

QUADERNI DEL DIPARTIMENTO DI GIURISPRUDENZA
DELL'UNIVERSITÀ DI TORINO

11/2019

EPISTEMIC COMMUNITIES AT THE BOUNDARIES
OF LAW: CLINICS AS A PARADIGM IN THE
REVOLUTION OF LEGAL EDUCATION IN THE
EUROPEAN MEDITERRANEAN CONTEXT

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Ledizioni

Opera finanziata con il contributo del Dipartimento di Giurisprudenza dell'Università di Torino.

Il presente volume è stato preliminarmente sottoposto ad una revisione da parte di una Commissione di Lettura interna nominata dal Consiglio del Dipartimento di Giurisprudenza. Detta Commissione ha formulato un giudizio positivo sull'opportunità di pubblicare l'opera.

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Via Alamanni, 11 – 20141 Milano – Italy
www.ledizioni.it
info@ledizioni.it

Cecilia Blengino and Andrés Gascón-Cuenca (edited by), *Epistemic Communities at the Boundaries of Law: Clinics as a Paradigm in the Revolution of Legal Education in the European Mediterranean Context*

Prima edizione: aprile 2019
ISBN 9788855260046

Progetto grafico: ufficio grafico Ledizioni

Informazioni sul catalogo e sulle ristampe dell'editore: www.ledizioni.it

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CLAUDIO SARZOTTI

Carceral Tours and Penal Tourism: a didactic tool for the understanding of the total institution

Introduction

For some years, as part of my courses in the Department of Law at the University of Turin, I have introduced the didactic practice of making my students visit prisons currently in operation and the *Museum of prison memory* in Saluzzo (C. Sarzotti, 2013). This methodology is not totally unknown in Italy¹, but no reflection has ever been made on it regarding the effects it has produced, either in terms of didactic goals achieved or on how the prison system perceived it and contributed to organising it.

The issue of external persons visiting total institutions is a classic issue of the sociological sector studying them. Erving Goffman (1961) devoted a whole chapter of *Asylums* to the so-called “institutional ceremonies”, using this expression to designate those institutionalised practices through which the staff and the inmates get closer to one another, in such a way that they obtain an image of one another that is in some way favourable, sufficiently to identify mutually. These ceremonies have the function to abandon for a short period the formalities and the rigid hierarchy characterising the relationships between staff and inmates, “relaxing” the relations between the individuals who are obliged to cohabit forcibly within the total institution.

1 To my knowledge, at least as far as teaching in departments of Law is concerned, visits to or cooperation with prisons is carried out at the Universities of Florence, Roma Tre and Bologna. In particular, Prof. Renzo Orlandi organised a study tour with a visit to the prison in Turin and to the *Museum of prison memory*, within his course of criminal procedure at the University of Bologna.

These institutional ceremonies also include the visits of external persons². They are often real and proper institutional “set ups”, prepared for visitors to respond to a double goal. First, looking inwards, they aim to convince both the inmates and the staff that the total institution is not a world in itself, but that it has a place within a wider social and institutional structure. Then the inmates and the staff have a legitimate role to play in the free world, even though that legitimacy is paradoxically strictly linked to that very condition of social separateness and subordination. Secondly, looking outwards, these ceremonies are aimed at visitors for the purpose of offering them an image of the organisation, intended to dissipate the vague terror they feel towards enforced institutions (E. Goffman, 1961, 129). The total institution tries on these occasions to show its best face and, especially, tries to reaffirm in the eyes of the visitors its ability to pursue the institutional mission that society has entrusted it with.

Analysing the ways in which these events are put together then becomes very interesting for understanding how the total institution conceives of itself in relation to the outside world. Through analysis of how the total institution builds up its own self-representation the picture also emerges of the elements that it considers acceptable and presentable to the public opinion. From this point of view, Goffman (1961, 130) underlines how the façade that the institution habitually shows is probably the new, modern part, which will change every time that modernisations and additions are made. Often the representation will not concentrate on essential aspects of the institutional mission, but on apparently marginal details, such as technologically advanced equipment or inmates who display some special talent in working or artistic activities. These are elements that permit a reassuring image of the performance of the institution and, especially, show that the inmate’s personality is respected, while they are often shown carrying out activities that put their time to good use. This is evidently a strategy of *excusatio non petita*³, which casts light in an indirect manner on the more critical elements of the total institution: the processes of infantilization the inmates are subjected to and the organisational dysfunctions very often displayed by the total institutions on account of lack of investments and poor outside control over the efficiency of the services provided.

2 Amongst the institutional ceremonies, Goffman quotes the periodicals that are produced inside the total institutions with the cooperation of the inmates, the annual parties (often held at Christmas time) where the inmates can meet their relatives and the theatrical shows, as well as sporting events involving the inmates in leading roles and which are often also open to the outside public.

3 N.d. A. The latin aphorism *Excusatio non petita accusatio manifesta* is used to mean that a not required excuse is an evident self-accusation.

Unlike what has happened in Italy, in the anglo-saxon context the sociology of prison life has made an extensive study of the phenomenon of visits to prison institutions (or kindred total institutions), whether as instruments of ethnographic research or as didactic instruments for university students. In this regard, the effects have also been analysed with regard to the didactic visits to prison museums. This greater attention is explicable not only because of the greater diffusion of these didactic and research practices, but also because of the greater sophistication of the organisational level of the prison systems in that context, which have produced genuine formally organised strategies to regulate the “spectacles” put on by the prison institutes during visits by outside subjects.

