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Juveniles in Detention: Narratives from Prison and Imprisoned Narratives

Gilles CHANTRAINE does research at the CNRS-CLERSÉ. He discusses some findings from a qualitative study on youths detained in France's three « juvenile detention wings », conducted in 2007-2008 within the CESDIP, for an analysis and understanding of their social trajectories and how they relate, subjectively, to confinement.

This study is an attempt to render and analyse 20 biographic narratives by juveniles detained in the juvenile detention wings of two short-term prisons (*maisons d'arrêt*) and one larger correctional facility (*centre pénitentiaire*). The data collected enabled us to turn from questions about criminal « acting-out » and « meaning of punishment » to an analysis of individual histories of relationship to prison, and of the institutional functioning of juveniles' wings, how power is exerted there, and how prisoners cope with it. This methodological stance brought out information on the ordinary, commonplace, everyday experience of prisoners, both from a biographical and an institutional perspective. As in our previous studies of prisons¹, juvenile detention wings were viewed as a passageway, a place where individual destinies converge. As such, this passageway is not devoid of significance for the actor; custody, a very particular episode in a person's existence, forces incarcerated individuals to « do some biographical work », during which the past, present, and future take new shapes, and through which they must redefine their vision of themselves.

Methodology and problematics

The survey was based on an original method, consisting of a series of biographic interviews with incarcerated juveniles, which were sought out again several months after their release (between 2 and 6 months, depending on the possibilities) for a second interview. To be able to apply this method to 20 narratives, it was therefore necessary to conduct over sixty interviews in prison, so as to anticipate the unavoidable post-release attrition of interviewees. The twenty youths in the second series of interviews were experiencing a great variety of situations. First of all, forced confinement as such had not necessarily ended: some youths had returned to prison ($n = 3$), had their detention prolonged ($n = 1$), or been sent to a reform school of some sort – CER (*centre d'éducation renforcée*, intensified education centre) or CEF (*centre d'éducation fermé* a reform school) ($n = 3$). Others had been sent to a halfway house ($n = 4$) or placed with a foster family ($n = 1$). Last, even those youths who were able to return home or live with a member of their family ($n = 8$) were almost always in an uncertain penal situation, awaiting trial and/or fearing that some other, earlier offences would eventually surface.

This set-up enabled us to at least partially fill the gap in sociological knowledge about prison. Relatively few investigations have dwelt on how juveniles experience prison life, but there is absolutely nothing about the concrete experience of leaving prison. We therefore lack answers to such all-important questions as, how is release on parole experienced? How is going from a prison to a reform school experienced? Is it preferable, from the juvenile offender's viewpoint, to « do one's time » in prison, or to agree to an adjusted sentence that does get you out of prison but may lengthen the period over which you are in the hands of the criminal justice system? What is the concrete nature of the social stigma associated with detention? Does going to prison win you prestige? Does the pathogenic nature of incarceration leave traces on youths following their release? Does coming of age change things? How do youths really view their prospects after release, behind the mask they sometimes have to put on for their educator? Is the retrospective perception of one's prison stay determined by custodial conditions, or more by the conditions of release? In other words, since there are different ways of « doing one's time », what are the different ways of « doing one's release »? In the absence of an answer to all these questions, we will confine ourselves to the description of some findings.

¹ CHANTRAINE G., 2004, *Par-delà les murs. Trajectoires et expériences en maison d'arrêt*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France-Le Monde.

Relating to Confinement: a Typology

The first objective was to grasp and render the proper nature of prison careers and experiences. Secondly, analysis aimed at an *ad hoc* elaboration of a Weberian typology of subjective relations to confinement. According to Weber, each type corresponds to a form accentuating a single aspect of reality, which then

serves to recompose that reality by measuring deviations from that construction. Not aiming at classification, the interplay and dynamic combination of different ideal-types should make it possible to describe the most singular experiences, using a unified conceptual toolbox. In this case, we will simply give a brief presentation of the typology, without going into the great variety of potential combinations.

