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# The ‘sensitive perimeter’ of the prison: a key to understanding the durability of the penal institution (★)

Philippe Combessie

## Preamble

I have been interested for many years now in the interaction between prisons and the outside world (Combessie, 1990, 1994 & 1996). In this chapter I would like to present a previously unexplored approach, involving research on four French prisons, each situated in environments with very different characteristics.

The oldest establishment dates back to 1808 - that is to say, practically from the earliest period of development of penitentiaries. This is an institution for prisoners serving long-term sentences, and it is set in a rural area, currently in economic decline. The second prison, slightly newer, was built almost a century ago in the countryside surrounding Paris. It was originally planned as a replacement for the prisons in the capital which were to be razed to the ground before the World Fair in 1900. Since the Second World War the Parisian suburbs have developed, and this penitentiary, which currently holds more than 3,000 prisoners, is now surrounded by blocks of high-rise flats and small houses. The third prison is also situated in the Parisian suburbs, but this one was constructed after much more significant urbanisation in the urban periphery: it dates from 1975. The fourth prison is even more recent: it is part of a new prison-expansion programme managed in part by private businesses<sup>1</sup>. I These establishments are governed by ordinary prison staff and the social workers are the same as in the other prisons. But everything else (prison food, the health of the prisoners, heating, work, and, of course, the maintenance of the buildings) is entrusted to private firms. There is, however, in these prisons, a director who has authority over the state employees and an external manager who is responsible for all of the activities managed by the private companies.

During the course of research I completed in 1996, I was surprised to discover that these four different establishments, each in very different localities and of very different vintage, have many similar relationships with the outside world and many other common traits. These traits are so distinctive that I propose to and capture their provenance conceptually in terms of the idea '*périmètre sensible de la prison*', which I feel can be translated into English as the '*sensitive perimeter of the prison*'.

## How to define the ‘sensitive perimeter’?

The relationship between prisons and their environment is marked by a tension, defined, on the one hand, by a powerful logic emphasizing security and public order (a logic that works to separate prisoners off from the world, and

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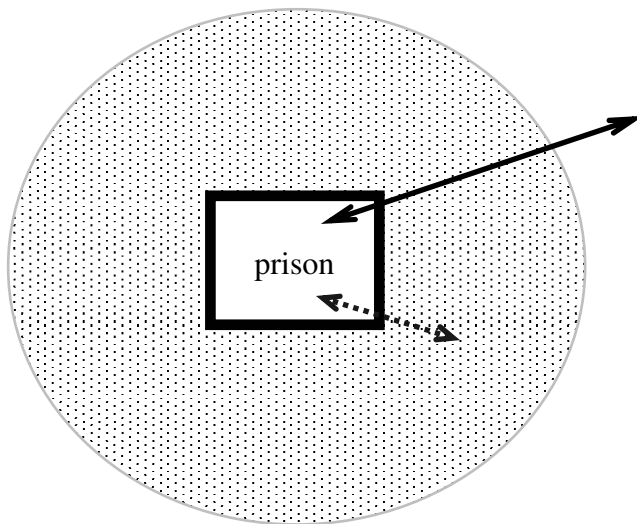
★. Author manuscript developed from this paper: Ph. Combessie (1998), “The ‘sensitive perimeter’ of the prison. A key to understanding the durability of the penal institution”, in : Vincenzo Ruggiero, Ian Taylor, Nigel South (eds.), *The New European Criminology. Crime and social order in Europe*, London & New-York, Routledge: p. 125-135.

<sup>1</sup>. In France, there are currently no completely private prisons.

indeed from each other) and, on the other, a logic we can call socio-educational (which is focused, to one degree or another, on the eventual reintegration of prisoners into society as a whole). This second logic is in many ways more widely valued in society at large, and is therefore more central to the legitimacy of the prison institution. The imposition of the first logic, however, works to separate prisoners off from the wider society, and renders the stigmatisation and the demonisation of the (invisible) incarcerated population over time that much more effective.

Around any prison there is a type of *no man's land*, which demarcates the institution both materially and symbolically from its broader environment. This is the zone that I want to call the sensitive perimeter. The symbolic power of the perimeter extends far beyond the obvious material aspects of the prison - its high surrounding wall, and other defining architectural features.

**Figure #1: Sketch of the Sensitive Perimeter**



One of the key findings in my recently completed research highlights the infrequency of contact between the population living in the prison, and the local population. Contacts between the prisons I studied and the outside world generally took place over some considerable distance. Those few contacts which were established with people or agencies living or working in close proximity with the prison were frequently disguised, camouflaged or very indirect.

