The (post)-soviet prison subculture faced with the use of self-management doctrines by the corrections administration

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1 Perhaps it is because the Soviet correctional system was described by Soljhenitsyn, Shalamov, Rossi and many others at the height of its inhumanity that its subsequent evolution has elicited much less interest. The more or less shocking pictures coming out of Russian prisons today look a lot like the ordinary horrors of underdeveloped countries, so that they seem to be politically neutral and devoid of historical background. The economic difficulties of the former Soviet republics exonerate their governments of some of their responsibility to reform prisons. But the question arises of the extent to which these governments are capable of changing their correctional policies and of developing new kinds of relations with the modern equivalent of the “natives” of the flooded Archipelago.1 To answer it would require an understanding of changes in the social system of the “natives” between the late 1950s and the present.

2 Paradoxically, it was in the 1960s that stable dynamics of resistance2 to abusive administrative practices began to be seen within the prison population. It is in the early 1960s, too, that a specific prison subculture truly came into existence, with a strict stratification of inmates into hierarchical groups, establishing rituals and interdictions and easily suffusing the rest of society.

Post-totalitarian prisons

3 The existence of a “prison subculture” (Sykes, 1958, 84-108) is not at all surprising in itself, particularly since it may be understood in terms of “adjustment” (Goffman, 1968) of inmates to prison as a specific institution. However, the reason why it is particularly interesting to study the Russian/Soviet prison subculture is definitely the postulate that
“even an institution that seems to cut ‘individuals’ off from the outside world, its representations and its classifications [is only comprehensible within the framework of an implicit correspondence] between the internal order of the institutional world and the external order of societal structures” (Pinto, 1999, 10). Indeed, one peculiar feature of Soviet camps as “total institutions” seems to reside in the fact that its prisoners participate in an experience of subjugation that exceeds the institution by far. The means of subjugation used by the (post-)soviet corrections administration and those applied to society at large must therefore be studied concomitantly, the same being true of adjustment of both categories of individuals to these.

4 It is a fact that throughout its existence, the Soviet government, spurred by a combination of ideological motivations and practical considerations, did everything it could to submit individuals on both sides of the barbed wire through two ever-present instruments: work and collective life. These means of subjugation and the forms of adjustment they elicited were definitely different in penitentiaries and in society at large. This is particularly true of the way the zeks, as opposed to Soviet citizens outside of prison, adjusted by forming a more structured group in response to a more intense experience of subjugation through work and collective life. It may seem that the inmates’ adjustment is so structured because they are enmeshed in the symbolic system of a pre-existing prison subculture, were it not for the fact that the hard core of that prison subculture was, precisely, a particular relation to work and a particular conception of manly solidarity based on radical rejection of any cooperation with the administration.

5 Whence another peculiarity of the Russian/Soviet prison subculture: since it constitutes a coherent overall adjustment to subjugation through work and collective life, an experience it shares with society as a whole, this prison subculture acquired a degree of relevance and legitimacy outside the penitentiaries. This simply adds to the problems encountered today by those who want to reform the Russian prison system by attempting to introduce a new type of relations between the administration and zeks, oriented toward establishing a less perverse kind of public space—which is to say, one which would not be instrumentalized by the administration, a public space whose only goal would not be to institutionalize denunciation and to “elevate it to a civic virtue” (Rossi, 1997, 179)—if not one which would be much more isonomic, open to and respectful of its participants. The difficulties encountered by reformers are all the greater since most are part of the penitentiary system and former members of the KGB. As such, they refuse to acknowledge the disrepute of the post-Soviet government as well as the social relevance of the prison subculture, preferring to view the spread of values and behavioral norms specific to the prison universe as a simple consequence of the rise of crime in post-Soviet society.

