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SAN QUENTIN 94974— THE EVERYDAY PRISON

Sited on 275 acres of prime real estate on one of the peninsula waterfronts of Marin County, the California State Prison at San Quentin overlooks the north side of San Francisco Bay and is a visible reminder that San Francisco is surrounded by a ring of penal institutions. San Quentin State Prison is California's oldest and best-known penitentiary. Founded in the tumultuous days of the Gold Rush in 1852, it is one of the largest prisons in the United States with a current population of over 5,000 inmates. The prison has had a tempestuous history marked by recurrent waves of repression, rebellion, and reform from the early scandal-ridden days of the mid 1800s¹ through the eras of 'New Penology,' the 'Big House' model, the turn to 'warehouse' and supermax prisons, to the present.² Having confined some legendary inmates, San Quentin's notoriety derives not least from housing the largest death row in the U.S., as well as California's only gas chamber.

But the prison is also unique in a different respect: it is home to a substantial number of volunteer programs, including the only on-site college degree-granting program in California's entire prison system, run by the Prison University Project.³ The Prison University Project's College Program provides approximately twelve college courses each semester in the humanities, social sciences, mathematics and science, as well as intensive

college preparatory courses in mathematics and English, to approximately 200 men at San Quentin.⁴

Teaching in a prison setting is strange and peculiar, especially for new instructors, because it involves transposing the setting of a classroom—with its implicit, though often unredeemed, promise of academic freedom, free inquiry, unimpeded speech, and candid debate—into a blatantly coercive environment. It is tempting to imagine this classroom, with its pedagogic routines, procedures, and practices, as an island of free learning and of intellectual and personal growth in a sea of crude and violent penalty; and indeed, this is often how the college program is figured and described by inmate students. Yet the narrative of the prison classroom as a haven and refuge overlooks the ways in which prison education is mobilized by the California Department of Correction and Rehabilitation (CDCR) to produce the penitentiary as a ‘normal’ space, to generate what we might call the *prison normal*. This prison normal is partly generated by the disciplinary apparatus, the tedious monotony of routines, procedures, and practices that produce the experience of prison as ordinary and quotidian. But it also draws on volunteer programs, such as the Prison University Project, in order to convey the sense of the penitentiary as commonplace, as the site of plain, nondescript, run-of-the-mill classrooms. To the public and to the California taxpayers, the prison presents itself as an exceptional space, a spectacle where dangerous, sociopathic criminals are locked up behind bars and where intrepid correctional officers perform the unpleasant role of keeping California safe. Yet to the inside, the prison is concerned to project an image of ordinariness, of regularity, and of dull, bland routines.

How is the everyday produced at San Quentin? What is the relation between the prison's norm and its exception, i.e. between the routine regularity of the prison normal and the threat of officially sanctioned violence embodied and spatialized in iron gates, prison walls, and death row? How, in short, does the prison manage the contradictory space of a routinized machinery of coercion combined with an architecture suffused with spectacular violence?

The manufacture of the prison normal is not, of course, a new phenomenon. Sixty years ago, prison warden Clinton T. Duffy described the relation between the ordinary and the spectacle in the following terms:

Just the other day I happened to be at the main gate—it isn't really much of a gate, because any kid with a jalopy could knock it down—when an old-time burglar came back from a sort of sabbatical leave spent in one of the Eastern penitentiaries. It was a beautiful day; the tide on San Francisco Bay was high and the water was lapping at the San Quentin shore while the sea-gulls floated lazily in the sky. The hills around the prison were green and lush with spring flowers, and down on the rocks a couple of our own town youngsters were idly fishing for bass. That day, at least, San Quentin justified its reputation—the opinion of permanent guests notwithstanding—as one of the prettiest pieces of real estate in Marin County. As we walked up the long cement walk bordering the water between the gate and my office, the old man began to look around incredulously. The yellow gun towers on the hill, which once stood guard like soldiers and whose

deadly marksmen had winged more than one fleeing man, were cobwebbed and empty. Along the street—our Main Street—dozens of men were working on various projects, and I spoke to some of them by name, asking about their wives and families and how the kids were getting along in school. Their work clothes were blue and neatly pressed, and the tell-tale shirt numbers were gone. There wasn't a guard in sight, and they were talking like workmen in any other town, in a language anyone could understand.

“They don't look like no cons to me,” the old-timer said suspiciously.

“They're not,” I said. “They're inmates. We don't use the word convict around here any more, and they won't let you forget it.”