In countries like Canada and the United States, the university teaching programmes on criminal justice, both for courses in law degrees and those of a socio-anthropological nature, very often include visits to prisons and museums dealing with that subject. These activities are very appreciated by the students and promoted by the university programs, which highlight these tours in their on-line prospectuses. The tours are organised jointly between the university structures and prison administrations, following extremely strict, detailed guidelines. When the students enter the prison structure, they undergo “training”, where they are warned of the dangers they may encounter and the procedures they have to follow. They are usually given instructions to stay with their guide, to walk along the walls of the corridors when they move around from one section to another and to avoid any contact with the prisoners, including exchange of greetings, conversations or even direct eye contact (T. Arford, 2017).

The organisational strategies have been formalised to such an extent by the prison administrations that it was possible to analyse their guidelines⁴. Many elements emerging from these research projects are also found in the Italian situation, with the only, far from irrelevant, difference that the “set up” strategies produced by the prison administration are almost entirely non-formalized and therefore linked to choices of the individual managements of the prisons involved. The more informal manner in which these visits are managed make them even more interesting from the point of view of sociological research into prison life, since aspects emerge more freely both on the prison operators’ professional culture and the inmates’ sub-culture. This essay proposes to analyse, in a preliminary stage of more structured empirical research, the experience of the prison visits the Author has experimented with during his didactic and research activities. I will try, first of all, to show the specifics of the Italian case and then make some consider-

4 Particularly regarding the state of Canada which has given rise to debate as to the legitimacy and usefulness of such visits (J. Piché, K. Walby, 2010; H. Thurston, 2017, 6).

ations on what impact these visits had on the students, from the point of view of didactic goals, and on what precautions should be taken, in order to reach the didactic ends of bringing under discussion the stereotypes that exist in the popular culture with regard to prison. In this last part, I will also attempt to take a reasoned stance towards the dilemma, which is also of an ethical nature, of whether it is legitimate and useful to continue making these visits.

The Turin experience in relation to the international literature

The observed data which will be taken into consideration in this research refer to both visits to prisons still in activity at the time of the visit, and to a museum site open in the ex-prison called the *Castiglia di Saluzzo* since 2014⁵. In the former connection, I will take into consideration both the visits regularly made by my students over the course of the last five years and the ones made as part of the *Summer School* organised by the University of Turin and the NGO Antigone⁶ since September 2017⁷. My reflection will also benefit from my consolidated experience as observer for the Antigone's Observatory on Prison Conditions in Italy. In the latter connection, I will examine, on the other hand, the visits to the *Museum of prison memory* made by myself with my students of Law, as from the Museum's inauguration. This evidently represents a limited number of visits, with regard to which the observed data are still at an experimental level. The considerations that will be put forward therefore make no presumptions to be considered representative of the Italian situation, but simply aim to lay the basis for wider and more methodologically accurate empirical research. Considering the vast difference between the two locations visited, one a working prison and the other a prison museum, the considerations put forward will stay separated and will be presented in the order just shown.

5 To gain an idea of the content of the Museum of prison memory, as well as the essay by C. Sarzotti (2013), please make a visit to the website www.museodellamemoriacarceraria.it

6 Antigone is an Italian cultural and political NGO that was born in the late eighties, devoted to promote rights and guarantees in the penal system. It is supported by magistrates, workers in the penitentiary system, lawyers, researchers, parliamentarians, teachers and ordinary citizens interested in criminal justice (www.antigone.it).

7 We are referring to the *Summer School on Deprivation of Fundamental Liberty and*, managed since 2017 by the Department of Law. It is a training course, addressing jurists and students in law, focused on how to guarantee rights for persons deprived of personal liberty (thus not only detained due to criminal convictions) even before international courts (eg CEDU).

Acceptance of the prison visit

A first element to be taken into consideration is how the prison administration looks on the visit to the institute and interferes in the manner in which it is carried out. In the anglo-saxon literature it has been noted that the limitations almost always placed by the prison administration “suggest that tours are always viewed as a risk to prison order (security and discipline)” (Piché, Walby, 2010, 572). In the meantime, the objective the prison administration usually sets itself is that, “to demonstrate our openness and integrity by promoting public understanding of the objectives and operations of Springhill Institution through official and public visit” (*ivi*, 571). Thus the total institution has to balance its own interest to show that it is open to the outside, confuting the stereotype of the prison that isolates itself from the outside world, with the risk that the outside visitor may observe a reality that is often very different from that which the institutional mission would require.

In the visits analysed in this research, this double objective, which is often difficult to reconcile, is further emphasised in the case of the visits of the NGO Antigone for the *Observatory on Prison Conditions in Italy*. This observatory, even though it does not hold real powers of inspection in relation to the Italian prison administration, is intended to publish a report to bring out the critical points of the prison administration with regard to its ability to guarantee the rights laid down by the regulations, both for detained persons (first and foremost) and for persons who work there (in an indirect way)⁸. On the other hand though, facing students’ request to enter the prisons, the attitude of the prison administration becomes much more relaxed and almost pleased, inasmuch as the university institution is looked on as an institution that can give prestige. The fact that cultured individuals belonging to social classes that are in any case privileged, as are lecturers (above all) and students (generally), should devote their time to approach the world of prisons is perceived as a symptom of non-total marginality of this institution. In the case of law professors and students – i.e. jurists whether already affirmed or in course of instruction – , there is the additional factor that many prison staff, such as wardens, are graduates in Law, who look up to and have a certain inferiority complex towards university law teachers.