Informal categorization

6 All prison subcultures, it seems, class individuals according to the way they adjust to prison conditions, but Russian/Soviet prison society attaches particular importance to the forms of adjustment to the means of subjugation used by the administration. Zeks are therefore classed in informal categories on the basis of their attitude toward the prison administration. From the early 60s on, the Gulag population is divided into several clearly defined categories, representing organized communities. There are the gangsters (blatnye), the “billy goats” (kozly) and the “real men” (moujiki). The latter group, the largest, “does not refuse to work, contrary to the ‘blatnye’, but on the other hand [as opposed to
the ‘billy goats’], obstinately refuses . . . to cooperate with the administration and to practice denunciation.” (Abramkin, Cesnokova, 1998, 16-19)

7 The “moujiks”, like the gangsters, choose their own “moral authorities” (ibid, 24), individuals who “mete out justice” (ibid), decide how members of their community are to be punished if they behave wrong. However, whereas death is the most frequent punishment among gangsters in case of a serious breach of the informal community norms, the “moujiks”, (“real men”) replace that sanction by “debasement”, or “lowering down” (opouskanie), meaning “the transferal of the person to the state of passive homosexual; this ‘transferal’ has a particular ritual and symbolic meaning” (ibid). This led to the creation, in the early 1960s, of a new increasingly large category, the “lowered down” (opouchtchenye). However, these “lowered down” are often simultaneously “billy goats”, since the application of punishment by “debasement” is almost automatic in cases of cooperation with the administration. The “lowered down” are “untouchables”, inasmuch as a “moujik” who touches their dishes or clothing or sits on their bed is “defiled” (oskvernenie, ibid). 6

8 This illustration of Russian/Soviet prison life raises questions about the ways in which representatives of the different informal categories, whose sexual identities are variably called into question, integrate the different images of virility and femininity available in their worldview. But the present discussion is confined to power relations between the prison administration and the different groups of inmates.

On Anton Makarenko’s theory of collective pedagogy

9 It is much easier to understand why prison society has produced this informal categorization when we depict the latter as the inmates’ reaction to the application in penitentiaries, from 1930 to the present, of policies inspired by Anton Makarenko’s collective pedagogy. From 1920 to 1934, Makarenko was in charge of camps for juvenile delinquents and orphans, in which he allegedly “did an unprecedented experiment in educational practice, with the mass rehabilitation of juveniles, [and] developed the theory of education within and through the collectivity.” (Kairov, 1974, 672)

10 The educational process is described by Makarenko as “an activity shared by the teacher, the tutor, the foreman and the student” (Danilin, 1991, 6). The latter—the student—is then not only the object, but also “the subject of pedagogical action” (ibid). This introduces the notion of a “pedagogy of direct, parallel action”. The first implication of this pedagogy is that the teacher pretends to take a back seat with respect to the collectivity, conceals his attitude from the students and stays in the background “so as to almost entirely avoid having them reject the educational action; the second is that the teacher acts through the intermediary of the collectivity” (ibid, 18).

11 Thus, Makarenko supports the idea of self-managed collectives. To achieve self-management, the collective must take an organized form. Whence his definition of the collective: “The collective is a freely established group of workers united by a same goal, a same action, an organized group possessing managerial, disciplinary and responsibility-taking organs.” (Getmanec, 1978, 207) These organs are necessary if the collective is to participate in the education of its own members in a sufficiently autonomous manner. In fact, Makarenko wants to turn the organs of the inmates collective into “partners on an equal footing with the administration for everything pertaining to the organization of
political-educational work, the stimulation of elite workers and the punishment of wrong-doers, the organization of education and of the production process” (Papkin, 1988, 168).

12 Makarenko is well aware that “more active participation of self-management collectives in the rehabilitation of inmates will result in the increased role of mutual dependency and responsibility, making it necessary for members of the collective to evaluate and influence each other” (ibid, 169). That is precisely his goal: to make sure that relations between members of the collective, “relations between comrades”, are “not a matter of friendship, love or close contact, but one of responsible dependency” (Danilin, 1991, 17).

13 This means that every member of a collective must be answerable for any other member; but also and above all that the entire collective must be answerable for each of its members taken separately. Thus, if the collective is evaluated as a whole by the administration (in case of competition between work teams for instance), the elite feels underestimated, “held back” by those who work badly. They depend directly on the latter, in respect to the possibility of being rewarded by the administration. However, the administration makes the collective free to organize itself, and leaves it the choice of how it reeducates those who lag behind, so that each individual faces the arbitrary action of the collective all alone. He has no latitude to appeal to a higher agency (perhaps more impartial, precisely because it is higher up), the administration. He is punished by his peers, which is quite unfair and intolerable for him. This method therefore elicits some aggressive, antagonistic feelings within the inmate group.

