyopadhyay, M. (2010) *Everyday Life in a Prison: Confinement, Surveillance, Resistance*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan.
4. Levi, P. (1989/1986), p.62 (see n.1). See also Bravo, A. (n.d.) *On the 'Gray Zone'* (unpublished article).
5. In the gulags of the Soviet period 1 in 4 prisoners officially worked as guard, compound or work *pridúrki*. As the Nazi concentration camps, these prisoners constituted most of those that survived — see Applebaum, A. (2003) *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps*, London: Allen Lane; Gregory, P. (2008) *Lenin's Brain and Other Tales from the Secret Soviet Archives*, Stanford: Hoover International Press; Shalamov, V. (1994/1980-1981) *Kolyma Tales*, London: Penguin Books; Solzhenitsyn, A. (1963) *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, London: Penguin; Solzhenitsyn, A. (1975) *The Gulag Archipelago: Volume 2*, New York: Harper and Row.
6. The administrators of Chinese work camps recruit *laotou yuba* (cell bosses) to maintain discipline and *zuzhang* (work group chiefs) to monitor production; prisoners with particular skills may also be recruited, for instance, as accountants, doctors, scribes or carpenters — see Williams, P. and Wu, Y. (2004) *The Great Wall of Confinement: The Chinese Prison Camp through Contemporary Fiction and Reportage*, Berkeley: University of California Press; Wu, H. (1992) *Laogai: The Chinese Gulag*, Boulder: Westview Press. In the work camps of North Korea prisoners are likewise divided into small work-teams; one inmate is held responsible for the rest of the group — see Hawk, D. (2003) *The Hidden Gulag: Exposing North Korea's Prison Camps*, Washington: U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea. Prisoners are also appointed as foremen in charge of work sites — see Harden, B. (2012) *Escape from Camp 14*, London: Mantle.
7. In India at least ten percent of prisoners formally work as trusties, many as office clerks or *mate pahara* (convict warders). The roles and powers of these prisoners are defined in statute — see Bandyopadhyay, M. (2007) 'Reform and everyday practice: Some issues of prison governance', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 41(3): 387-416; Bandyopadhyay (2010) (see n.3); Bandyopadhyay, M. and Jefferson, A. (2010) 'Entangled interactions', paper presented at the *British Society of Criminology Annual Conference*, July 2010. The origins of the Indian convict warder system can be traced back to 19th century British colonial rule — see Arnold, D. (2005) 'India: The prisoners revolt', *IIAS Newsletter*, 39: 6. It was also replicated in neighbouring British colonies, including Burma and the Philippines — see Brown, I. (2007) 'A commissioner calls: Alexander Paterson and Burma's colonial prisons', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 38, 2: 293-308; Winton, T. and Brown, I. (2005) Colonial Burma's prison: Continuity with its pre-colonial past?', *IIAS Newsletter*, 39: 5; McNair, J. and Baylis, W. (2010/1899) *Prisoners Their own Warders*, Gloucester: Dodo.
8. Until the mid 1980s 10-20% of prisoners in the post-slavery prison farms worked as 'trusties', as in India both as warders and administrators — see Crouch, B. and Marquart, J. (1989) *An Appeal to Justice: Litigation Reform of Texas Prisons*, Austin: University of Texas Press; Marquart, J. and Roebeck, J. (1985) 'Prison guards and 'snitches'', *British Journal of Criminology*, 25(3): 217-233; McWhorter, W. (1981) *Inmate Society: Legs, Half-Pants and Gunmen — A Study of Inmate Guards*, Saragota: Century Twenty One. See also Bisonette, J. (2008) *When the Prisoners Ran Walpole*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, an account of an experiment in which prisoners assumed full control of Massachusetts Correctional Institution during a two-month strike by prison officers in 1973.
9. Bandyopadhyay and Jefferson (2010) (see n.7).
10. Prior to the Prisons Act 1835 prisoners were legally employed to work in the place of staff, including as turnkeys. Prisoners are recorded as working as office clerks until the late 1800s — see Thomas, J. (1972) *The English Prison Officer since 1850: A Study in Conflict*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