We walked on towards the admission gate, where the old Spanish buildings, once a muddy grey, now sparkled in fresh green paint. In a large sunny room just to the right of the gate a dozen civilians were patronising the San Quentin Hobby Counter, a retail shop as modern and well stocked with handmade goods as any similar store outside. In the visitors' room beyond we could see inmates talking, laughing, or clasping hands across the tables with their sweethearts and wives. There was a poster on the wall listing the prison's week-end movie fare, and from somewhere inside we could hear the prison orchestra rehearsing the latest bebop. For a moment, the old-timer was speechless,

and at last he turned to go inside with the officer who brought him.

“Movies, jazz bands, department stores!” he muttered. “No gun towers on the hill, no shirt numbers! Dammit, Warden, I ain’t gonna like having to like this place. It’s just a trick to make me work. I shouldn’t have to come here.”

I wondered how the old man would feel after he got inside, because I knew he had much more to see. He would find the black dungeons gone, with the straps and rubber hose, and would see that none of the guards had clubs. He would hear about the movies and the quiz shows on Condemned Row and how the men there forget the shadow of death with chess tournaments, impromptu concerts, or just bull sessions in the long airy hall where they gather every day. He would find himself eating hot meals from a cafeteria tray, and there would be no gun guard restlessly pacing the catwalk over his head. He would no longer be cut off from the world in his cell, for he would find a radio headset there, or a copy of the new prison biweekly with all the big house news. He would no longer hear the metallic march of many gun guards on the cell-block rail, and he could smoke tailor-made cigarettes or cigars bought with his own earnings from the New San Quentin Canteen without getting into a jam. He would find he could leave his cell after dark and walk unescorted to night school, or to the big mess hall to watch the San Quentin All-Stars play their basketball rivals from towns across the bay. If he had

been known as a drunk, the Alcoholics Anonymous group would soon sign him up, or if he were interested in the motivations of crime, he might find some answers in the Seeker's club. He might even get elected to the prison's "house of representatives" and discuss important inmate problems in a big hall where no guard goes unless he is invited by the men. And he might see me walking alone through thousands of so-called "dangerous" men in the yard—men going out tomorrow, and men who will never be free, the bad men and the good men of my town. He might even tell me I'm crazy to take the risk. But I don't need any guards for that walk. I never will. San Quentin is my home, and these are my people.⁵

This excerpt is drawn from the memoirs of Clinton T. Duffy, who served as warden of San Quentin State Prison between 1940 and 1952. At the end of his tenure, he wrote an account of his experience, chronicling the change of the penitentiary from a medieval bastion of cruelty into a humane and progressive correctional institution. The book aims to inform and instruct, and set the record straight regarding what a prison looks like from the inside. Duffy wrote these lines in 1951, at a time when the California Department of Corrections ran seven institutions with a total inmate population of around 11,000.⁶ Sixty years later, the renamed California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitations operates thirty-three adult prisons, eight juvenile facilities, over forty minimum custody camps, twelve community correctional facilities, five prisoner mother facilities that incarcerate over 170,000 prisoners and supervise over 120,000 parolees.⁷

Duffy was a reformist, and at the time, penal practices and discourses were once again governed by the ideal of rehabilitation.⁸ The 1950s heralded a new era in penology, what David Garland called “penal welfarism”.⁹ Prisons were transformed into institutions aimed at correction and rehabilitation in contrast to earlier emphases on retribution, physical abuse, and isolation. In the 1940s and 1950s, California was among the states attempting to (re-)introduce a rational, humanitarian penal system aimed at treating and curing felons of their criminality.¹⁰ But even in the context of his time, Duffy’s rendition is hyperbolic and distorted. Indeed, after reading Duffy’s blissful account, one may well be surprised to learn that the very last years of his tenure as warden saw a number of inmate revolts and strikes that were suppressed by overwhelming lethal force and that laid the groundwork for California’s radical prison movement.¹¹

As is clear from the idyllic rendition, the warden depicts the institution in highly idealized and ideological terms. But it is precisely as an ideological discourse, as a state discourse, that this portrayal of the prison is interesting and revealing. It is revealing because it demonstrates how the official narrative about prisons is caught between constituting the penal space as *normal* and at the same time *exceptional*. The warden, who is also the narrator of the story, takes the reader on a guided tour of the prison grounds; however, the fact that this is a scripted and highly restricted visit is camouflaged by a rather implausible yet at first sight not entirely unconvincing exchange between the warden and an “old-time burglar,” who is welcomed like a time-honored guest. The warden’s proud display of the prison’s new institutions, policies, and services highlights

how San Quentin is just like the outside with the only difference that it houses what he calls “permanent guests”. Its convicts have been turned into inmates and are treated like lodgers who, like any good American workers, take pride in their work, have happy family lives, and live in a town that boasts retail shops, entertainment facilities, a Main Street, and even a house of representatives. The message of this official penal discourse is that prison is an ordinary lived space of everyday experience that differs little from the outside, with the small exception that admission is not voluntary and that the gates are locked.