Juveniles in detention: biographic relations with prison

Relations to confinement	Typical situations
A biographical disruption <i>(disruption in one's social or personal identity)</i>	Biographical accident
	Penal risk perceived but under-estimated
	Unaware of the penal risk
Inevitability <i>(personal and/or collective and/or family destiny)</i>	Innocent
	That's the way it is
	Rite of passage
	An unavoidable and/or necessary « pause »
	Putting the brake on
	Becoming a professional offender

Disruption(s)

The « biographical disruption » category is a narrative from a minority of youths who find themselves in detention without any criminal record, or even any particular contact with the police, before the present charge (such as armed car theft or burning a bus). Above all, the imprisonment takes the family by surprise, with socially well-integrated parents discovering that their child is a delinquent. This means that the disruption mostly affects the youth's social identity: it disrupts his social image among people around him.

With respect to personal identity – the youth's image of himself – four typical situations are found. In the first, the social disruption is also a break in personal identity (personal and social identity are one and the same). The typical case is the youth who had not committed any offense, but was incarcerated following a car accident. The incarceration is narrated here as a « biographical accident », no pun intended. In the second situation, the youth was involved in offending and was aware of a penal risk, but never imagined that he might end up in prison. These narrations are often punctuated by an accusation: « they didn't give me a chance ». In other words, the penal risk was perceived but under-estimated. In the third, infrequent situation, the youth was involved in offending (violence among peers, for instance), but seems completely ignorant of the penal risks he ran. Last, the youth claims to be innocent, and is more combative in fighting the symbolic degradation and the stigma associated with criminal charges and imprisonment.

All in all, when incarceration is narrated as a disruption, it represents a social shock which may nevertheless be cushioned by the youth's ability to develop good relations with the guards, and to gain access to various activities, thus reducing the time spent alone in his cell. But this type of narrative says nothing about their particular adjustment to the prison world. Some are isolated, and constantly run the risk of becoming « victims » during their detention – in other words, of being bullied by other prisoners, who have developed a shared territorial affiliation. Others, conversely, soon learn to outsmart the traps of prison life, and are able to participate in the different activities available in prison without experiencing any significant fear.

When his family is supportive and active (in visiting, contacting a lawyer, sending money), the youth may retain the invaluable impression of having at least some hold on the penal process. Release from prison, often in the form of release prior to trial (since most of the youths interviewed were in pre-trial detention), provides an opportunity for the youth and his family to make greater educational efforts, which will weigh on the final sentence. It is a matter of giving confinement the status of a « biographical parenthesis »; that is to limit the attendant stigma (by hiding the detention from his little brothers, and his milieu, for instance) and to resume normal life, as much as possible (through a training program, for instance). Parents who participate financially by paying a lawyer to defend the juvenile offender are attempting to make his penal future less uncertain.

Inevitability

Most experiences differ from narratives of disruption (but may be intertwined with these, since life stories are never free of contradictions) in that they reveal an overall relation to confinement as something unavoidable. What is meant here, first and foremost, is a peculiar dynamics of the narrative: prison is depicted as an inevitable or normal episode in one's life. The narration then sets forth what Bourdieu calls a « destiny effect ». This destiny effect may take a personal, collective, and/or family form.

Personal Destiny

The youth alleges his many handicaps: poverty, dropping out of school, uproofing, numerous convictions for offences related to poverty, to the necessities of survival. Offending and its specific pleasures (adrenalin, money, partying), central to this kind of narrative, may be depicted as « choices », but the story of that choice is not set against any alternative. The choice is not a free one, then. An alternative is occasionally mentioned, however: that of living honestly but miserably. The rejection of a drop in status, of poverty and survival on welfare add some further kick to the inevitability story: if you don't want to be destitute, the only option open to you is offending.

The inevitability narrative appears under two guises, then. Either it is explicit: the youth clearly states that he knew he would go to prison, that there was no escaping it; or it is implicit, which perhaps further reinforces its sociological significance. Here, inevitability is not narrated as such, but is in fact integrated in *the way things go*. The actors' tactics, strategies, and resistance, if not to say their choices, are a part of an overall story that negates them. For example: a first imprisonment following many convictions, possibly with stays in halfway houses and/or coercive institutions such as a CER or a CEF, is naturally integrated in the narrative; it is striking, here, to discover how these youths hate the first halfway houses to which they were sent, described as fear-inducing and criminogenic, and therefore as « biographical transfer hubs » leading to prison. Another example is a young drug addict who could not imagine any solution other than prison as a way of putting an end to his addiction. Here, custody takes the form of an unavoidable, necessary « pause ». In other situations, it is perceived as unavoidable (as the consequence of drifting into delinquency, for instance), and/or as a way of « stepping on the brake », in which case the youth has assimilated the discourse often heard among youth workers and judges. Prison

may then enable the youth to consider a change in trajectory, without giving him the social levers necessary for true social integration, as will be shown below.