focus. Equally significant, across the developing world today prison wings operate largely without the presence of officers. In these circumstances, prisoners are required to administer their own regimes. In some prisons, in India for instance, the inmate hierarchies that inevitably arise are formally managed by prison authorities. Here, officers appoint inmate leaders, who exercise power on behalf of the prison administration. In other prisons, for instance the work camps of China and the gang-infiltrated prisons of Russia, South Africa and Latin America, inmate leaders are more likely to be appointed by prisoners and to impose (and themselves be guided by) inmate rather than prison codes.¹¹ Contrary to popular perceptions, in Brazil at least, inmate leaders govern through negotiation as much as coercion, and are as likely to be selected among the oldest or longest serving as toughest or well-connected prisoners. Further, inmate leaders typically run the wings with at least some degree of support from prison staff; nor are they necessarily castigated by other prisoners for doing so.

The primary data presented in this article is taken from an intensive three-week fieldwork study at an overcrowded, under-staffed police jail in Rio de Janeiro that I completed in September 2010 (I will refer to the jail as Polinter).¹² I was introduced to the depth of prisoner involvement in running the jail within half an hour of my first visit six months earlier, when a number of new prisoners arrived and one of eleven recognised inmate leaders was called to oversee their registration and subsequent escort to the cells.¹³ Shortly afterwards I entered the cell block with the director and the head of the sixteen police jails in Rio de Janeiro to meet the same inmate leader to discuss (and effectively seek

permission for) my plans to return to study prisoner organisation. Later my colleagues were amused to discover I had not realised the people that locked the doors behind me were prisoners. The director informed me that on some nights there was only one officer on duty. On these occasions he slept with his mobile phone next to his bed.

The extent to which inmates participate in administering the regimes in which they are incarcerated has a number of consequences for the study of prisons in the post-colonial and transitional world. In my writing on Brazilian prisons to date¹⁴ I have endeavoured to document and categorise the various formal and informal roles played by prisoners at Polinter and other Brazilian prisons in providing for security, discipline and welfare, from sweeping cells and washing clothes, to raising money to purchase material goods and pay bus fares for released prisoners, maintaining and enforcing norms concerning conduct, dispute resolution and dealings with prison staff, and working as turnkeys. I have demonstrated that, as in other countries in the developing world, prisoner participation can be divided into two broad categories of activity: self-governance (in which prisoners organise themselves, often with the implicit approval of staff, and may gain unofficial benefits such as additional unlock and access to the prison administration and welfare services) and collaboration (in which, as in the case of Auschwitz, inmates are formally entrusted to run prisons alongside or in place of staff, and in some cases gain additional official benefits such as pay and early release). I have also explored the context in which inmates collaborate and self-govern, principally state abandonment (low staffing levels and material deprivation) and the realities of everyday prison life (for instance, eating, washing, sleeping, receiving visits,