In this bucolic narrative, the prison emerges as a pastoral space; it remains coercive, but the coercion has soft edges. The lavish depiction of the physical environment as a rich and enchanted abundance—the tide lapping at the shore, the seagulls floating lazily in the sky, framed by lush green hills speckled with spring flowers while town youngsters are idly fishing on the rocks—outlines not only an extravagant setting for the prison but also functions as a rhetorical trope: the placid and mesmerizing environment stands in for the new harmonious spirit of the prison, a spirit of cooperation and understanding. The violence, brutality, and cruelty of previous prison regimes have been replaced by a humane and compassionate vision, a vision based on education, rehabilitation, and social reintegration.

The same mood is manifest in the visitor’s room, where inmates enjoy spending time with their loved ones. It should come as no surprise that the warden does not stop to consider how imprisonment affects inmates’ family lives and how the punishment inflicted on an inmate typically spreads and multiplies through the texture of families and communities.¹² Nor

does he mention, for that matter, how the imposition of a constantly changing mix of minor and major inconveniences and harassment on visitors in the name of security, propriety, and discipline, as well as the failure to provide minimum amenities for visitors' basic physical and hygienic needs produces them as second-class citizens.¹³ The emphasis on the family-friendly character of the penitentiary, for instance, stands in direct contrast to all the restrictions imposed on the items visitors can bring into the prison, which makes visiting with babies and toddlers especially cumbersome.¹⁴

Yet what is perhaps oddest about the warden's account is that it stands in stark contrast to San Quentin's architecture, which resembles a medieval fortress. As the oldest penitentiary in California, the state prison has a pre-panoptic architecture and campus-like layout. Initially planned as an "architectural marvel" with doric columns, arches, bell towers, and minarets, the original cell block (torn down in 1959) was built in an open Spanish-colonial style, without the giant shell building that typically encloses cell blocks in American prisons from the same period.¹⁵ Overcrowded from its very inception, the prison was never able to implement the silence and isolation of inmates required by the rehabilitation models of the Auburn and Philadelphia penitentiaries.¹⁶ Its architecture did, however, embody the military ideals of discipline, order, and control as well as the continuity of punishments. At San Quentin, state power is represented neither through visibility and optics, as in the panoptic structure of what John Irwin calls the "warehouse prison" nor through high security architecture.¹⁷ Rather, the prison was built to resemble a grim fortress; state power is embodied in spectacular artifacts like heavy oak doors with iron

lattices, two-foot thick brick walls, oversized dark iron keys that seem to come out of a Hollywood movie set.

How do we explain this tension between the narrative of normality and the heavy visual effect of these symbols of state power and coercion? Duffy's description aims to banalize these insignia of power, and it achieves this partly through its rendition of the physical environment, the bay, the seagulls, and the lush hills, which are portrayed as a profuse cornucopia of pleasurable sense experience, an experience so overwrought that it reads as intoxicating, as though the excess of beauty, pleasure, and serenity has to offset and counterbalance the power and the violence of punishment. As Duffy points out, the walls, iron-latticed gates, and massive keys are not directly functional for the incarceration process. This is even more accentuated sixty years later, when most prisons have an entire electronic security infrastructure including motion sensors, remotely controlled doors, CCTV monitoring, intercoms, and so on.

If the fortress design and its features fulfill no immediate function in the incarceration process, they must be understood as props; they are visual fixtures that 'stage' the prison. They produce a theatrical scene of imprisonment, one in which state power is dramatized in a dated medieval setting of fortresses, citadels, towers, and dungeons. The warden recounts the story of a bullet embedded in the wall of his own home: "The shot was fired by men who were trying to kill another warden some years ago, and it missed him by inches. I confess I have left the bullet deliberately—not so much as a warning to myself, but because it satisfies the morbid curiosity of some tax-paying visitors who might otherwise be disappointed in their penal system."¹⁸

I would like to suggest that it is for the same reason—to satisfy “the morbid curiosity of some tax-paying visitors who might otherwise be disappointed in their penal system”—that San Quentin maintains its theatrical stage design. The 30+ prisons built in California over the course of the past few decades are typically industrial prefabricated cities of concrete, steel, and razor wire. It would have been easy to replace San Quentin with a modern structure or even just to substitute some of its more arcane features—the useless heavy iron keys, for example—with high-tech security measures. That this was not done can only partially be explained by budget-saving measures.