14 Moreover, formal procedures are never a satisfactory way of handling conflicts between members of the group. To the contrary, conflicts of this type are best solved informally. For this reason, they tend to go partially unseen by the educational and administrative staff, so that we may say that these conflicts between members of an inmate collective are dangerous and difficult to manage. For Makarenko, however, the autonomous educational influence exerted by an inmate collective on an isolated individual is efficient, above all: “Teachers are often unaware of the surprising efficiency of some informal sanctions that are specific to Makarenko’s system, such as reprobation, blame, expressions of disbelief and even boycotts.” (Papkin, 1988, 169) Now if this rehabilitation method is to function, a large majority of the ward group must side with the administration and agree to work with it.

15 Before Makarenko received formal recognition in 1936 and became a prominent figure in Soviet education, the main quarrels between him and the more traditional pedagogues of the Commissariat for Public Instruction had to do with Makarenko’s refusal to acknowledge the need to divide the huge, extremely heterogeneous mass of homeless children into several categories based both on age and on how difficult they were to rehabilitate. The idea underlying that sort of differentiation implied that the various categories of homeless children should be entrusted to different institutions.

8 Now this would not do for Makarenko, since his ambition was to establish a universal educational system (provided it would remain communist), based on Marxism-Leninism and applicable to every citizen of the Soviet Union without exception.

16 Aside from the ambitious character of Makarenko’s project, there were also practical reasons behind his refusal to divide abandoned children (besprizorny) into different categories. The social composition of the Gorki camp he founded in 1920 was very heterogeneous from the outset, which was exactly what he wanted, since he did not want to deal with delinquents only. His vision of collective pedagogy implies the presence of a
group of wards agreeable to collaborating with the administration, an "active group" (see below) through which Makarenko would rehabilitate the criminal element in the camp. Moreover, the whole group is structured by a whole range of organs, sections, communities and formal categories, so that a member who has just chosen to accept rehabilitation knows it will take a long time to climb the social ladder. In the camps he runs, Makarenko therefore makes sure there is extreme differentiation among wards. He stresses the fact that "an organized "active group" must be created, composed of the most dynamic students, the vanguard, which should be given special insignia or armbands." (Kalacnikova, 1988, 178) The "active" group must take charge of the "passive" group. Initially, Makarenko focused his attention, curiosity and educational passion on what he calls the "passive", and even on its worst elements (Golovitch, 1996, 52-55). His refusal to adopt a differential approach and to separate the criminals from the other categories of students was legitimated formally through one of the basic and most ambiguous principles of his work: "approach each human being with an optimistic postulate" (ibid 13-14). The pedagogue tries to draw the attention of the entire camp to the "passive" criminal element, with the organization of all sorts of groups, large and small, formal and informal, “people’s courts” (ibid, 67) and competing fractions of the “active”, which would supposedly turn up a means, some means, of rehabilitating the delinquents.

**Makarenko and penal legislation in the early period of the Soviet regime**

17 A parallel may be seen between Makarenko’s technique and the philosophy of the first, founding texts of Soviet criminal law, and especially the 1922 Criminal Code and the 1924 Basic Principles of criminal law of the USSR. These texts tend to limit the field of application of the concepts of crime, guilt and punishment (наказание) to offences and individuals viewed as counter-revolutionary, whereas a same offence committed by an insufficiently conscious worker is not a crime and is punishable by a “social defense measure”. Behind this terminological shift there is always the idea that a society rid of capitalist domination (or again, a community rid of its counter-revolutionary elements) must cease to produce criminals, for one thing, and for another, be able to defend itself against any wrong-doers—that is, exert an educational influence on them, through the dominant weight of its conscious members. Correlatively, the end of the notion of punishment would express the “refusal of the idea of revenge [in the name of] socialist humanism in the organization of the repressive system” (M. Ancel et al, 1975, 63). The notions that had supposedly become relevant, then, were no longer those of punishment or revenge, but rather, “defense of society”, rehabilitation and the responsible action of citizens viewed as socially conscious.

