

The Avenue of Escape

by François Bonnet

All over the world, from India, Sierra Leone and Mexico to 1970s France and revolutionary Tunisia, people have tried to escape from prison. How is a prison break conceived, how it is planned and what does it signify to those who experience it and those who dream of it?

Reviewed: Tomas Max Martin and Gilles Chantraine (Eds.), *Prison Breaks. Towards a Sociology of Escape*, Palgrave Macmillan, 351 pp.

Despite their varied backgrounds and fields, the contributors to this book share a fairly uniform theoretical perspective. Broadly speaking, there are two main ways of discussing prison escapes. The first consists in describing and counting them and assessing the impact of explanatory factors. There are several ways to escape from prison: what is shown in the movies (digging a tunnel, crawling through air vents, jumping off a wall onto a street light), and what usually happens – fleeing during a transfer to court, hospital or another prison facility, or simply not returning from a temporary release. The other method of describing prison escapes focuses on their meaning, both for prisoners and for the prison system, as well as for society and the authorities. This book approaches the topic of escape from the latter perspective.

Is It Possible to Escape?

The book gives prominence to anthropological approaches and cultural studies, and its early chapters focus on the meanings that prison escapes hold in the daily lives of inmates. For example, they explain how prison guards tighten conditions for all detainees following an escape, and how prison escape is a project that can never be fully brought to completion since a true escape would consist in resuming one's life as it was before prison. (Mahuya

Bandyopadhyay, chapter 1). Prisoners construct their self-esteem by planning and executing their escape, regardless of whether the escape is successful (Andrew M. Jefferson, chapter 2). Planning an escape requires trusting one's fellow inmates who will be tempted to report what is being plotted in order to gain personal advantages (Simone Santorso, chapter 3).

Escapes are often in keeping with a specific political context. For example, they give the population a chance to mock an incompetent and corrupt State (Atreyee Sen, chapter 4). Likewise, the mass jailbreaks that took place in revolutionary Tunisia served as both an opportunity to celebrate the fall of the regime and a trigger for public panic over rising crime rates and rumours of manoeuvrings to restore the former regime (Yasmine Bouagga, chapter 5, perhaps the most interesting of the book). Finally, the deplorable conditions in high-security units in 1970s France sparked protests among inmates, which eventually led to the dismantling of such facilities (Grégory Salle, chapter 7).

The bureaucratic management of prison escapes is the subject of the chapters that follow. In closed educational centres for young offenders, there are no walls, and the youth are not supposed to be locked in, although escaping is the surest way to be sent to a real prison (Nicolas Sallée, chapter 8). Naturally, escapes should be considered in terms of the complex relations that guards maintain with inmates, but also with the bureaucratic system that lays down rules that are impossible to follow (Tomas Max Martin, chapter 9).

The last section of the book is devoted to cultural representations of escapes, in cinema, television series and in prisons transformed into penal history museums (Matthew Ferguson et al., chapter 12). As Jamie Bennett explains, punishments have largely faded from public view, and therefore only continue to exist in the collective conscience in films and series, usually with a metaphorical rather than documentary aim:

These films reveal the 'prisons' in which we all live, constrained by the routine and rules of social life, and the 'escape attempts' we make in striving to retain individuality and identity (p. 285).

What Does "Escape" Mean?

On a number of occasions in the book the authors make reference to the 'true meaning' of escapes. Grégory Salle, in the conclusion to his chapter on disputes relating to high-security facilities, provides an excellent explanation of this: it is just about as illusory and futile to escape from prison as it is to pursue an abolitionist agenda in penal matters today. The critical thinkers of the 1970s had imagined that prison could be abolished and that the long-term trend toward lighter sentences would logically lead to the creation of penal practices that were less barbaric than imprisonment. In the 1990s, a major increase in the American prison population coincided with a sharp fall in crime rates, giving unprecedented

legitimacy to penal practices organised around thwarting criminals. Prison overcrowding – in France, for example – has not brought about a reappraisal of the prison system but has instead justified building new prisons. The idea of escape, like abolition, acts as a fantasy-valve: just thinking about it, even in the knowledge that it is impossible, provides some relief. As A. M. Jefferson writes:

escape is an illusion but a necessary one”. (p. 82)

In *Prison Breaks* we encounter more ‘hegemonic discourses’ and ‘subversive accounts’ than contextual data. For example, in the western world at least, escapes are increasingly rare: in England and Denmark, the rate of escape has fallen tenfold over the last 20 years (p.4). And yet *Prison Breaks* does not seek to make a contribution within this context. The result is a highly evocative richness and a series of enlightening and geographically diverse perspectives, as well as an indication that escapes remain an elusive subject. Insofar as escapes are a fine research topic that, to say the least, is under-explored in the social sciences, one would have welcomed a little more eclecticism and the inclusion of contributions with systematic data on the subject in question. Likewise, it would have been useful to reflect on the differences between individual escapes and mass escapes. However, this pioneering book should be credited for successfully bringing to light a new area for reflection on prisons.

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