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11. Again, this is a phenomenon with historical roots. The roots of prisoner participation in Russian prisons can be located within the broader national tradition of the worker or community *artel* (guild or cooperative), and traced back to the 19th Century — see e.g. Dostoevsky, F. (1956/1861-1862) *Memoirs from the House of the Dead*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. In the barracks of the Soviet gulags prisoner discipline and welfare was maintained by high-ranking members of organised criminal *artels* known as *vory v zakonye* (thieves-in-law) — see also Gilinskiy, Y. and Kostjukovsky, Y. (2004) 'From thievish artel to criminal corporation: The history of organised crime in Russia', in Fijnaut, C. and Letizia, P. (eds.) *Organised Crime in Europe: Concepts, Patterns and Control Policies in the European Union and Beyond*, Dordrecht: Springer. For contemporary examples, see inter alia: on Bolivia, Skarbek, D. (2010) 'Self-governance in San Pedro prison', *Independent Review*, 14(2): 569-585; on Peru, Pérez Guadalupe, J. L. (1994) *Faites y Atormentas, una Etnografía Del Penal De Lurigancho*, Lima: Centro de Investigaciones Teológicas; on Venezuela, Carroll, R. (2011) 'Drugs, murder and redemption: The gangs of Caracas', *Guardian*, 10 March, and Romero, S. (2011) 'Where prisoners can do anything, except leave', *New York Times*, 3 June; on Honduras, Jefferson, A. (2010) 'Prison spaces in Nigeria and Honduras', *Prison Service Journal*, 187: 34-39; and on South Africa, Geer, S. and Lindegaard, M. (under review) 'Surviving South African prisons', and Steinberg, J. (2004) *The Number: One Man's Search for Identity in the Cape Underworld and Prison Gangs*, Cape Town: Jonathan Ball. For an account of the roles played by *vory v zakonye* in Russian prisons today, see Lambert, A. (2001) (director) *The Mark of Cain* (documentary).
 12. The nine cells at the jail measured between 18m² and 36m², yet held an average of 43 prisoners. Besides their salaries and the delivery of prisoners' meals, the five officers that worked at the jail received no material support from prison or police authorities.
 13. Officially there was one inmate leader for each of the nine cells and one senior inmate leader for each of the two wings. I had a comparable experience at Penitenciária Alfredo Trajan, a high security prison, also in Rio de Janeiro, which I visited with a public defender a few days earlier. The chief inmate leader was present for much of the three hours we spent advising prisoners. As we were leaving, he was waiting by the entrance to the main prison wing for the arrival of new prisoners. His role here was to decide which prisoners to allow in, that is which prisoners were willing to accept the authority of the wing's inmate hierarchy, and which needed to go onto the security wing to await transfer to another prison.
 14. In English, Darke, S. (2012) 'Estação Carandiru', *Prison Service Journal*, 199: 26-28; Darke, S. (forthcoming) 'Inmate Governance in Brazilian Prisons', *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*; Darke, S. (under review) 'Managing without guards in a Brazilian police lockup'.

working, resolving conflicts, socialising and maintaining friendships). Finally, I have investigated prisoner collaboration and self-governance in terms of mutual dependence, accommodation and cooperation. Over the remaining pages I return to my case study of Polinter in order to analyse the consequences of inmate participation for our understanding of everyday authority in the guard-less prisons of the global South. In doing so I focus on two blurred prison boundaries: between freedom and incapacitation and, first, between confiners and the confined.

'How did you end up here?'

Of course, prisoners also continue to perform certain janitorial and administrative duties in the post-industrial world. In some countries, most notably the USA, inmate hierarchies likewise continue to exist on the wings. Nevertheless, here inmate collaboration and self-governance remain exceptional, not defining features. Though useful, prison staff do not depend on inmates to run their regimes. As the North American and European sociology of prisons literature makes clear, the worlds of prisoners and staff remain largely distinct in the global North, and the ability of inmates to shape their experiences of prison is dependent upon the compromise or corruption of individual officers, which are as easily corrected or withdrawn as they

are gained. With rare exception, prison administrations remain in control of the most important aspects of prison life, from security and discipline to everyday routines such as lockup, visits and mealtimes.¹⁵

In contrast, many if not the majority of prisons in the South would quite simply not be able to operate without the support of prisoners. To expand for a moment on some of the roles played by prisoners in administering Polinter, the police not only relied on inmates to perform janitorial tasks like cleaning, cooking and distributing meals, but also to provide for basic prisoner needs such as medicines, cooking utensils, toiletries, bedding and clothing (fortunately, a

number of voluntary sector groups also frequented the jail to provide, among other things, medical check-ups and pro-bono legal advice). As for discipline and security, prisoners were responsible for handcuffing and escorting, searching cells and food parcels for contraband, eavesdropping for plans to rebel or escape, and (in the case of inmate leaders) ensuring that inmates remained in their cells outside visiting hours and allocated periods of free association, did not argue, swear or raise their voices, were silent from midnight, and did not impede officers or trusties. Indeed, there were no clear divisions between the roles of prisoners and staff. In effect, there were three kinds of guard (prison officer guards, trustie prisoner guards and inmate leader guards) and three kinds of support staff (voluntary sector support staff, trustie support staff and inmate leader managed support staff).