18 There is no direct parallel between the early criminal codes (1922, 1926) and Makarenko’s technique, however, in that Makarenko cannot have exerted any influence whatsoever on these texts. Rather, he was a passive reader of them at the time, since he did not take over the Gorki camp until 1920, and his “pedagogical system”, elaborated thereafter, only gained official recognition in 1936. In 1934 Anton Makarenko met with serious opposition from traditional pedagogues, who still controlled the Commissariat for Public Instruction. At the same time, a law dated July 8, 1934 seems to indicate the end of the expression “social defense measures of a legal-correctional nature” and its replacement by “punishment”. But the former expression was finally retained in the criminal codes of the
Soviet Republics, which were in operation between 1926 and 1960. As for the 1960 penal reform, it simply reinforced that same system combining “severe repression . . . of serious breaches of the socialist order” with the old social defense doctrines, including “courts of comrades” and the “intervention of social agencies for assisting offenders” (ibid, V-VI), and so on.

On the other hand, an indirect parallel may be sought between Makarenko’s technique and the early Soviet criminal legislation. Firstly, because Makarenko admits to have “noted [in the writings of the main source of inspiration of the legislation, Lenin] every passage referring to education, and even some which apparently were unrelated to educational issues” (Danilin, 1991, 7). Secondly, because criminal legislation, as well as the idea of rehabilitation through work, were generally viewed as means of overcoming the country’s economic problems, and especially of dealing with the need for rapid industrialization given the rather small, insufficiently conscious working class. Moreover, we may assume that the powerful (and intensely portrayed by Soviet iconography) idea of a universal, unequalled breed of worker-citizens that had to be elevated by purifying and reinforcing the social body (M. Foucault, 1997, 230-234) had to set the standards sufficiently high as to produce across-the-board guilt feelings which, as we know, lubricate the machinery of the inquisitorial ritual. Witnessing a scene of public reprimand, never mind whether it is organized by a religious authority or by a “court of comrades”, is an excellent opportunity for the spectators to set themselves apart from the victim and momentarily rid themselves of their own unconscious guilt feelings. Last, thirdly, there seems to have been an indirect link between Makarenko and the criminal legislation of the 1919-1930 period, since the latter was inspired not only by Leninist thinking but also by the “revolutionary creation of law by the masses, which found its expression in the practical activity of the local popular courts elected by the revolutionary people” (Ancel et al, 10975, 2). We therefore effectively differentiate a first phase in the functioning of Soviet criminal law, between 1919 and 1958, in which the inquisitorial, ritual mode prevailed, and which was followed by a new phase commanded by “procedural legality” (ibid) following the 1960 penal reforms.

The two modes of meting out punishment were not really opposed, however. In any case, they are reconcilable. Makarenko himself was the first to work at combining them in a single model, in his camps; thereafter, the ability of these two registers to function hand in hand was definitively corroborated by the exportation of the Makarenkist “pedagogical system” to the prison-camps (see below); and last, the overall model knitting them together went on to invade other social spaces, or to return to them, and to circulate between them. This model seems to have entailed consequences that considerably exceeded both criminal law and educational practices in the USSR. What is involved is, more basically, the birth and diffusion of a very special form of public space, a form that may be viewed as specifically Soviet. Only in the USSR would it achieve such complete institutionalization and leave such deep marks on society as a whole, including the most wide-ranging spheres. This public space is a dangerous place for most of its participants, since it allows horizontal violence to be exerted on the basis of arbitrarily distributed roles of victim and informers, under the appearance of egalitarian self-management. The dynamics of the institutionalization of this type of public space corresponds to the movement of successive waves of “plebeianization of power” (or of “violence from below”) described by Marc Ferro, the very first of which corresponds to the 1917-1918 period. It is noteworthy that these waves correspond to the periods during which

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Makarenko was popular. After 1918, the boundary between those who govern and those who are governed was gradually reinstated (ibid, 815), and Makarenko fell into disgrace, but the mechanisms set up by Stalin in the mid 300s cause that boundary to “dissolve somewhat, so that its nature changed and it became porous” (ibid, 816): Makarenko came out of disgrace in 1936. The third wave of institutionalization of control from below took place under Khrushchev and Brejnev, and that was when Makarenko became a central, immovable reference for Soviet pedagogy.