Faced with the impression that their route is inescapable, the actors formulate two sorts of (not necessarily mutually exclusive) criticism. In the first formulation, the « system » is viewed as an intangible whole with which the person has been socially and personally familiar for years, and the problem is to « do what you can » (try not to be caught, know what to say to the judge, manage to get tobacco in prison, and so on). Court supervised education and the criminal justice system are part of these youth's social universe, and they do not envision the possibility of any other one. There may be tactical resistance and peripheral criticism (one or another of the judge's decisions is said to be absurd, some arbitrary decision in prison is denounced, a sentence is judged excessive, or « unjustified »), but this social universe is rarely called into question more broadly. Conversely, in the second formulation, the analysis of the delinquent career gradually becomes politicised. The narratives then contain « the State », « France » that you will « fuck ». Some repressive policies may be severely criticised, as well as the lack of prospects for « kids from the projects » (« *jeunes des cités* »). However, the degree of conceptualisation of this political criticism is lesser than in the prison wings for adults we have studied previously. It may be hypothesised that if these youths further spend time in prisons as adults, their critical political vision of the way illegalisms and crime are handled will be strengthened.

Collective Destiny

This possible politicisation is also symptomatic of a much broader process: personal experience is also a collective experience. Le Caisne's study² of social life in p is a good description of how these youths situate their individual, judicial and custodial history in the framework of a collective experience. The collective nature of prison may be illustrated by the importance of their meeting up with old acquaintances when they arrive in prison, and throughout their stay. Ascribing a collective dimension to what they are going through enables these

youths to attenuate the seriousness of the correctional experience: « *they try to take the drama out of their presence in prison and to make their individual experience and trajectory less unusual, integrating them in a culture and life style typifying youths of their sort* »³. (...) « *The boys construct symbolic, affirmative communities which enable them to account for their behaviour without having to call themselves into question. That way their offences are not connected with the morals of an individual, but with that of his group, neighbourhood, and culture* »⁴.

Similarly, Le Caisne shows the ties between inmates are so strong that the culture they bring with them to prison will hardly be disturbed, and the institution will actually hardly have any effect on them. Meeting up with old acquaintances produces a peer group, source of prestige and social strength within the prison, while creating a bridge between inside and outside. Ties between inmates therefore provide protection against the all-invasive character of prison, since they mitigate its possible depersonalising and stigmatising effects.

Our own findings corroborate these conclusions, to a large extent, and show how collectivisation of the experience is also a way of shielding off violence by other inmates. A group of this sort may turn into the « bully » of « victims » in detention. Such bullying should no doubt be viewed in the light of the specific values of that particular group, but it is also a product of the very structure of the institution, the effort of which to control it being ineffective, and also because it enables groups to improve their living conditions and to control space.

Collectivisation of the experience also helps in anticipating forthcoming incarcerations. Surprisingly in this respect, the youths were able to make very precise comparisons between the organisation of prison wings for juveniles and those for adults, including the relations between inmates and guards, the activities available, rights, and so on. Collectivisation of the experience gave them advanced knowledge about prison for adults. Others, conversely, thought that a stay in prison when you are still under-age will no doubt help you not to go back as an adult: « if you want to fuck around, it's better to do it now ». In other words, since a life without prison is inconceivable, the thing to do is to manage to avoid it being even worse.

Sharing the experience is also a way of contrasting « those who go to prison for nothing » and those who go there for « lots of money », which shows, among other things, a criminal professionalisation process. The idea is to get out of paltry offending and to become the ini-

tiator of one's own career by turning to more lucrative, more « penal-proof » activities. Last, this collective destiny typically finds its expression in the claim some youths make that you have to go to prison to « become a man ». Prison then constitutes a genuine *rite of passage*, necessary to construct and prove one's virility.

Family Destiny

We were not able to delve more deeply into this dimension, although several narratives did bring out a familial relation to prison. Other actors enter the story: an uncle, a brother, a father, who did time, sometimes more than once, sometimes for a long sentence. This family dimension then compounds the collective dimension of the destiny effect. It also, conversely, gives the youth the idea that he will probably cease to return to prison some day. That far-off prospect of leaving the prison circuit paradoxically reinforces the normalcy of the trajectory, with the impression that there is nothing to be done: the trajectory has to take its course, to the end. The family destiny narrative mentions other typical correctional careers, to which one may refer: sometimes it's a brother « who managed to get off the hook », and who now has « a wife, a job, and a car ».