Particularly important for current purposes was the depth of autonomy enjoyed by higher ranking trusties and inmate leaders. Trusties were organised into work teams, the most security-orientated of which were led by prisoners the director had brought with him when he arrived from another of Rio de Janeiro's police jails six months earlier. New trusties were closely supervised by team leaders, who were in turn monitored by the two most senior trusties at the jail, both long-term prisoners who reported only to the director. The police interfered little with the work of trusties, who

outnumbered them ten to one. Nor did they leave their posts during work hours, in the office in the case of the deputy director, and at the front gate in the case of the two officers that worked as *plantonistas* (caretakers; guards) and a female officer that searched the majority of visitors. The director spent his days sitting in the courtyard in front of the entrance to the cell block, from where he had the best oversight of the most risky procedure, the movement of prisoners to and from the wings. However, he seldom entered the cell block itself and rarely spoke to junior trusties or team leaders, choosing instead to communicate through his two head trusties. Consequently, little trustie security work

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15. For a possible exception, see recent reports on prison officers depending on inmate leader to maintain discipline on the wings of the juvenile unit in the Riker's Island prison complex, New York — e.g. *The Guardian*, 16 May 2012; *New York Magazine*, 30 January 2011; *New York Times*, 4 February 2009; *New York Village Voice*, 9 May 2012.

was supervised by the police, including end-of-visit strip-searches and the end-of-day *confere* (involving head-count, cell-check and lockup). When the director was not present, the head trustees were effectively left in overall charge of security at the jail. Both carried keys to the cell block and back gate (used as a tradesmen entrance and as an exit for visitors), and carried mobile phones to speak to the director and arrange deliveries to the jail. Other prisoners referred to the director and his head trustees as the jail's *administração* (administration). Among the numerous examples of the power exercised by these two prisoners that I witnessed, one event stands out. Shortly after I arrived for my last day of research, a junior trustee tried to escape when taking rubbish bins through the back gate. One of the head trustees took him into the office, where I was sitting, and assaulted him in front of the deputy director, before proceeding to handcuff him and put him in a van for immediate transfer. In the confusion, one of the police escorts forgot his rifle. As the van was leaving, the second head trustee rushed to the arms cabinet, loaded the rifle and passed it to the officer through the window.

Inmate leaders worked with even less impediment. The director explained that so long as the wing remained quiet and no-one was seriously hurt, what happened on the wings was 'their business'. Neither did the police communicate with common prisoners. Inmate leaders described themselves as prisoner *representantes* (representatives) and their role as intermediaries between prisoners and the police as working on the *ligação* (link). However, even this aspect of their work involved little direct contact with the police. Most of the time they liaised with junior trustees over relatively mundane matters like calling prisoners with visitors, the delivery of prison meals and packages from families, and the purchase of material goods. For more serious matters such as indiscipline and changes to prison routines, they liaised with the head trustees. In the three weeks that I researched there, I only saw the police enter the cell block on two occasions. The first was to take me on my first detailed tour of the two (gang and segregation) wings (on the other occasions that I entered the wings, I was accompanied by one of the head trustees). The

second occurred when a common prisoner assaulted a trustee, and the director entered with his head trustees to speak with the relevant wing representative. The two sides agreed that the culprit was out of control and needed to be moved on.

There was, then, little to distinguish trustees and inmate leaders from prison officers, not only in terms of function, but also of command. Indeed, one of the most difficult tasks at the beginning of the study was to establish which of the people working there were prisoners and which were police. Once I had understood that the wings were self-governing and those that stood on the two sides of the double-gated *gaiolas* (cages) that led onto the wings were all prisoners, I had little problem distinguishing inmate leaders from officers and trustees. It took longer to realise that all of the support staff, including the paramedic, the handyman, the receptionists and office

clerks were prisoners.¹⁶ Besides having to come to terms with the crossovers in officer-trustee functions, this task was complicated further by the fact that many trustees, including the head trustees and most team leaders, were former police officers.¹⁷ By the end of my research, I was fully accustomed to the fact that the institution was run by its inmates. I also found myself being slowly drawn into prison routines. Mostly this involved directing visitors, most of who assumed I was working

there. On one occasion, when the jail was temporarily under the charge of just one officer, I was asked to help out at the front gate. On my last day, the director joked that if I got into trouble with the law, he would have a job for me. On another occasion, a lawyer to whom I had already spoken a number of times asked me how I had ended up in a Brazilian prison.