The extent of the sensitive perimeter of the prison seems to vary: in general, it is larger when the area in which the prison is established is poorly urbanised. From the perspective of the local community itself, of course, the sensitive perimeter around the neighbourhood's prison is a kind of symbolic block or barrier, 'containing' the local presence of a foreign body - the penitentiary itself. As for the prison community, the perimeter acts as a sort of quarantine line, I would argue, which reinforces the isolation of those within the walls.

Constituted by and through a mix of these different logics, the sensitive perimeter can be seen to operate along many different perspectives. In this chapter I want to describe five different areas: the development of voluntary activities, relations with businesses outside, relations with local councillors, the impact of the prison on property values and the social composition of the local neighbourhood, and finally the routine discursive positions adopted by key managers and decision-makers in the penal system with respect to the isolation of prisons and their relations with the outside world.

## **Prison and voluntary activity**

The development of voluntary activities among prisoners is a good illustration of the dynamics which outline the sensitive perimeter.

### ***Volunteers working in prisons do not come from, the immediate vicinity***

All prisons need volunteers, but it is noticeable that in general volunteers are particularly difficult to find in the immediate environment of prisons. Local residents from the area immediately surrounding the prisons, especially, do not want to hear about it. To recruit volunteers, prison managers generally have to move away from the establishment. This phenomenon is more apparent in rural areas than in urban areas, and my own research suggested that the newer prisons evoked a stronger negative reaction than the older ones, although this phenomenon was seen everywhere. There was even one instance, it must be said, of a priest who refused to visit prisoners, although the prison was in his parish. So I was told by a chaplain working in prison that: "*Ordinary men from the area round the prison won't come here... and priests are just ordinary men*".

### ***The search for money***

Particularly when it comes to preparing for Christmas for the prisoners, prisons need extra money. Once again, this is far easier the further the prison authorities move, in their appeals for support, from the vicinity of the prison itself. In the Paris region one prison governor told me that he thought it useless to ask for money for prisoners within approximately a 10-kilometre circumference of the prison.

Publicity at a geographical distance from the prison may be the only solution when attempting to recruit volunteers; but when it comes to money, certain stratagems allow the route which the money takes to be artificially disguised. For example a prison chaplain 'explained to me how he took collections outside of the prison on behalf of a sub-branch of Catholic Aid. The money he collected went to the departmental office of Catholic Aid and at this departmental level the money can quietly be directed towards purchases on behalf of the prison. It could be argued that routing the money from collections in this way constitutes a form of money-laundering (or more accurately, 'money-laundering in reverse' since it is not where it comes from that is covered up, but rather where it is going).

### ***Concern for other poor people***

In another prison, when a Chairman of the Association for Prisoners came to appeal to the regional council for a grant, elected members strongly advised him to modify the statutes of his association and to concern himself with other 'havenots' in the area - people with no links to the prison. In practice, of course, this solution also allowed some councillors to disguise the destination of the funds granted. In this instance, the grant which was awarded - to an organisation which declared itself concerned in general with the poor in the area - was in fact partly spent in the prison. Ideally, however, many prison governors told me, it was better for money, like voluntary activities, to be seen to come from afar and certainly for it to be so presented. We are now going to see that money which takes the opposite channel- from the prison towards the outside world - follows a path which is often just as long and indirect.