Use of Makarenkist theories in the Gulag during the 1930-19500s

21 The invaluable empirical experience accumulated by Makarenko necessarily attracted the Chekists, who were aware of the extreme heterogeneity of the Gulag population and who must not have been particularly enthusiastic about specialization, which is to say by the prospect of having to turn part of their clientele over to the ministry of Health and the Commissariat for Public Instruction. Makarenko’s theories first seem to coincide with Soviet prison policy during the period of the great achievements, and especially of the White Sea canal. In 1932 that concentration camp complex was given a “staff for emulation and the work offensive”. “When the administration assessed emulation, it considered the ‘socio-cultural’ and ‘lifestyle’ results [of each team] as well as the work accomplished. This soon began to modify the very organization of work. Instead of brigades, or even phalanges (250-300 individuals) involved in production only, work collectives developed, and they also managed lifestyle and education.” (Cuhin, 1990, 124-125) As in Makarenko’s camps, the members of the inmate collective depend on each other. If any member of the collective committed a lapse of discipline, escaped, refused to work or was insufficiently productive the administration punished the entire brigade by reducing the amount of food it received.

22 All sorts of sections and circles (kroujki) were created for those inmates who wished to be viewed as “having firmly chosen the path of rehabilitation”. Thanks to the laisser-faire policy of the administration and the resourcefulness of the professional criminals, the latter were first given the prominent positions, including the highest ones, in the cultural education department and the security department. Thus, the self-management granted to work teams in the Gulag led to the exploitation of the ordinary inmates by the criminals.

23 Thanks to this form of usurpation, it was the criminals who became the Gulag’s so-called Stakhanovites in the 1930s. They climbed to the top and were given early release. However, in the fall of 1937 the administration of the Gulag finally realized that this pedagogical doctrine was inefficient. Not that it was disappointed with the results of “rehabilitation”, but the recidivists had gotten too much power over the other inmates. Although the sections subsisted as an efficient means of supporting denunciation, the propaganda for “overhauling” disappeared in 1937 and Makarenko was formally forgotten until 1960, particularly since the economic importance of the concentration camp system became primordial during the great achievements as well as during the second world war.

24 However, the 1930s, marked by the reinforced power of the gangsters, brought about a system of informal norms soon to be called the “thieves’ law” (vorovskoi zakon). This
system of informal norms must be interpreted in the context of a network, a community of interests between professional (or traditional) criminals in different camps, and of a shared strategy as to relations with the administration and the exploitation of other categories of inmates. This network of relations, the framework of “thieves’ law”, differs fundamentally from the networks of the Sicilian mafia, for example, since it is grounded in the social system of prisons rather than in the surrounding society. The network of “lawful thieves” came into being in the Gulag, is inherent to it and has its raison d’être in the social conditions specific to the Gulag, then to the GUITU. From this standpoint, the trend toward centralization and universalization of the system of informal norms within this network corresponds to the centralized nature of the concentration camp system itself.

When Khrushchev began his penal reforms in 1960, the alleged purpose was to abolish crime, but the aim was also to destroy “asocial culture”, that is, the growing weight of the underworld in correctional facilities. When the government decided to deal with “thieves’ law” and the “lawful thieves”, then (Rossi, 1997, 289), it was able to make use of a historical lesson showing the enormous importance of informal norms and suddenly pointing to efficient means of combating these.

Between 1941 and 1943, 35% of inmates were given early release and sent to fight in the war (Anisimkov, 1993, 68). A considerable number of them were “thieves”. “But at the time, no-one could imagine that the war would split the ‘guardians of the thieves’ traditions and customs’ into two enemy groups.” (ibid). Indeed, the two basic principles of the “thieves’ law” are the prohibition on work and the prohibition on serving in the army. Both are rooted in the informal norms of the pre-revolutionary underworld, but they became genuine taboos in reaction to the enforcement of the Bolshevik ideology. The prohibition on entering the sections and trying to get early release was under discussion until the end of the 1930s, when it too became the rule. After the war the crime rate rose considerably in the USSR, for objective reasons. In this context, the “thieves” who had fought in the war and then been released soon returned massively to the camps. They rarely had any idea of what was awaiting them. They were treated as “bitches” (souki) and persecuted by the “straight thieves” who had not left the camps.