'The only difference between us is that I sleep at home'

The last points that remain to be explored concerning the nature of authority at Polinter relate to the boundary between freedom and incapacitation. In this case, the challenge to staff authority emerged from varieties in prisoner confinement, and from the poverty of prison work.

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16. Bandyopadhyay (2010) and Bandyopadhyay and Jefferson (2010) describe analogous experiences in their research on prisons in India and Sierra Leone (see n.3 and n.7).

17. Here, comparison can be made with the compound *pridúrki* of the Soviet gulags, many of the most senior of which were likewise former police — Solzhenitsyn (1975) (see n.5). More generally, up to half of all trustees either started out as prison officers and/or were employed as prison officers at the end of their sentences — Applebaum (2003) (see n.5).

All of the 464 prisoners that were being held at the time of my research were confined in the sense that they could not go beyond the boundaries of the jail. Likewise, all prisoners faced severe overcrowding at the jail, which measured just 1,200m². The point is not that conditions were bad for everyone, but that there was significant variation in the conditions experienced by individual prisoners. This was less so on the wings, where the only benefit gained by inmate leaders was to leave the cells between 7am to 7pm to work in the cell block corridors and visiting rooms. The experience of confinement on and off the wings, on the other hand, varied enormously. All prisoners held off the wings (of which around 45 worked as trusties but a further 25 or 30 prisoners, mostly university educated or former criminal justice practitioners, were kept off the wings for their convenience and safety) dressed in their own clothes, ate better than other prisoners, and slept in more comfort, usually on their own beds or mattresses and often in air-conditioned rooms. The majority were still required to share four to six bed dormitories, but some had their own rooms. A number of trusties slept where they worked, for example in the kitchen, the lawyers' visiting room and the medical room. The most junior trusties, the cleaners and porters, slept in the visiting rooms and the corridors of the cell blocks. Of particular significance, prisoners held off the wings had acquired certain freedoms to move around within the jail, and to chat informally with officers. This was most noticeable at the end of the working day and at the weekend, when trusties and other privileged prisoners would relax and engage in banter with the police in the courtyard. It was also noticeable at meal-times, when lower ranking trusties would collect their food and return to their posts to eat, but prisoners at the top of the hierarchy would eat alongside the police, in the courtyard or kitchen. The head trusties and one other privileged prisoner, also a former police officer, ate in the director's room. Trusties as a whole distinguished themselves from other prisoners through terms like *presos na tranca* (locked up prisoners), *presos de confiança* (trusted prisoners) and working or being held *dentro* (inside) and *fora* (outside).

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Equally intriguing were the varying conditions of officer as well as inmate work. Where trustie and inmate leader experiences of prison were defined by relative freedom, officer experiences of prison were defined by relative confinement. As previously noted, with the exception of the director the police effectively had no more, in some cases less freedom of movement than a number of senior trusties and other privileged prisoners. They also spent an extraordinary number of hours at the jail. While the officer that searched visitors worked only Monday to Friday, from 8.30am to 6.30pm, the *plantonistas* worked 12 hours a day, often seven days a week. The director and deputy director worked equally hard, in order to maintain a minimum presence of two officers in the evening and at the weekend. The heaviest burden appeared to fall on the deputy director, who claimed to have had only a few weeks off in over fifteen years. He likened his situation to having served a long-term sentence in semi-open conditions. The only difference between us, he enjoyed saying to trusties working in the office, was that he slept at home.