## Prison and the local business

### *Prison purchases*

When there is talk of a prison being opened in a particular area, the majority of mayors and local councillors almost always appear resistant. In order to convince them, national authorities very often promise that the opening of the prison will carry considerable economic effects for the locality. Local building firms, for example, will profit from work on the important new local building project. Many other benefits are promised (for local taxi firms, hoteliers, etc.). But research suggests that the medium- to long-term benefits of prisons on local economies are negligible. After the initial building phase, hardly any significant profit accrues to local business. In prisons which are entirely managed by the Prison Service, the rules of the procurement process (particularly with regard to invitations to tender, where corrupt practices are widespread) often specifically prohibit local retailers from bidding. In many of the semi-privatised prisons, free competition rules and small retailers find themselves ousted from the market in favour of larger national or regional businesses. The only remaining direct economic repercussion from the prison on the surrounding environment is the small-scale market in tobacco. French tax laws force each prison to stock up at the local tobacconist rather, for example, than by bulk mail order. Our research suggested that in the majority of cases, the local retailer very rarely publicises his or her entry into the prison market and the guaranteed income so received. In cases where there were disputes with the client (the prison), the supplier would usually use indirect methods to rectify the situation, in order that the retailer could avoid being seen publicly in negotiation with prison managers. An additional regular market for local retailers potentially involves visitors to the prison, especially the families of prisoners. Mostly, prisoners' families pass through local towns and villages and do not stop, spending very little in the area. Local residents often chafe that the visitors arrive having bought their provisions elsewhere (and local residents as a whole complain that they then leave their rubbish behind). The only establishments that these people sometimes visit are bars and in some cases, cheaper local hostels. In such cases, there is a particularly dramatic instance of the management of relations between the prison and its immediate vicinity. Hostels offering accommodation to prisoners' families almost always house them separately, at a distance from the 'ordinary' clientele. In a few hostels, indeed, a separate entrance is provided so that they do not come into contact especially with tourists from whom there is a great desire to hide the proximity of the prison. Most importantly, all contact between the prisoners' family and prison staff must be avoided. So in some prisons, a further measure of segregation is evident - one bar serves the prisoners' families, whilst another serves the warders. In this way, the prison divide is repeated in the surrounding community. Everyone must remain in their place: it would be quite inappropriate for warders to mix with the relatives of prisoners. So, also, when the members of the prison staff go shopping, they mostly do so by car - often in the supermarkets which are often quite far away from the prison, rather than in the small shops in the neighbourhood. It is to these small shops that prisoner's families will occasionally revert during their visits, never likely to encounter there any member of the prison staff.

So this empirical enquiry into financial flows between prisons and their environment confirms and reinforces the analysis of what I have named the Sensitive Perimeter and confirms the rarity of contact between different parties in the prison. A similar kind of divide overshadows the relationship between any companies who could give work to the prisoners.

## **Companies and prison employment**

Our investigations revealed that business people working near prisons are often warned against offering work to inmates in the local prison. Warnings are given both by the local leaders hips of trade union managers and local MPs as well as by the authorities in charge of local employment exchanges, or otherwise involved in the local labour market. The employment of prisoners (especially at a low wage) is considered unfair competition to local 'free workers' - just as it was in the last century (Petit, 1990). The officer in charge of employment training and work programmes in a new prison told me: *“We realised that from the moment we enquired about work opportunities in the area all the doors closed on us. So we enquired in neighbouring regions and that worked. Companies came from far away, which increased production costs due to transport, but it was the only solution to get work for the prisoners.”*

For prisons, the labour market can only be opened up outside their immediate area, and this can be quite an extended distance, given that many prisons are situated in areas where the economy is already quite weak and where there is a shortage of work.

## **Prison and the local councils**

Without doubt, these logics have their own specific features, but we can see that their convergence of each of them reinforces the distance between the local society and the prisons. This does not encourage councillors to take action on behalf of prisons when there is one in their constituency (Villette, 1991). When asked about funding for prisoners' activities or about any kind of direct contact with local prisons (and even their governors) local mayors of French cities are in general very reserved.

The various organisations which approach the council for grants often meet with categorical refusals, under the pretext that it is the State's responsibility to take charge of the prisons and their residents: the mayors always insist, in this respect, that prisoners are not part of the local community. Yet when they send the statistics to be taken into account in the calculation of the amount for centralised state funding payable to the municipality (on the basis, in part, of their population), the municipal authorities almost always add local prisoners onto the total number of inhabitants, though of course this is not 'shouted from the rooftops'. In this sphere, the local prisoners are certainly given the status of full citizens. On the other hand, prisoners are almost certainly not included in the count when the same municipality is asked to contribute, on a per capita basis, to a regional fund for social service support, usually on the argument that prisoners already benefit from their own social workers. When grants are directly requested for prison activities, they are often refused or are very modest, or even, as I specified above, only allocated under the proviso of a joint programme with the poor people in the community, who seem a more worthy cause than the prisoners.

Sometimes, a local councillor will delegate responsibility for any relations with the prison to one of his assistants. Several mayors explained their reluctance, for example, to go and celebrate a marriage in prison, arguing that they would be regarded as an intruder or, alternatively, that they resented being searched before entering the prison and sometimes regarded with suspicion. This show of disinterest from the local councillors for prisons within their constituency is one of the key aspects which distinguishes the prison from other

public establishments, such as hospitals or schools.