This conflict, based on the existence of diverging interpretations of the informal norms, was soon instrumentalized by the prison administration, which dosed the number of gangsters from the conflicting groups in each establishment, and also set up a formal structure for the attempts by what it called the “neutral” inmates (that is, the future “moujiks”), to combat the gangsters. It was during this period that prison slang acquired the term “demolition” (lomka), on which more below. Let us simply say that it is a series of measures aimed at subverting every pocket of resistance to the power of the administration in a particular camp by forcing inmates to disobey their own informal rules.

Actually, in the 1950s the prison administration fully realized that the “moujiks” are the main underpinnings of the “thieves” power, so it should pit as many “moujiks” as possible against the “thieves”, or even create a category of moujiks from which the “thieves” would set themselves apart because of their informal norms. The representatives of this new category were to be designated, in prison slang, as “billy goats” (kozly) or “reds” (krasnye), and the administration found ways of increasing their numbers. In the best tradition of Makarenko’s collective pedagogy, “talks, general assemblies of inmates, open court sessions were organized: and concrete acts of banditry, abuse and assault
committed by the autority were used to demonstrate the true nature of the latter. Importantly, inmates themselves very often spoke up as witnesses or public prosecutors. This specific trait is an eloquent demonstration of the enormous educational effort . . .” (Anisimkov, 1993, 81). The development of these activist organizations, or “sections”, is part of the same tendency to institutionalize informing as in Makarenko’s camps, with the establishment of an organizational structure of camp-member collectives. The concentration camp system of the 1950s also used “councils of active members”, mass sections with internal courts of comrades” (ibid).

**Evolution of informal norms within the GUITU between 1960 and 1980**

29 In other words, at the end of the 1950s, the camp administration gave the impression it had succeeded in controlling the situation, had victoriously combated the “lawful thieves” and had done away with the “thieves’ traditions”. But the beginnings of the prison culture represented by the latter had simply regressed momentarily, and would re-emerge forcefully in the form of a “prison law” (turemnyi zakon) shared by a vast majority of inmates. That “law” became the informal, almost universal grid for the interpretation of prison life, including, often, for the prison administration and guards. Whereas the Stalinist period was marked by a conflict between the “moujiks” and the “thieves” as well as by antagonism between the “thieves” and the “politicals”, the Khrushchev and Brejnev eras correspond to a reconciliation between the “moujiks” and the autority, as well as to a degree of proximity between the criminals and the political prisoners. A broad-based prison community was formed, whose cohesion was due to the adherence of the majority of inmates to the values of the underworld, which facilitated more effective resistance to the subversive activities of the administration.

30 It was also in the early 1960s that the “lowered down” (opouchtchennye), “untouchable” (neprikasaemye) and “cock” (petoukhi) groups became “castes” (Abramkin, 1998, 15). However, punishment by “lowering down” could not always be enforced, either because the administration took preventive measures or because there were too many potential candidates for “lowering down”; possibly over 50% in a camp under an ordinary regime. It then became physically impossible for informal justice to be enforced. So a qualitatively new community, the “billy goats” (kozly), developed. These are “activists”, section members, to whom the “lowering down” sanction could not be effectively applied.

31 Thus, the administration used all sorts of tricks, but also sheer force, to try to “convert into billy goats” (zakozlit’) as many “moujiks” as possible, while the “moujiks” in turn used sheer physical constraint to try to turn as many “thieves” as possible into “cocks” (zapetouchit’), which is to say, to “debase” them (opoustit’). The informal code prescribes that there is no way back: “billy goats” cannot become “moujiks” again, and the “debased” retain their status forever. Thanks to its knowledge of these informal norms, so clearly emphasized by Makarenko, the administration was able to impose a status on an individual by forcing him to break one of the “prison law” taboos.