Important for current purposes is that the relative lack of privilege experienced by officers led to further erosion of everyday police power. What was most striking about the deputy director's analogy was not so much the solidarity that he felt towards the prisoners he worked with, but their mutual experience of being constrained to the office. From this position, he had little opportunity to influence what went on at the jail. Nor did he have the necessary knowledge to do so. For instance, he had little contact with inmate leaders, and only a basic understanding of their organisation and roles. He was not even aware that segregated prisoners (who, ironically, made up 50 per cent of prisoners) had a wing representative. He also depended on senior trusties to make important administrative decisions for him, for instance which dormitories to allocate new prisoners, and which prisoners to transfer when spaces became available in state penitentiaries.

Prison authority

The more 'prominent' prisoners, the Capos, the cooks, the store-keepers and the camp policemen, did not, as a rule feel degraded at

all, like the majority of other prisoners... but on the contrary—promoted!¹⁸

When they got together on their porch for a friendly smoke and a chat about camp affairs, it was hard to picture just who among them might be different.¹⁹

When you get such good treatment from officers, you tend to forget you are a prisoner.²⁰

The more I research prisons, the more I question the value of the Northern sociology of prisons literature in exploring what it is like to work or be incarcerated in the impoverished prisons of the South. Through the example of Polinter, I have sought to tease out some of the ways in which, at least in Brazil, prison is a shared experience, between prisoners and, my focus here, between prisoners and staff. More specifically, I have explored the ways in which the communal nature of Brazilian prison life persists both despite and as a result of material deprivation and staff shortage. By way of conclusion, the first point that needs emphasising is that Polinter was among the most materially deprived of Brazilian prisons. Neither was the acute shortage of staff that I found there exceptional. Across the Brazilian prison system it is not uncommon to find one officer on duty per 200, even 300 prisoners;²¹ prison officers make up 75 per cent of total prison staff.²²

In the introduction I noted that one of the consequences of prisoner participation *vis-à-vis* staff shortage and material deprivation at Polinter was that prisoners and officers pulled together to maintain basic levels of security, discipline and welfare. This, of course, stands against the mainstream of existing prison conditions literature, which tends to depict Brazilian prisons as institutions of disorder, violence, exploitation and despair, in which inmate trustees invariably act as

extensions of prison officer abuse of power, and inmate leaders head tyrannical gangs.²³ This Hobbesian picture of Brazilian prison life, I suggest, is not only exaggerated, but is largely premised in an unquestioned extension of established Northern sociology of prisons: notably that inmates and officers stand in 'normative opposition'²⁴ to one another and rarely develop positive relationships;²⁵ and that inmate solidarity has broken down as prison regimes have become harder and prison populations larger, less heterogeneous, made up of more remand and first-time offenders, and awash with hard drugs and (particularly in the US) gang culture.²⁶ To the contrary, it is arguably the case that solidarity between and among Brazilian prison staff and inmates has increased over the past twenty years, at the same time as the prison population has almost quadrupled (to 514,582 in December 2011), the percentage of prisoners held in pre-trial detention has risen (to 42 per cent, or 217,146 prisoners), and prison gang culture has spread from a handful of prisons in Rio de Janeiro to half of prisons in the country.²⁷ Contra David Sharbeck,²⁸ for instance, my research at Polinter and on Brazilian prisons more generally leads me to the conclusion that even large, overcrowded, self-ordering prison communities do not necessarily become predatory. This is a conclusion that is supported by other recent prison fieldwork studies in Brazil,²⁹ and other parts of the global South.³⁰ Bad conditions, as Bandyopadhyay puts it, give rise to social bonds as well as tensions.³¹

In this article I have focused on a second major aspect of staff shortage, prisoner participation and prisoner/prisoner-officer relations at the jail: the lack of clarity over what it meant to be an inmate or a member of staff. We have seen that through their joint experiences of running the jail, the daily lives of those that worked or were incarcerated at Polinter were entangled to the extent that it was not always clear or, in terms of prison authority, even necessary to know

18. Frankl, V. (2004/1947), p.72 (see n.2.).

19. Solzhenitsyn (1975), p.262 (see n.5).

20. Prisoner quoted in Bandyopadhyay (2010), p.81 (see n.3).

21. Salla, F. (2006) 'As rebeliões nas prisões: Novos significados a partir da experiência Brasileira', *Sociologias*, 8: 274-307.