This attitude emerges at least in two circumstances. Very often the visits start and spend rather a long time in the administration offices of the management, before reaching the detention areas. In particular, the place

8 The report has reached its fourteenth edition, most of them published in the magazine *Antigone. Four-monthly criticism of the penal and prison system*, and which since two years ago is only available on-line (see the latest edition in <http://www.antigone.it/quattordicesimo-rapporto-sulle-condizioni-di-detenzione/>).

for initial reception of visitors is represented by the prison director's office, which is normally distinguishable from all the others by the elegance of the furnishing and its spaciousness. But even when it is not the warden who directly accompanies the visitors, the initial reception does not take place in the detention departments, but in the administration offices. It is as if those who are part of the total institution want to show anyone from outside that their work does not consist, either exclusively or mainly, in managing the detention spaces, but rather in operating within a complex organisation requiring official work and of a concept not very different from any other ministerial apparatus. I recall, during a visit made to the prison in Saluzzo with students from the *Summer School*, a long stay in the registration offices with a young prison officer who was explaining the operations of registering new inmates and the juridical questions that such apparently simple operations lead to. The young officer, who felt the need to explain exactly how that rather complex job was only possible for him on account of his degree in law, continued by praising the technology that has today done away with the old inkpads for fingerprinting, replaced by modern scanners which memorise the dactyloscopic data immediately. In the narrative of this young officer, the inhuman rituals of degradation identified by Goffman lost their de-humanising effects and took on the tone of aseptic, technologically advanced scientific procedure. The body of the detainee and the place where his/her dispossession and classification took place were thus transformed by narrative from a place of degradation into a scientific laboratory, from the body of a prisoner into the body of a patient undergoing a medical examination.

The second circumstance where this attitude emerges is related to the questions that the guides chosen by the prison administration make during the visit to the teacher accompanying the students: these questions almost always involve a request for juridical information relating to regulatory aspects of life in prison. These questions are not intended so much to satisfy a need for information, as to demonstrate a quite sophisticated knowledge of law on the part of the person asking the actual question. A typical formulation of these questions is the following: "as you will know Professor, it seems to me that the Court of Cassation has given a verdict on this aspect, but do you understand what that verdict means in concrete terms?" In this manner, the guide shows that he/she is informed on developments, even in sophisticated aspects of law, and at the same time pleases the interlocutor by asking for clarifying advice. This is yet another demonstration of the inferiority complex towards jurists on the part of prison staff, who are afraid of being judged as second tier jurists.

Guide to the visit and related prison areas

Another element highlighted by the international literature is the fact that the administrations usually choose a guide to accompany the visitors for the whole duration of the visit. “In every Canadian federal penitentiary, there are designated staff members responsible for organizing facility tours requested by groups such as university classes and government officials. It is a responsibility of internal tour organizers to ensure the adequate preparations have been made regarding the security of tour participants as well as staff and prisoners, and to convey the desired institutional narratives and imagery to outsiders” (Piché, Walby, 2010, 572).

As mentioned, the visits to Italian prisons are much less formalised and there is therefore no evidence of measures from the Department for Prison Administration which lay down the choice and the preparation of the tour guides⁹. One sole exception was made for the tours of the contact persons of the NGO Antigone, for whom it was established that the guide must be the prison warden, or if he/she was unavailable, the commander of the prison officers or his/her delegate. This regulatory indication proves very significant inasmuch as it repeats formally a choice applied by the managements of the prisons informally, following a professional culture that is evidently very widespread: even before this measure, in effect, when it was not the warden who carried out the role of guide, the task was delegated to the commander of policemen inside the prison or, in any case his/her representative. In this manner, the components of the so-called rehabilitation area – educators, social assistants and psychologists – , are excluded from the role of guides, yet they could play an invaluable role in describing the working activities as well as those of teaching and other kinds organised for the prisoners, in order to achieve the institutional mission of the prison, as clearly described by art. 27 of the Italian Constitution. Occasionally these figures are not totally excluded from the visits, inasmuch as they are called on as “non-leading players”, to illustrate individual activities carried out inside the institution: if a woodworking laboratory is visited, up pops a training official who teaches the prisoners the art of engraving on wood; if a classroom is visited, out comes the teacher, who illustrates the good results achieved by the student inmates; if the infirmary is visited, there is the nurse who explains how the

⁹ It should be pointed out that we are talking about visits of outside subjects not covered by art. 67 of the Prison Regulations, which contains a mandatory list of institutional bodies (members of Parliament, judges, regional councillors, watchdog commissioners etc.) who may visit prisons for purposes of inspection without any authorisation from the administration. For these visits the DAP issued a consolidated law, in circular no. 3651/6101 of 7 November 2013, to regulate many aspects of these visits, which, however, are for purposes and organisational dynamics very different from the visits for didactic purposes we are talking about in this essay.

institute purchases the latest drugs available, to guarantee the right to health-care for the prisoners. The choice of giving precedence to a member of the prison officers as a guide is an indication of the greater power that this sector of the prison operators possesses compared to others. The task of guiding, in effect, evidently represents a gratifying task and that reaffirms the power of the person who carries it out, also in the eyes of the visitors. The subject who “does the honours” is evidently the one who feels “the owner” of the institution and is also the one who knows the details of the prison facility better than anyone else, is more adroit when moving around the areas of the various sections safely and is familiar with the various activities carried on in the institution. This topographical knowledge of the facility is anything but taken for granted, especially when the institute is medium-large in dimensions: even when it is the warden who is guiding, he/she is almost always accompanied by an official of the prison officers in prison to show the way around. It should be pointed out, in fact, that only a few prison operators possess full knowledge and are able to move around freely inside the structure. Rehabilitation operators, and sometimes even the wardens themselves, would not know how to move around without difficulty inside the institute, because they do not usually go into a large part of the sections of the facility: the former because they have no official authorisation and the latter because they do not find the time or the wish to do so¹⁰.