32 One major aspect of “prison law” is composed of prohibitions pertaining to symbolic acts: participation in repair work for facilities connected with control or repression (miradors, solitary confinement cells); picking up something on the ground; sweeping the camp territory (but in fact, one has simply to appear in the courtyard where roll call for
inmates is held with a broom in one’s hand to be classed as a “billy goat”). Prison culture has a whole range of actions and attitudes stigmatizing denunciations, which in turn are associated with a depreciatory image of femininity; that is, one in which femininity, submissiveness and denunciation are one and the same. This imagery, although sustained by the usual prison hardships, seems to function as a strong, radical and irreversible means of defending inmates’ ego against the particular type of attacks on their identity induced by the institutionalization of denunciation. Actually, punishment by “lowering down” is on the same symbolic register, even if it does rest on some practical considerations as well.

Makarenko and “prison law”

Thus, the particular form of prison subculture that took shape in the early 1960s seems to be a way for zeks to resist the administration’s attempts to “subdue” (slomat’) the camps. The tactic used by Makarenko to break the resistance of those wards in the “passive” group who refused to participate in the public life of the camp consisted of integrating them forcibly in the public space by having them appear before a “General Assembly of Camp members”, making them behave publicly in a way that discredited them in the eyes of other protesters in the “passive” group. “Prison law” is anti-Makarenko, since it advances a type of solidarity opposed to that of official public space.

“Prison law” aims at establishing an alternative public space, then, in opposition to the official public space, in which denunciation is institutionalized. This law expresses radical rejection by the prison community of a type of solidarity conditioned by the presence of a public authority and by the requirement to denounce others, imposed by the latter. The radical nature of this negative reaction to the imposition of an official public space is visible in the harshness of the informal punishment aimed at reinforcing cohesion within the group and excluding any member suspected of giving in to the administration. “Prison law” cannot be seen as “anti-Makarenko” in its totality, but only inasmuch as Makarenko’s new man can only be built by “crushing” individuals, submitting them, integrating them forcibly in the public space and obliging them to denounce others.

At present, the forms and the degree of violence in relations between the penitentiary administration and informal prison norms vary considerably from one establishment to another. On the one hand, camp directors and the rest of the custodial staff may be more or less tolerant when dealing with “prison law” and prefer means of pressure more or less in step with Makarenko’s system. On the other hand, vertical and horizontal violence in penitentiaries also depends on the strategy of the gangsters (blatnye). The latter explicitly aim at exerting a regulatory function within prison society, but they may do so in more or less responsible ways. Also, the effectiveness of their action should be evaluated, on the basis of the following criteria: in a given establishment, do the blatnye have a genuine hold on the other inmates? What kind of relations do they have with the administration (open war or partnership with a corrupt administration)?

These two factors are easily identified through an informal classification of penitentiary colonies as “red” or “black” colonies. In the “red” colonies the administration has the upper hand. Moreover, it is openly at war with representatives of the underworld as well as with all those inmates who refuse to collaborate. Here, the administration definitely exhibits its will to “subdue” (slomat’) the colony.
In the “black” colonies on the other hand, the administration doesn’t openly defy representatives of the underworld, either because they are too influential and are apparently capable of organizing a widespread revolt, or because it views the relatively balanced relations between zeks, thanks to the blatnye, as a lesser evil, or again, because a number of administrative workers at different levels participate in the gangsters’ illegal activities, such as drug dealing (Ekshtein, 1990).

Thus, most inmates find themselves torn between an official public space institutionalising denunciation and an alternative public space excluding the administration. The administration is torn between a logic revolving around security concerns, for which it cannot do without informers completely, and the gangster subculture, which won legitimacy by resisting the administration’s obviously abusive policies. As for the reformers, their desire for a broad public space including the various informal categories of prisoners and the administration is easily seen to be irrelevant. In the light of this Soviet experience one may in fact ponder on the credibility of doctrines calling for the introduction of elements of self-management in Western correctional facilities, since Makarenko’s conception too was apparently very democratic.

Translation: Helen Arnold

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NOTES

1. “The Archipelago arisen from the sea”: the author depicts the island of Solovki, on the White Sea as the first metastasis of the concentration camp system (Soljhenitsyn, 1974, vol. II, 21).

2. The gains of the 1953-54 strikes were not preserved. The rebellious prisoners first succeeded in winning a number of rights (Rossi, 1997, 133, art. “strikes”), but the administration gradually managed to rescind them, and the penitentiary system established by the 1960 Criminal Code became harsher, in many respects, than in Stalinist times (V. F. Abramkin, V. F. Cesnokova, 1998, 17-19). This relativizes the idea that the stabilization of the resistance of soviet prisoners in the 1960s was mostly due to the relative loosening of constraints following the end of the Stalinist regime.

