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Detention

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State detention is an institutionalized and centralized form of social control born within Western modernity. It developed, paradoxically, as a utilitarian, reformist, and humanistic project of punitive response to crime in the eighteenth century, against the death penalty and penal colonies. While Chicago sociologists entered the prison in the 1930s and studied it as a “small society” with its hierarchies and different roles, anthropologists started studying detention only when the ideal of the encounter with alterity gave place to research “at home” since the 1980s.

Detention is both a political and a social process—a lived experience occurring in various institutions: penitentiaries, maximum security prisons, psychiatric units, immigration removal centers, military or security intelligence prisons, juvenile correctional facilities, and so on. These institutions categorize and define the population they target, and produce an understanding of the social problems they deal with: crime, delinquency, mental illness, migration control, terrorism. Anthropologists have looked at how these institutions think, and at the texture of life inside them. Depending on the access to the field and the researcher’s position, empirical investigations focus on practices, agents, and technologies of power or on detainees’ experiences, social worlds, and communities. Inspired by Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1977), some analyze the apparatus of detention and how those exposed to it (re)define or experience themselves as subjects. Ultimately, these investigations all question the sense and social functions of detention: Is the prison a reflection of broader social forces in the way detainees are brought in and treated (Wacquant 2009)? Is it a warehouse of violence (Fleisher 1989)? Is it a self-perpetuating,

flourishing, industrial complex (Rhodes 2004)? As a social fact, an experience, and an object of study, detention challenges many limits: that of state power and the rule of law, that between delineated insides and outsides, as well as that of ethnography itself.

The state and the rule of law

Since the 1980s, detention has expanded worldwide in size, power, and complexity (Rhodes 2004). New technologies of surveillance have emerged and new practices of detention, such as immigration detention, have developed. Extensive data show (1) an increase in incarceration and a repressive turn in legislation, leading to prison overcrowding; and (2) the racial and social homogeneity and subalternity of inmates. This evolution has raised new questions on criminalization and detention as a strategy of governance and a differential management of social, racial, and economic exclusion (Wacquant 2009).

Multiple actors intervene in detention: their everyday practices, moral classifications, and professional ethos shape, and are in turn shaped by, the penitentiary world, opening on a critical ethnography of the state and bureaucracy. These spaces perform and produce understandings of state power, authority, and sovereignty. But they also witness normalization through supranational norms and standards for a “more humane” treatment, new and global managerial practices, totalizing surveillance technologies, privatization and subcontracting, and a political economy that partakes of neoliberal governmentality.

These organizations entail distinctive modes of subjectification. Detention categories and practices (re)produce gender subordination and use gender humiliation as a tool of control: they affect self-definitions of womanhood and manhood. Subjectification has also been explored in relation to the manipulation of the body as a locus of resistance (e.g., through hunger strike or automutilation). But inmates’ bodies are also a site of inscription of state power through solitary confinement and torture. In contexts of political violence, memory work and

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life narratives pointed to prisons as a recurrent component of administrative, intelligence, and military repression, shaping the government of populations through terror (e.g., in Argentina, Greece, Iran, and also in occupied Afghanistan and Iraq). Underpinning allegations of human rights violations, these studies, together with works on detention in Western liberal states' military prisons (Guantanamo) or aliens' detention centers, raise the question of state violence in spaces of exception and the relations between violence and the rule of law.

Inside/outside

While it is a separation in space, detention is often experienced through time: suspended, distorted, void. But, beyond closed spaces of confinement and Goffmanian "total institutions" (1961), prisons are porous, permeable spaces studied in terms of circulations in time and space. At a spatial level, detention is crossed by extramural worlds and opens up on neighborhoods, informal or moral communities, and kinship, which it can reshape in turn. Symmetrically, inmates' families living outside are swallowed into confinement, experiencing its discipline and constraints. At a temporal level, detention is analyzed in relation to a "before" (the criminal justice organization and public policies producing hyperincarceration) and an "after" (the horizon of rehabilitation or sometimes a death sentence). At an institutional level, the carceral-assistential continuum that shapes the penal state combines the worlds of social work and the criminal justice-detention apparatus. Likewise, multiple sites of detention draw together an archipelago that delineates marginal spaces of circulation for unauthorized migrants.

Ethnography

In the study of detention, ethnographic methods of interviews, observation, life stories,

self-narratives, and autoethnography ("convict criminology") have expanded in other disciplines (sociology, criminology, penology, geography). However, the opacity and coercive environment of detention challenges research methods and ethics. Detention facilities are bureaucratic and hyperregulated spaces; access to the field needs to be negotiated and is always revocable. The researcher is usually seen as threatening the control of information and has to deal with security and surveillance issues. At the same time, s/he needs the cooperation of detention staff. Establishing trust with inmates while facing suspicion by antagonistic actors and negotiating ways of leading unrestricted observations or confidential interviews are other obstacles to overstep. Anthropologists have to navigate between different groups and power structures while constantly objectifying their position, not only in regards to how their knowledge is produced, but also to how, why, and by whom it is used.

SEE ALSO: Biopolitics; Biopower; Deportation; <DRAFT: Ethics in field research>; Foucault, Michel (1926–84); <DRAFT: Law and anthropology>; Participant Observation; Political Anthropology; Security; <DRAFT: State of exception>; States; Violence, Structural and Interpersonal

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ABSTRACT

State detention is an institutionalized and centralized form of social control born within Western modernity. It is both a political and a social process that occurs in various institutions, which categorize the population they target and produce an understanding of social problems: delinquency, mental illness, migration control, terrorism. Anthropologists have looked at how these institutions think and at the texture of life inside them. Depending on the researcher's access to and position in the field, empirical investigations focus on agents and technologies of power or on detainees' experiences and social worlds. These investigations all question the sense and social functions of detention. Since the 1980s, detention has expanded worldwide in size, power, and complexity. New technologies of surveillance and practices of detention, such as immigration detention, have emerged. This evolution raises questions on criminalization and detention as a strategy of governance and a differential management of social, racial, and economic exclusion.

KEYWORDS

political anthropology; research methods; social control; state; violence