Analysing the choice of spaces where the visits are carried out is also highly interesting for bringing out the features of the professional culture of the prison staff. Regarding areas that may be visited, it should first of all be underlined that it is almost never possible to visit the sections where the detained persons spend the largest part of their days in their cells. This choice is officially justified, first of all, to protect the confidentiality of the detained persons¹¹ and, secondly, to prevent communications becoming too informal between them and the visitors. Such communications are not expressly forbidden, but the visits are organised in such a way that the visitors can only enter into direct contact with a selected group of inmates in spatial contexts

10 It also has to be taken into consideration in this respect that in Italy, because of insufficient numbers of qualified management personnel, many prisons have wardens who are so-called “on tour”, or in other words wardens who have more than one prison under their management. Time to devote to inspecting the individual sections is therefore very restricted and this is also to prevent prisoners being able to make claims directly to the warden, without the shield of the prison officers. I have managed to observe personally prisoners who took their chance, while the warden was present as a guide for a visit of outside persons, to make a request for a meeting with the warden himself.

11 We will return to this argument shortly, when talking about the ethical problems relating to the visits to the total institutions.

other than those where they spend a large part of their day. This organisational choice enables the prison administration to achieve two results that are very important for their own communicative strategy. On one side, it allows them to select the prisoners that can show to best effect the presentable face of the total institution. On the other, it allows them to represent to the visitor a typical day for the inmate inside the total institution as being packed with working, school, sports and cultural activities, etc. On superficial examination, the ingenuous visitor may be led to think, by what he/she sees, that the inmate passes the days attending school, taking part in craft workshop activities or in real and proper employment activities, cooperating in cultural projects, such as theatre shows or painting exhibitions and stretching their legs when they feel like it, either in the gym or on the five-a-side football pitch¹². The prisoners can enter into direct contact with the visitors in all of these contexts that are not really detention, such that they are able to appear to a superficial observer not very different from any free individual whatsoever, who may be enjoying these activities. But this is a spectacle somewhat distant from the effective reality of the total institution, when the statistics tell us that in Italy little more than 30% of the prison population perform any work inside the institutions, then only with occasional frequency and mainly on behalf of the prison administration itself, with very humble tasks, such as cleaning the corridors and giving out food in the detention sections¹³. These are also somewhat improvised spectacles and they are sometimes exposed, even by chance. An example from this point of view was the visit made to the prison in Saluzzo by a group of young participants in the *Summer School* previously mentioned. The visitors, accompanied by the warden, were taken into a laboratory for brewing beer, to find sparkling new equipment on show and cleanliness fit for a hospital ward. The warden, with the aid of an immigrant prisoner who – speaking a very good Italian and being unusually well dressed for the happening – described the production process, which involved considerable investment on the part of the outside cooperative that runs the laboratory and which had also engaged a famous master brewer. To show off the quality of the home brew produced, the visitors were also invited to a tasting, which was promptly prepared and served by the same prisoner. Goffman would have been delighted to find such a perfect incarnation of his notion of institutional ceremony! But the devil always hides behind

12 These are usually the main places and activities that are illustrated and visited on these occasions.

13 These data were provided by the same prison administration and were commented on by the observatory of the Antigone Association, cf. the latest updates <http://www.antigone.it/quattordicesimo-rapporto-sulle-condizioni-di-detenzione/lavoro/> (last visited on 26/07/2018).

details: one of the participants on the visit, between one sip of the golden beverage and another, is moved spontaneously to ask the warden an innocent question. “How many prisoners were involved in this project?” The warden immediately switched off his smug air and started a long, tortuous and slightly cryptic speech, at the end of which it was revealed that, on account of bureaucratic questions that could not be further explained, the prisoners involved amounted to the exorbitant total of ... two! General embarrassment ensued and the “showcase” strategy was almost totally compromised¹⁴.

Impacts on the students’ perception about prison and convicted people

The anglo-saxon literature has widely discussed, and it has even been divided, over the didactic effects and of perception of the prison world on the part of students produced by the visits to the prisons (for the reconstruction of this debate cf. H.P. Smith, 2013). Empirical research has been carried out to try to measure these effects. Some research has analysed written comments requested from the students after their visit (Helfgott, 2013). Others have issued questionnaires to the students before and after the visit, to measure the effects it has produced towards the conception of punishment s (retributive, re-educational, incapacitating, etc.), the representation of the prisoner and the prison and the selectivity of criminalisation processes (Smith et al., 2009). Other research has widened the research subject to mutations also of the perception of the students towards the prison staff and their propensity to enter these professions (Stacer et al., 2016), or again to the alternative measures to prison (W.R. Calaway et al., 2016). Yet others have extended the analysis to the effects on the students from courses employing virtual prison tours and e-learning, which use film footage of juvenile prisons (K. Miner-Romanoff, 2014). Some research has set out to measure the impact of didactic programmes that go beyond simple, occasional visits, but take concrete form in genuine training courses, lasting weeks, within the prisons, through didactic methods that come close to being genuine legal clinics (L. Ridley, 2014).