Keally McBride has argued that public perceptions of punishment are crucial in the production of political legitimacy and sovereignty.¹⁹ For McBride, such perceptions mark the moment where the state needs to demonstrate the congruence between its penal practices and its avowed norms and ideals. Criticizing the tendencies in contemporary political theory to hypostasize sovereignty as an overwhelming and quasi-transcendent power (tendencies that she associates with Carl Schmitt, Giorgio Agamben, and Michel Foucault), McBride contends that sovereignty is fragile and unstable, and relies critically on representation to mask this vulnerability.²⁰ In light of this argument, we can interpret the prison warden’s reasoning for why he did not remove the bullet in his reception room as part of the production of public perceptions of the power to punish. By leaving the bullet lodged in his house, the warden satisfies not only the tax payers’ curiosity but the representational requirements of a particular mode of state power and violence. These requirements include the production and distribution of figures of murderous threats as well as the state responses. In other

words, the bullet hole and the iron-latticed gate in San Quentin's sally port participate in the same economy of representation.

In the enchanted picture painted by Duffy, there is no room for violence and cruelty. Indeed, violence is explicitly marked as exceptional. The gun towers are cobwebbed and empty, the gate is flimsy, the guards unarmed. There are no more black dungeons, no more gun guards on the catwalks, and even the unfortunate patrons on death row can enjoy movies, quiz shows, and forget that the state has slated them to be killed. And just as the inmates are no longer subject to violence, so the entire prison atmosphere has become cordial, so amiable that the warden addresses the inmates by name and walks among them without a security detail. But even in the bucolic and ideological picture painted by Clinton T. Duffy, the markers of violence remain, and their continuous presence indicates that there are representational requirements of sovereignty that need to be satisfied.

NOTES

- 1 For an account of the early history of the prison, see Kenneth Lamott, *Chronicles of San Quentin: The Biography of a Prison* (New York: David McKay, 1961).
- 2 John Irwin, *The Warehouse Prison: Disposal of the New Dangerous Class* (Los Angeles: Roxbury, 2005).
- 3 See <http://prisonuniversityproject.org/>
- 4 See Jody Lewen, "Academics Belong in Prison: On Creating a University At San Quentin," *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (2008): 689-95; Heather Jane McCarty, "Educating Felons: Reflections on Higher Education in Prison," *Radical History Review* 2006, no. 96 (2006): 87-94. On the early history of prison education at San Quentin, see Benjamin Justice, "'A College of Morals': Educational Reform At San Quentin Prison, 1880-1920," *History of Education Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2000): 279-301.
- 5 Clinton T. Duffy, *San Quentin: The Story of a Prison* (London: Peter Davies, 1951), 3-6.
- 6 California Department of Corrections, *California Prisoners: Summary Statistics of Prisoners Received and Released From Prisons and Parole 1951* (Sacramento, CA: Department of Corrections, 1952), 1.
- 7 It is notable, however, that between 1951 and 2008, the number of men incarcerated at San Quentin has remained remarkably stable. The CDC's 1951 report records 4,742 inmates for San Quentin; the 2008 report lists 5,256 and an occupancy ratio of 170%. But the overcrowded conditions at San Quentin go back to the very beginning of the prison. Already in the first years, the original cell block, laid out for 50 inmates, housed more than three times that number. California Department of Corrections, *California Prisoners and Parolees 2008: Summary Statistics on Adult Felon Prisoners and Parolees, Civil Narcotic Addicts and Outpatients and Other Populations* (Sacramento, CA: Department of Corrections and Rehabilitations, 2009), 11. See also Lamott, *Chronicles of San Quentin*, 29.
- 8 The idea of penal reform and of substituting education for punishment has been a recurrent feature in the history of the California prison system ever since the 1880s. See Justice, "'A College of Morals'."

- 9 David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 34-35.
- 10 Irwin, *The Warehouse Prison*, 35-38. The turn to rehabilitation was a return to an ideal that marked the idealism of the early American Republic and the turn against the punitive practices characteristic of the British monarchy. See David J. Rothman, "Perfecting the Prison: United States, 1789-1865," in *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*, ed. Norval Morris and David J. Rothman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 102; Keally McBride, *Punishment and Political Order* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 81-102.
- 11 Eric Cummins, *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 1-3.
- 12 John Hagan and Ronit Dinovitzer, "The Collateral Consequences of Imprisonment for Children, Communities, and Prisoners," *Crime and Justice* 26 (1999): 121-62.
- 13 Megan L. Comfort, "In the Tube At San Quentin: The 'Secondary Prisonization' of Women Visiting Inmates," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 32, no. 1 (2003): 77-107.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 99.
- 15 Lamott, *Chronicles of San Quentin*, 27-28.
- 16 Rothman, "Perfecting the Prison," 105-11.
- 17 Irwin, *The Warehouse Prison*.
- 18 Duffy, *San Quentin: The Story of a Prison*, 2-3.
- 19 McBride, *Punishment and Political Order*, 4.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 70-79.