Perhaps no other circumstance can better illustrate the consensus on keeping the prison at a distance than the annual meeting of the Prison Warders' Commission. Here, the local authorities are technically called upon to evaluate the prisons, but in fact the meeting of these commissions usually turns into a social event among colleagues. Even when the Mayors themselves participate in the meetings of the Prison Warders' Commission, their rare interventions normally concern the impact of prisons on their surrounding environment (the warders' accommodation, escorting the prisoners back when they go beyond their constituency, etc.). They hardly ask any questions about the internal functioning of the prison over which they are supposed to be keeping watch. The local authorities willingly confirm all actions taken by the director who has the authority in this particular field, yet does not belong to the local community. This, of course, does not prevent the prison from having an effect on the surrounding environment, as far as the value of property is concerned.

## Impact of the prison on local property values

At first glance, analysis of the evolution of home prices around prisons reveals quite contradictory situations. As Hawes (1985) and others have also noted, the stigma attached to prison does tend to depreciate the market value of surrounding property in urban areas, whilst in rural and depopulated areas, a more pragmatic economic logic leads to a revaluation of the market value of property over time<sup>2</sup>.

Beyond these seemingly contrasting trends, we can see that when prisons are first established in urban areas, local property prices are driven closer together usually at a lower level than before. The change in prices then attracts a different, usually rather poorer population into the area. But it can also happen that this reduction in the price of housing enables prison warders and other staff to buy in the area, and a certain balance between the locality and the prison can thereby be encouraged. What is clear is that there will be no significant settlement in the area by the bourgeoisie (for this to happen the prison would have to close, and other more noble buildings erected) and it is precisely this which prevents a rapid trend towards a middle-class outlook in a community. We can see once again, for different reasons, these two opposing trends operative at different levels (between a prison which attracts and a prison which rejects, one prison that has got to be hidden and another that tries to be integrated into the community).

## The 'perimeter' in the discourses of the authorities

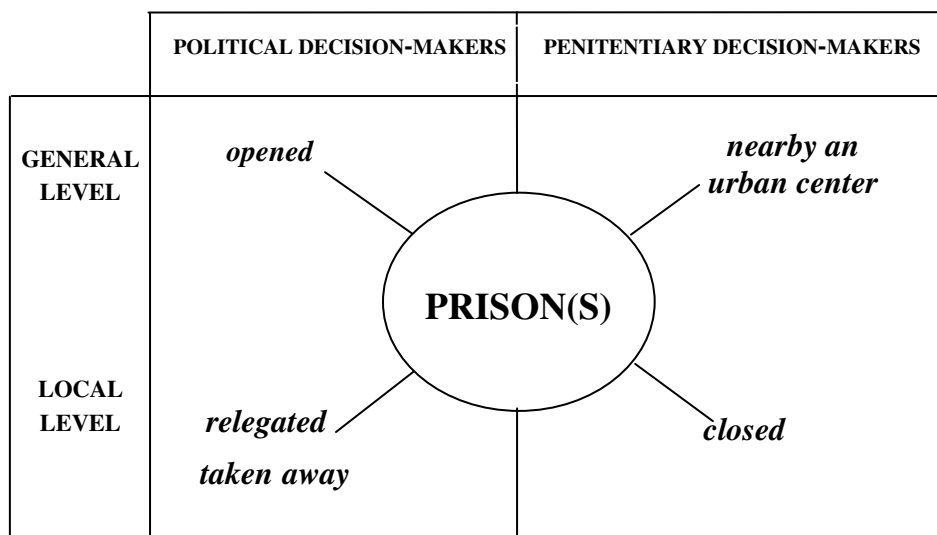
We can see the sensitive perimeter at work again, for example, in the discursive arguments of those responsible for penitentiaries and penal policy generally, and here too there is evidence of significant contradiction. Figure 8.1 illustrates this. In general, political authorities, on a national level, speak about prisons in a fairly abstract, theoretical discourse (which may sometimes even recommend that prisons should become more open to the outside world). But in complete contrast, at local level, civic authorities usually speak about prisons in

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<sup>2</sup>. I do not agree with all Jeffrey Hawes' analysis especially when he studies crime rates, nor with his main conclusions (cf. Combessie, 1994) but the results of his study concerning property values are reliable.

a practical and particularistic fashion: insisting that they should not be in the town centre, not too near to a tourist or prestigious place, etc. Prison governors and administrators of the penal system generally would ideally like to situate some of their establishments, especially the short-term detention centres, near to town centres and would also like to encourage partnership with the surrounding society (cf. for example, the report of the Study Commission on 'Architecture and Prisons' chaired by Madame Myriam Ezratty, published in 1985). The senior managers of one particular prison, however, have tried to resist this opening up on security grounds. The closer we get to the individual establishment, indeed, the more we lose sight of the rhetoric of the political and administrative elites, and the more we are confronted with the immediate concerns of local managers and local citizens, and the more the ideological arguments in favour of the opening up of prison give way to pragmatic and unspoken practices which work in the other direction.