As mentioned, the considerations that will be presented here are not the fruits of truly empirical research, but they represent the result of certain reflections that I have been able to develop over these years of didactic practice, through contact with the students who took part in the visits I carried out for didactic purposes, both to prisons and to the *Museum of prison memory* in Saluzzo. In this way I have managed to analyse the reactions of the students, which were revealed both in informal contexts (discussions during

14 I will return to this episode when dealing with the didactic strategies to measure the effects of the visits on the students.

the university lessons and those of the *summer school*), and in more formal didactic contexts, such as the written reports on subjects covered in the visit, mini-theses on conclusion of the *summer school* and oral assessment exams for student preparation. These are observations that still lack a full scientific structure, but which lay the basis for further development of the research in a context like the Italian one, where empirical research is virtually unknown.

If the effects seen on the students from the previously mentioned research are analysed, it can be seen that the students have taken up different positions on some of the fundamental didactic questions. Taking it for granted that the total institution tries to exploit these visits as part of the institutional ceremonies à la Goffman, how do the students protect themselves and/or be protected against the “construction of reality” proposed in the visits by the warden of the prison? In particular, can the students manage to take up a critical position against this? To what extent does this construction of reality put on show by the prison administration merely reaffirm the stereotypes of the prison world that circulate in the popular culture? In terms of his/her future professional aspirations, how is the student influenced by the experience, often emotively significant, of the visit? Do they change their perception of the person imprisoned and the staff working in the prison, and in what way do they change it?

Regarding these questions, the group of Italian students examined by myself present some elements common to those analysed in the international literature, while other aspects, though, differ from them.

Concerning the perception of the living conditions of the inmates inside the prison, the most widespread tendency seems to be that of considering such conditions in any case less difficult than what the students expected prior to the visit. These expectations are very much influenced by the public view of prison that is abundantly nurtured by the construction of reality by the so-called “prison movies”. As is well-known, this cinema genre, which often takes on the perspective of the unjustly punished prisoner, overturns the social roles of the victim-oppressor pairing¹⁵. In this perspective, the film plot is often studded with abuses of power, humiliation and extremely tough conditions of prison life. This rather macabre imaginary reconstruction of prison reality existing in the popular culture may be reinforced by the concept of a retributive sentence, according to which it is completely obvious that the convicted person in prison has to suffer, in order to atone for the blame for the crime committed. The prison visit, as orchestrated by the prison administration contributes to covering up the more painful aspects of life in prison: the prisoner is not seen in the promiscuity of the cell, the eyes of the visitors are not allowed to fall on the more difficult prisoners, the ones

15 For the definition of this cinema genre, cf. C. Sarzotti, G. Siniscalchi, 2013.

who bear the signs of their suffering on their faces and bodies; the sense of desolation, the minor abuses of power of life in detention are totally ignored in the narrative of a daily existence devoted to work and the commitment to re-education; the places visited themselves, if exception is made for the visible presence of the bars on the windows and the disquieting metallic sound of the locks and the doors opening and closing¹⁶, appear to be decent, sufficiently clean and not very different from any other total institution for free people. All of this produces a perception according to which the prisoner enjoys conditions of detention that are substantially acceptable, in line with what one deserves in paying the penalty and even, in certain cases, also makes use of services that gratify his/her existence in a way that is even excessive. From this perspective, one often hears the very common, typical, rather shocked expression: “But they even have television in the cell!”

As for perceptions of the person imprisoned, the effects are, on the other hand, rather distant from a reaffirmation of the stereotypes in force in the popular culture. On this aspect, I have not found in Italy any praxis described in the literature on the subject, that shows the prison administration guides emphasising the dangerousness of the prisoner or warning the visitor against interacting with them with too much trust (cf. Piché, Walby, 2010). On the contrary, it is precisely the strategy that aims to represent life in prison as that of a community that is, in the final analysis, well run and engaged in various daily activities which tends to bring out the characters of absolute normality and reliability of the imprisoned person. The typical comment of the student concerning this is: “I didn’t believe they were so similar to us”. This sensation grows when the visitor has the chance to exchange a few words with the prisoner or when the latter also manages to recount briefly his/her personal story that led to imprisonment. It may occur that the expression of these excerpts from personal affairs of the inmates are favoured by the guides for the visit themselves, who probably mean to use this device to show their humaneness in a good light, or demonstrate how the role of the staff goes well beyond the technical level designed to maintain security and the prison treatment of the prisoner. It is highly likely that the specific professional culture of the Italian prison staff includes an element of accentuated benevolent paternalism, deriving from the very history of the Italian prison (C. De Vito, 2009).

In any case, the chance for the persons imprisoned to bring into play storytelling of their personal affairs, which, on account of the very circumstances in which this occurs, can only take on pathetic, self-absolving tones,

16 These are the aspects which, according to the statements of the students who possibly possess greater sensitivity and sense of empathy, are the source of greater uneasiness for visitors who had not previously known prison.

induces a two-sided reaction in the visiting students. On the one side, the student most frequently develops a process of empathy with the inmate, which may even go as far as to perceive his/her condition as a deep injustice and to put into question the legitimacy of the prison sentence. On the other side, in a more limited number of cases, the student tends to read the affair of the inmate as confirmation of the positive effects induced on the latter by the prison. As a matter of fact, cases are not infrequent where prisoners, especially those with long spells of detention behind them, demonstrate on these occasions a surprising capacity for self-analysis of their own condition and their own existential journey, to such an extent that they appear intellectually and morally far superior to what might be expected in a person in prison¹⁷. In front of such accounts full of deep humanity and self-reflection, some of the students are led to believe that it was the prison that provoked the deep change and thus attribute to the sentence a cathartic function of reform of the convict¹⁸.