22. Salla, F. et al. (2009) *Democracy, Human Rights and Prison Conditions in South America*, São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo.

23. See, *inter alia*, *The Economist* (2012, 22 September) *Prisons in Latin America: A Journey to Hell*; Human Rights Watch (1998) *Behind Bars in Brazil*, New York: Human Rights Watch; UN (2012) *Report on the visit of the Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment to Brazil* (unpublished document); Wacquant, L. (2003) 'Towards a dictatorship over the poor: Notes on the penalization of poverty in Brazil', *Punishment and Society*, 5: 197-205.

24. Crewe, B. (2009) *The Prisoner Society: Power, Adaptation and Social Life in an English Prison*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

25. Clemmer, D. (1958/1940) *The Prison Community*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

26. For recent analysis, see e.g. Crewe, B. (2009) (see n.23); Drake, D. (2012) *Prisons, Punishment and the Pursuit of Security*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Sharbek, D. (2012) 'Prison gangs, norms, and organizations', *Journal of Economic Behaviour and Organization*, 82: 96-109.

27. For more detailed analysis of prison conditions, staff-inmate accommodation and solidarity, and the rise of gang culture in Brazilian prisons, see Darke (forthcoming) (see n.14).

28. Sharbek (2012) (see n.26).

29. Again, see Darke (forthcoming) (see n.14).

30. E.g. Bandyopadhyay (2010) (see n.3); Geer and Lindegaard (under review) (see n.8).

31. Bandyopadhyay (2010) (see n.3).

who was a prisoner and who was an officer. Trustees and inmate leaders acted and were treated as staff, and staff experienced some of the same constraints as inmates. We have seen further that, like the compound *pridúrki* of the Soviet gulags and the *kapos* of the Nazi concentration camps, trustees inevitably interacted with officers on a social as well as professional level. Under these circumstances, the question who was guarded and who did the guarding was not a straightforward one. Neither was the question who was free and who had lost their liberty. Authority at the jail was not undermined by the lack of state resources but rather determined by a fusion of staff-inmate functions and a complexity of staff-inmate privileges. Again, these conclusions resonate little with contemporary prison studies in the North, which take as their starting point that prisons are (or at least strive to be) bureaucratic institutions in which power is imposed or negotiated from the top-down.³² Here, inmate authority is regarded as arising from defects in what are otherwise

institutions of total power, defects that arise through inevitabilities of friendship, reciprocity and inmate involvement in prison regimes,³³ but defects all the same. More specifically, to cite Bandyopadhyay once more, '... deficiencies in the exercise of total power are to be located in the 'interactional space' that binds prisoners and staff [...] [interwoven] relationships, strategies to maintain these relations, communication networks, rules of engagement...' ³⁴ In this article I have sought to demonstrate that in contrast to the relatively well-resourced prisons of the North, staff-inmate interaction (and the friendships, reciprocal exchanges and inmate participation from which it emerges) is not an aberration, but rather an integral feature of prison life in the South. With Martin, Jefferson and Bandyopadhyay, I would argue that 'situational adjustments'³⁵ to material deprivation and staff shortage, not structural dispositions of power or ostensible human rights, are key to understanding prison governance in the post-colonial world.



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32. See e.g. Sparks, R. et al. (1996) *Prisons and the Problem of Order*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, who describe prison power as 'imposed and enforced... neither spontaneous nor consensual' (p.300).

33. Sykes, G. (1958) *The Society of Captives*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

34. Bandyopadhyay (2000, p.176 and 178) (see n.7).

35. Moore, S. (2000) *Law as Process: An Anthropological Approach*, Oxford: James Currey, cited in Martin, T. et al. (under review) 'Sensing prison climates: Governance, survival and transition'.