3. We are referring to collective pedagogy inspired by the theories of Anton Makarenko (see below).

4. This slang expression, popularized by the literature on the Gulag, is a general term designating inmates in Soviet and post-Soviet prisons.
5. In Russian, *moujik* is both a familiar designation, something like “guy” in English, and one of the main references to the notion of manliness, a much-desired quality connoting both courage, dignity and honor. The meaning retained in English, taken from classical Russian literature—peasant, common person—is definitely archaic with respect to present-day Russia. Is that only because of the “plebeianization” of Russian/Soviet society (Ferro, 1985)?

6. See the English version of the dictionary of prison slang on the Internet web site of the Social Center for penal reform assistance (www.prison.org) run by Valéri Abramkin. For a detailed description of these informal norms in French, see A. N. Oleinik, 2001a; A. Oleinik, 1999; A. Oleinik, 2001b.

7. In the sense of serving as security, meaning that one guarantees that an obligation underwritten by another person will be fulfilled. An interpersonal structure of this sort, comprised of an individual $a$, another individual (or group) $b$ and a higher agency $C$, may represent a situation involving either solidarity or violence (horizontal) between $a$ and $b$.

8. We may imagine, for instance, that orphans and children under 10 would come under the ministry of Health, the “hooligans” (*huligany*) under the ministry of Education and the confirmed delinquents, prostitutes and other “problem cases” under the Cheka.

9. M. Ferro, 1985, 814: “The plebeianization of power developed at the grass-roots level with the birth and formation of countless committees of soviets, and turned into a specific political phenomenon . . . These former soldiers, unskilled workers and red guards, newly arrived from the countryside, gradually climbed the ladder of the new State apparatus. They were just as determined as the Bolshevik leaders, since their legitimacy was grounded in their ability to take action: to requisition and organize, so that in addition to absolutism from above, there was an absolutism from below.”

10. We return here to the problem mentioned in paragraph three (the collective pedagogy of A. Makarenko), with the dispute between traditionalist educators and Makarenko and the latter’s refusal to accept the soundness of the notion of sharing out both tasks and the individuals to be rehabilitated among various institutions in charge of dealing with the problem of homeless children; that is, the ministries of Health and of Education (the Commissariat for Public Instruction) and the repressive agencies (the Cheka). The Cheka’s practical interest in Makarenko’s theories should be situated in the context of the creation, in 1930, alongside of the local systems (in the various republics) of establishments for reform by work, of a network of camps “of federal interest” (Anisimkov, 1993, 60). “The first document aimed at regulating their activity was the ‘Regulation on camps for reform by work’ adopted by the Council of Commissaries of the People on April 7, 1930. Now neither this document nor any of the following ones ever referred, in the part devoted to the prison regime of inmates, to the need to isolate recidivists from individuals sentenced for the first time. . . . In 1929, following the inspection of places of detention, the assignment commissions were eliminated.” (Ibid). Those commissions were in charge of sorting the huge mass of inmates into different categories and prescribing the proper type of establishment for each inmate.

11. The General (Glavnoe) Direction (Upravlenie) of the ITU: in the shift from GULAG to GUITU the term “camps” (*lagera*) is replaced by the abbreviation “ITU”, for *Ispavitel'nno* (rehabilitation) *Trudovye* (by work) *Učreždenña* (establishments).

12. At the time, the term *avtoritety* (“moral authorities”) was used to designate individuals with boss status within the gangster community, and who served as mediators. Later, in the 1960s, individuals with a similar status (and also defined as *avtoritety*) were also found among the *moujiks*. 

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RÉSUMÉS

This article on the post-soviet prison subculture shows the connection between the establishment of new informal rules in prisons and changes in the means of submission used by penitentiary institutions under Khrushchev, as well as the influence of the main principles of Anton Makarenko’s collective pedagogics on the above-mentioned means. Analytically, the article is focussed on different forms of the public sphere which can exist in prison environments. Special emphasis is laid on the importance of the historical approach in understanding the present situation in post-soviet penitentiaries.

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