The differences in the reactions to the visits highlight how essential it is, for reaching the predetermined didactic goals, to plan a stage of preparation for the visit and a subsequent stage for discussion and re-elaboration of the observations made and emotions aroused by the visit. In the specific case I am dealing with, these two stages were developed in parallel with the visit to the *Museum of prison memory* in Saluzzo. That is obviously a far different activity from that of a visit to a working prison and it has developed a specific literature linked to the so-called prison tourism. In the next paragraph I will deal with the visits to prison museums in their purely didactic aspects and as a tool for development and analysis of the emotions aroused by visits to prisons.

Prison tourism as a didactic tool

Prison tourism in museums is a practice that has been well developed in the international context, so much so that it has been the subject of extensive

17 This effect of the prison on the prisoner often has nothing to do with the critical review of the route that led him/her to the crime, but is due to the condition of inactivity of the inmate which leads them to externalise self-reflective activity which in life as a free person they perhaps would never have achieved. This condition also explains the singular phenomenon by which a lot of semi-literate prisoners start writing in prison and, in some cases, even become great writers.

18 This reaction, in particular, is demonstrated by some of the students in a very evident manner, when viewing a docufilm on the story of a group of life prisoners, so-called whole-life prisoners, in other words convicted of serious organised crime, interviewed after long spells of reclusion.

studies and has also been involved in the didactics of penal and prison law. The international literature on the subject has given precedence to analysis of how this tourism has influenced the construction of the prison reality and the collective imagination regarding the total institution. This is what Michelle Brown (2009) called “the culture of punishment”.

However there is no lack of reflections on the impact that prison museums have produced when they have been visited for didactic purposes. The case presented here is quite singular, because the Museum we are talking about was set up by the Author of this essay, who is the same teacher that later organised the visits for didactic purposes for his own students. Therefore, while the teachers who have normally used this didactic tool have had to adapt to museum layouts built for mainly tourism-economic ends or as a celebration of the prison administration¹⁹, the Museum of Prison Memory in Saluzzo was set up for purposes that, if not exclusively didactic, contain the elements for development in that sense. The final objective of the museum tour, in particular, was actually to offer elements for reflection on the history of the modern prison, from a Foucauldian perspective which enhances the elements of breaking away from the arsenal of pre-modern sentences and as a tool of the new disciplinary power which established itself with the modern industrial society²⁰. This is evidently a critical approach that is well suited to introducing elements of reflection, as compared to the mainstream narrative on the history of the prison, which was called *whig*²¹. According to that narrative, prison should be seen, in a progressive vision of history, as a mode of penal execution which overcomes the pre-modern barbarism through philanthropic humanitarianism of a religious framework and the enlightened criticism of penal systems in absolute regimes (cf. E. Santoro, 2004, 3 and ss.). The didactic goal is therefore to bring out all the critical aspects of a total institution whose latent function is very different and more complex than that institutional mission which is, on the other hand, celebrated in the majority of museum institutions.

This goal is pursued through two communicating strategies which reinforce each other: the didactic tool of museum storytelling and the critical

19 These seem to be, in the opinion of researchers who have dealt with the subject, the main ends that have been characteristic of the layouts of these museums. For a classification of these cf. K. Walby, J. Piché (2015).

20 For a project that may to some extent be read from the perspective of the one in Saluzzo, a look should be taken at the project of the *Museo Penitenciarario Argentino Antonio Ballvé* in Buenos Aires (cf. M. Welch, M. Macuare, 2011).

21 This interpretation about prison history plays a predominant rule in the existing museums of prison because of its attractiveness to the public (see A. Barton, A. Brown, 2015, 246).

reconstruction of the popular culture relating to prison and criminality.

From the first point of view, the museum tour was conceived with the exhibition mode of storytelling, a new way of conceiving the museum²², which has revolutionised the traditional model, which saw it as a container of a certain number of works, objects, etc. suitably selected by so-called expert knowledge, according to hierarchies of relevance and of significance²³. From the new perspective, museums are to be “understood no longer as mere containers holding, conserving and exhibiting objects, but as spaces for democratic, inclusive exchange for various categories of users. In the contemporary multi-cultural societies, museums are called on (...) to become centres of cultural elaboration *of* and *in* the local areas, a motor for development of a new culture of social inclusion and participation in the cultural life of society” (I. Salerno, 2013, 10). The museum becomes an interactive set of narrations, which concern the protagonists of the subject of the museum tour and call on the visitor to co-participate in this collective memory. At the centre of attention, there is no longer the work or object on display in itself, but rather the tale of the individuals who contributed to their production. In the museum of Saluzzo, the history of the prison is not reconstructed through the display of documents and objects, but the narratives of the protagonists of the history are brought back to life, both well-known protagonists and, especially, those forgotten by official history. In the case of the prison, this latter aspect bears enormous importance, since it makes it possible to elaborate a history of the prison “seen from the bottom”²⁴, which brings to light the critical aspects and the effective social functions, beyond the re-educational rhetoric.

There are various examples of how subjects linked to the history and to the present²⁵ of the prison may be dealt with, starting from the narrations that

22 Compare to this model, often applied to museums of prison and criminal justice, the recent works by Hannah Thurston (2016; 2017).

23 Constituting, amongst other things, an effective device of power in relation to the institutional memory, as was clearly underlined by the Foucauldian analysis of the historian Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2005).

24 And when I use this expression, I am not referring, as will be obvious, only to the persons imprisoned, but also to the category of the prison operators, in particular the prison officers, who are often, just as much as the inmates, forgotten and marginalised by the official history.