**Figure #2: Official discourses on prisons**



These practices aim to ensure a certain 'keeping of distance' between the prison and local community rather than active collaboration, participation and openness. These practices are clearly linked to the identification of prisoners, in effect, as the '*undeserving poor*', particularly since they are not working and are not of the local parish or local community (Castel, 1995: 63).

In this way, the Sensitive Perimeter works in two opposite directions, on the one hand creating attraction and mystique, and, on the other, ensuring that a good distance is maintained between the prison and its locality. The resulting tension (between those exhortations which operate on a general level to open the prisons, and the daily management of relations between this establishment and its environment) builds the 'Sensitive Perimeter' both in the direction *prison* → *environment* and in the direction *environment* → *prison*. In this respect we could say that the environment treats the prison in the same way as the prison treats the prisoners. And we can also say, taking an opposing point of view, that the prison imparts on its host locality a stigma similar to that which affects the prisoners.



## Conclusion

It should not be believed that this suppression of relations between the prison and the outside world works to conceal the prison completely. Indeed - and this may seem paradoxical - I want to argue it accentuates the prison's visibility. Our argument, obviously, is that this visibility is more symbolic than real. The symbolic aspect of the prison and its disturbing presence in the midst of the community make it possible to project images onto the prison which have even more strength (since they are constructed on top of the social divisions the prison's perimeter has erected). In this way, the sensitive perimeter contributes to the success and the durability of the prison. I am not a historian - I do not know if, as Michel Foucault (1975) argued - the prison was "*born of a takeover by force*". But I do think that prisons have enjoyed an unexpected success, and their life expectancy is not threatened. And I think that these phenomena which constitute what I called the sensitive perimeter are partly the cause of this longevity since they confuse the image of the prison. As a magician conceals from the public the very thing which allows the trick to function, these phenomena in the same way contribute to disguising the ordinary running of the prison. In front of a magician, the public can be led to believe that they are not watching a feat born of a skill worked on for a long time rather than that it really is magic. When faced with the penitentiary institution, those who are highly ignorant of prison reality can create an image of the prison which they believe to be more suitable. For some, this image will be of a three-star hotel or a holiday club. For others it may appear to be a concentration camp. Others again can be led to believe that these high walls conceal an organisation which, temporarily separating certain individuals of society, could eventually allow them to find a better place for themselves in society. These three opposing images depend upon the status held in society by the person producing the image and on the path which he has taken in life. These three images are diametrically opposed in discussions of prison reform. In the first instance the argument would be that penal reform should consist of toughening up the conditions of imprisonment (examples of which can be seen in the United States). In the second case the image is pushing for the ideal of prison abolition 'on principle'. In the third case we would like to reform prison to allow it "*finally*" to function (Faugeron, Le Boulaire, 1992). Confronting these three images is futile in my view insofar as they are all based on a lack of knowledge about the reality of prison.

An analysis of the sensitive perimeter of prison has enabled me to show that certain relations which exist between the prison and its neighbourhood are often seen to be kept out of sight, under the seal of secrecy, and confidential. In 1989, French Socialist MP Gilbert Bonnemaïson drew up a report which advocated for a vast opening up of prisons. He concluded his report with the words: "*the time of ignorance, suspicion, and thoughtlessness of putting individuals into oubliettes, without making any distinction, could, in fact, come to an end.*"

Without doubt, however, Gilbert Bonnemaïson underestimated the power of this sensitive perimeter, and the force of the different social and ideological relationships constructing a popular ignorance towards prisons.

In concluding, let me try, in order to avoid any misunderstanding, to highlight the following point: the sensitive perimeter around prison is the source of obfuscation of prison reality resulting from the practical activities of prison authorities. The sensitive perimeters of the prison would not have such mystificatory power if the prison itself did not so severely limit its relations with the outside world. In a world where suspicion is endemic, the slightest

interference is seen as a disturbance. Whether it is the volunteers, a temporary replacement, an elected councillor, or a sociologist carrying out research - whoever enters the prison must arm themselves with patience and much humility. The long and difficult task of taming this environment is necessary. But it is never enough: the danger facing those having contact with prison (volunteers, temporary replacements or researchers) other than elected local councillors - is always that they can be banned from entering the prison.

As long as these phenomena (which I grouped under the concept of sensitive perimeter) exist, they will continue to recur, because, it must be noted, they strengthen and reinforce each other. In this way, the durability of the prison will be guaranteed, due to the ignorance of prison reality which these phenomena perpetuate.

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