Trajectories of Confinement

In a second series of talks, we questioned the young inmates about their life after their release from prison. These interviews show that irrespective of whether prison is narrated as an unavoidable passage or as a break in their life, it definitely is not a phase that puts an end to their court supervised itinerary. The detention period is not a means of evening themselves off with the justice system, but the starting place for the restructuring of the youth's penal career. Custody is a multiplier of penal uncertainty. Although uncertainty often exists before incarceration, it is nonetheless reinforced by the threat of imprisonment, now much more forceful. The youth knows he runs the risk of returning to prison, either for the same case or for another one, but he does not know when, or for how long.

Detention also produces an existential and biographic dead end. Indeed, many narratives stress the « wish of social reintegration », the desire not to return to prison, and so forth. But these statements seem either to be stereotyped (that's the « correct » thing to say) or to be disconnected from the actor's actual capacity to take the initiative. It is that gap between dreams and hopes on the one hand, and the objective situation on the other, that accounts for the radical ambivalence that often structures these

² LE CAISNE L., 2008, *Avoir 16 ans en prison*, Paris, Seuil.

³ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 88. See also HACHEM SAMI Y., 2005, *Les jeunes et les IPPJ : « Jusqu'ici tout va bien ? »*, in CHRISTIAENS J., DE FRAENE D., DELENS RAVIER I., (dir.), *Protection de la jeunesse. Formes et réformes. Jeugdbescherming. Vormen en hervormingen*, *École des Sciences Criminologiques*. Léon Cornil, Bruxelles, Bruylant, 167.

narratives: the desire for social integration on the one hand, with the fear of returning to prison, and the feeling that one will possibly, or even probably return to prison, on the other. Measured by these uncertainties and dead ends, prison may be perceived as useless (it in no way changes the conditions that led the youth into it), producing a dead end (recidivism is judged unavoidable), criminogenic (it turns you into a professional offender; it hardens you), and stigmatising (therefore making you more fragile).

One overall finding stands out in the biographic wealth of those narratives: for many inmates, the time spent in prison only becomes meaningful within a *trajectory of confinement*. What is meant in this expression is not only the inmate's trajectory in detention (the shock at arrival, adjustment, preparing for release, and so on), or the various kinds of institutional confinement (CER, CEF) possibly preceding or following detention. More broadly, and more fundamentally, we would emphasise the way these trajectories are narrated by their main protagonists as inescapable destinies. Confinement to a territory, confinement in

one's own biography (poverty, school drop-out): these narratives revolve around the inability to change one's life. Often, the only story about getting some control over one's life takes the form of becoming a professional offender, which means going from street crime to more profitable, better organised sorts of crime. Because of the suffering it brings about, prison makes you dream of another life, but it does not (or only extremely rarely) reinforce the actors' capacity to take initiatives, which would make that change of lifestyle possible.

In that sense, the analysis of the life stories of young inmates corroborates the classical finding of prison sociology, showing the distance between the « founding myth » of penal imprisonment— according to which prison participates in the rehabilitation and social reintegration of convicted offenders – and the concrete reality of confinement⁵. This analysis also questions the present-day political contention that emphasising juvenile offenders' « criminal responsibility » is the best response to delinquency. The point is that these narratives do not indicate efforts by actors to excuse their

acts, but rather point to their dispossession of the social backing required for the construction of their individuality, and therefore for standing in a position to be responsible. Basically, those people who are most enjoined to be responsible are those who are deprived of the support they require to be in a position to conform with that injunction⁶.

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CHANTRAINE G., (dir.), Coll. TOURAUT C., FONTAINE S., 2008, *Trajectoires d'enfermement. Récits de vie au quartier mineur*, Guyancourt, CESDIP, Collection « Études et Données Pénales », n° 106 (on line: <http://www.cesdip.fr/spip.php?article408>).

⁵ FAUGERON C., LE BOULAIRE J.M., 1992, Prisons, peines de prison et ordre public, *Revue Française de Sociologie*, 33, 1, 3-32.

⁶ MARTUCCELLI D., 2004, Figures de la domination, *Revue Française de Sociologie*, 45, 3, 473-497.