25 As is well known, the Foucauldian approach to history, “the history of the present”, is precisely what sees the work of the historian not as an end in itself, but as that which makes it possible to understand current affairs, starting from the genealogy of the past, cf. for all H. L. Dreyfus, P. Rabinow, 1989, 143 ss. and D. Garland (2014). A. Barton, A. Brown (2015) agree on this prospective about museums of prison.

are held inside the museum. I will remind you of just a few here. The subject of suicide in prison, starting with the case of a prisoner who cooperated with justice and was “rewarded” by being given a job as an “archer”²⁶ inside the prison of Saluzzo, until one morning in August 1842 he abandoned his workplace and, as he was about to be arrested, shot himself in the head with a pistol in front of the clients of an inn. The subject of the conservative, bureaucratic juridical culture of the prison organisation, through the case of the first warden of the prison of Saluzzo, Giacomo Caorsi, discharged from his duties in 1834, because he put trust in the inmates and was opposed to corporal punishment for anyone who broke the rules, because that was humiliating the convict. The subject of the criminal career of marginal individuals through the tale of the brigand Francesco Delpero (1832-1858), who became a serial killer and “crime star” after having been imprisoned for the first time at 15 years of age in Saluzzo and condemned to 20 years of forced labour in the labor camps of Genoa, only because he laid his hands on a policeman. And we could go on.

Under the second profile, as was clearly observed by Alison Griffiths, “prison is a paradox: unknown to the vast majority and yet resolutely imagined through popular culture, what I called the *carceral imaginary*” (Id., 2016, 1). The *Museum of prison memory* reconstructs this imaginary through the narration of prison which the cinema, literature, painting, the theatre and music have produced. It is a question of dismantling the stereotypes and representations transmitted by the media and the various artistic forms, which have created an imaginary somewhat distant from what is the material reality of the total institution. This is not to claim an unlikely supremacy of the sociology of prison life in accessing empirical reality, but rather to reflect on the nature of social construction of processes of criminalization in their various stages. The artistic products that have influenced the prison imaginary and which are displayed in the *Museum of prison memory*, are of various kinds and come from various cultural levels. We can range from a worldwide icon of the prison imaginary, such as the painting *The Round of the Prisoners* by Vincent Van Gogh, the highest expression of the artistic view of the world of the disciplinary prison, down to the most commercial, second rate prison movie, which, however, contributes as a vehicle for stereotype images of prisoners and prison staff, mainly taken up by the US prison system²⁷. From these cultural products, work can be done with the students

26 These were the guards who had the task, in the prisons of the 1800s, of execute corporal punishment to inmates who had broken the internal rules. This enables us to deal with another subject related to prison, namely whether or not it is effectively a punishment that does not apply physical violence to the body of the convict.

27 As is well known, the collective imaginary of prison is nurtured to an over-abundant

on dismantling of stereotypes and the narrative frames, which enable us to bring out how the construction of the penal reality, which takes form in the popular culture, also involves the legal operators and strongly conditions the process of implementation of penal law. The stereotypes, in fact have an operational repercussion on the selectiveness of criminalisation processes. These works of reflection and dismantling of the collective imaginary are reconnected, amongst other things, to that thread of theory of law which Richard K. Sherwin (2007) called *Visual Legal Realism* and which dealt with how the visual popular culture influences the interpretation of the law and its application. Visual language, especially, has taken on great importance in the post-modern society, a language which education of the jurist normally does not take into account. The visits to the museum of Saluzzo and the subsequent discussions in class have therefore been very useful in developing sensitivity on the part of the students, which enables them to pick up the communicative aspects regarding in general the world of penalties. For example, in the museum, the last fifty years of the history of the prison in Saluzzo are recounted through the on-line archive of the Turin daily newspaper *La Stampa*²⁸. This is an enormous archive of written texts and images, which brings back to the light items of local news, judicial trials, prison revolts for prisoners' rights and legislative reforms, all told in the popular language of the mass-media. The students are called on to analyse individual incidents of this history, with special reference to juridical aspects. This didactic approach allows us to focus on the juridical phenomenon in the wider context of the social and institutional history of an area and then analyse the juridical rules regarding the prison and their implementation, in the environment known by sociologists of law as living law.

Conclusions

How do we answer, then, our original question: is it useful and legitimate to organise didactic visits for students to prisons and prison museums? I add in the question of ethical legitimacy, inasmuch as some students have advanced a lot of perplexity concerning visits to prisons, since they might harm the dignity of the convict and his/her right to privacy in the context of

extent by images and narrations originating from American culture, which has long enjoyed hegemony in the environment of the blockbuster cinema. This predominance has also appeared, to a less evident extent, in narrative (prisoners turned famous writers, such as Edward Bunker and Jack Henry Abbott spring to mind).

28 <http://www.lastampa.it/archivio-storico/index.jpp>

daily detention. This is a very serious objection, which many researchers tend to underestimate. The “zoological garden” effect²⁹ is a distraction that is always present in the visits to prisons. The precautions to avoid this effect are therefore very important and, in my opinion, they are the same that must be followed to make the visits useful from the didactic point of view and I will talk about this shortly. Given that, it seems significant to me that the argument about safeguarding the privacy of inmates, at least in Italy, has never been raised by the prisoners themselves nor by the associations that protect their rights, but by the prison administration, which has never, in all these years, shown itself to be very zealous in guaranteeing other rights of convicts³⁰. It is quite evident, then, that this is an instrumental exploitation of the privacy argument on their part, in order to prevent visitors coming into direct contact with persons closed up in the daily living spaces (habitable cells and corridors in the sections). It seems to be evident that it is not so much the inmates that are disturbed by the visits³¹, as the staff that are worried that access to certain detention areas may endanger the construction of the predetermined institutional ceremony.

The main criticism that has been put forward against the visits to prison and to prison museums is that such visits do not represent the reality of prison and de-humanise the prisoners through genuine “screenplays” constructed ad hoc by the prison administration. The visitors, in this manner, take on a voyeuristic attitude towards the prison world and they are substantially reaffirmed in the stereotypes that the popular culture has built up around them. The undoubted suppression of the prisoners’ right to privacy, caused by the visits, would then not be compensated for by the achievement of didactic goals, above all the elaboration of a critical view towards the total institution reality.

If we transfer these considerations to the Italian experience, which I have managed to experiment with, we have to note immediately that this screenplay on the part of the prison administration is much more informal

29 This expression was used by Loïc Wacquant (2002), who also concluded his reflections with a favourable position on the visits to prison, or rather deploring the fact that this practice had declined over recent years.

30 It is sufficient to recall that it was the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg that reminded the Italian prison administration of its duty to observe the fundamental rights of the convict with its famous, so-called, Torreggiani sentence of 8 January 2013.

31 On the contrary, many of them show sincere satisfaction with the visits and consider them as a tool, even though limited, for communication towards the outside and to have their voices heard by young people who do not know prison. This attitude seems to be confirmed, at least partially, also by research in the U.S. which has dealt with the subject: cf. C. Minogue (2003 and 2009), more critical E. Dey (2009).

and improvised on the spur of the moment by the individual prison. These characteristics make the screenplay rather fragile in masking the reality of the total institution; they are camouflage strategies that can be overridden, sometimes even with a simple request for information, as we saw in the visit to the brewery in the prison of Saluzzo. Furthermore, such strategies, in order to pursue the goal of presenting the prison as a place of employment and of re-education, require selection of prisoners who can speak to the visitors, which hardly corresponds to the stereotype of the violent individual who is dangerous and culturally crude. The paradoxical effect is therefore that the visitor-student is often struck by the humanity and depth of the thoughts and accounts heard during the visit and therefore comes out of it convinced that the representation of the popular culture relating to the prisoner is mostly over-simplistic.

The screenplays of the visits not only prove to be rather improvised, but they themselves may be subjected to study and reflection on the part of the student visitors. And here we get to the precautions that have to be taken by the teacher, in order to avoid the negative effects of the visits. The visits, in actual fact, must be preceded and, especially, followed up by explanatory lessons, which have the aim of introducing the student to the critical knowledge of the world of total institutions. The visitor-student, even before the visit, has to be put into a condition to be able to stay clear of the prejudices that the popular culture has instilled into him/her concerning the world of prison. His/her view must be that of the ethnographer and not that of the “tourist”³², which the post-modern society has made so widespread. This will allow the student to pick up details and interpret what he/she sees in a very different way from how a visitor who is not equipped and is lacking in sociological and juridical knowledge of prison would see it. What will be decisive, however, is the discussion and re-elaboration following the visit led by the teacher involved. The theoretical concepts explained in class have a much greater impact on the student when it has been possible to test them before his/her own eyes. Once Goffman’s concept of institutional ceremony has been described in class, the student can test in person how that concept takes form in the material context of the prison, as well as appreciating its nuances and the relational dynamics. Once the formal content of the principles and of the rules that regulate the detention punishment has been described in class, the student can appreciate how that content can sometimes be overturned by the dynamics of power of the prison. The visit to prison activates the student’s emotive sphere, both through the human relationship, however limited, that can be initiated with detained persons and members

32 The concept of “tourist gaze” is applied to the visits to prisons by Michelle Brown (2009, 97 ss.), but was also developed by John Richard Urry (1990).

of the staff, and through the sensorial impression that the visitor gains from the set of images, sounds and odours that make up the context of prison. The same can be said when the visit is made to a prison museum, especially when, as in the case of the *Museum of prison memory* in Saluzzo, it is housed in ancient prison structures, with their disquieting, grim aspect, where there are also on display poor objects from the prison life, which evoke the daily deprivations and occasional violence suffered by the prisoners³³.

The capacity of the teacher for commenting after the visit on the emotive impressions absorbed by the students is that of bringing such impressions back to the rational, reflective sphere. The group discussion, if possible starting from written reports on the impressions gained from the visit, can be an excellent context in which to develop reflections and exchange opinions on what has been seen. The screenplay of the visit developed by the prison administration can be, in this manner, analysed in detail in its aspects of construction of prison reality, in order to bring out the cultural and organisational culture of the staff that produced it. The spectacle is no longer a screen that prevents appreciation of the underlying reality, but becomes itself a subject for study.

In conclusion, I believe it can be stated that the Turin experience of didactic visits to prisons and prison museums, as long as the precautions described in this essay are adopted, can represent a didactic tool that can become a fully effective part of so-called experiential learning. It is a set of didactic tools (legal clinic, training courses, operation of juridical information desks, moot courts etc.) which, when applied to teaching of criminal justice, has demonstrated undoubted benefits for students of law: increased sense of social responsibility of the role of jurist, greater connections between theoretical law teaching and its practical effects, increase in critical sense and in the knowledge of the methods with which the legal professions operate, greater capacities for identifying conceptual and practical links between the various subjects of law etc. (A.S. Burke, M.D. Bush, 2013; M. George et al., 2015). There is no reason why these positive didactic results may not be achieved also with visits to the prisons and the museums which “celebrate” their history.

33 As part of the visit to the Museum of Saluzzo, what always leaves a great impression on the students is the display of two strait jackets, used for “rebel” prisoners, at least up until the last decade of the last century. Compare to the concept of “atmosphere” created by museums of prison the interesting observations developed by J. Turner, K. Peters (2015).

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