


Imprisoned Writings: (im)possible Sources for the History of the Present Time

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Abstract

This article deals with writings by ordinary prisoners in the 20th century. The first part of the text discusses how these sources can be used to think about the different layers that make up institutional practices, making it possible to broaden our view of the history of prisons. The analysis goes through the disputes over memory that are intertwined with the binary dichotomy of “political prisoners” and “ordinary prisoners”. Finally, the article explores how research, based on these sources, can have its results transmuted into products that aim to reach a wider audience, focusing on the process of creating podcasts based on lives traversed by institutional experience. The proposal takes the history of prisons as a moving and unavoidable theme for the history of the present time.

Keywords: prisoners' writings; history of the present time; public history.

Escritas aprisionadas: fontes (im)possíveis para a História do Tempo Presente

Resumo

Este artigo trata de produções escritas por prisioneiros comuns no século XX. A primeira parte do texto problematiza como estas fontes podem servir para pensar as diferentes camadas que compõem as práticas institucionais, possibilitando a ampliação do olhar a respeito da história das prisões. A análise perpassa as disputas pela memória que se entrelaçam à dicotomia binária “presos políticos” e “presos comuns”. Por fim, o artigo explora como a pesquisa, a partir dessas fontes, pode ter seus resultados transmutados em produtos que visam alcançar um público mais amplo, focando no processo de criação de podcasts baseados em vidas atravessadas pela experiência institucional. A proposta, toma história das prisões como um tema movediço e incontornável para a história do tempo presente.

Palavras-chave: escritos de presos; história do tempo presente; história pública.

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(Im)possible sources

“I held the pen in my nervous, calloused and icy hand, from the years gone by and the days that are so many that I can’t even count them, in the cold and gloomy shadow of a prison. Far from the comfort of home and loved ones, unaware of fate, I was dozing off in a semi-slumbering lethargy, but... [...] I beg you; I beg you: to forward my request [...].

I am obliged and wishing that the cornucopia of happiness guides your steps wherever you go. And may God bless you” (Florianópolis Penitentiary, File 116, 1933)².

The nervous, calloused and icy hand of someone whose time in prison was already uncountable – “the years already gone by and the days that are so many that I can’t even count them”, wrote Nelson³, imprisoned between 1933 and 1957 in the Florianópolis Penitentiary, convicted of robbery. As in other cases in which it is possible to have access to writing in prison, the inmate mentions the pen, an instrument not always available in prison, as a way of finding a listening ear within the isolation to which he was subjected. Writings like Nelson's are intended to obtain some benefit; they are petitionary documents, common within prisons. Several elements in Nelson's text appear in other writings by prisoners analyzed by different authors in different contexts (Artière, 2014; Gómez, 2021; Whitfield, 2016). Such elements commonly include references to the time spent in prison and prison conditions, distance from loved ones, deference to authorities, allusions to God in gratitude or requests for freedom, the explanation of suffering, bad luck, and poverty, as well as supplications. These artifacts structured by writing are often repeated in poetic and/or dramatic tones.

The analysis of the writings of ordinary prisoners found in archives reveals more than simple life stories; it opens a crucial window for understanding the complexities of human experiences in confinement contexts. These texts constitute unique sources of research, allowing a deep understanding not only of the living conditions in prison, but also of the experiences and subjectivities of incarcerated individuals. Prison writings allow us to explore a series of research possibilities: recurring themes, narrative strategies, recipients, writing supports,

² O trecho citado sofreu correções ortográficas para facilitar a compreensão do leitor, sem alteração do conteúdo.

³ Pseudônimo escolhido para preservar a identidade do preso.

arguments mobilized and the way in which these records were used by institutions to outline profiles of deviance and their place in society. These sources offer a valuable inside perspective, revealing not only the daily and institutional life in prisons, but also the resistance and agency of individuals living in this context, contributing to a broader debate about the prison system and its power dynamics.

Time in prison leaves lasting scars on those who cross its gates as convicts. Prison is constantly in evidence as an unavoidable social problem and should be considered one of the main issues in present history, marked mainly by human rights violations.⁴ Since its inception in the late 18th century, prisons have proven incapable of fulfilling their mission of rehabilitation. Prisons have been flaunting their failures for centuries and continue to assert themselves as legitimate and insurmountable, despite countless criticisms and searches for alternatives.

Between 2000 and 2019, the number of prisoners worldwide increased by more than 25%, while the global population grew by 21% in the same period, resulting in 11.7 million people incarcerated at the end of 2019 (UN, c2021). In According to data from the National Penitentiary Department Information System (SISDEPEN), of the Ministry of Justice, the Brazilian prison population was around 830 thousand people⁵ in December 2022. This represents an extraordinary increase in relation to the approximately 90 thousand prisoners existing in the early 1990s (Brazil, 2022). This frightening number responds to the mass incarceration policies that have crossed most Western countries in the last decades of the 20th and 21st centuries (Salla, 2001).

Although the global prison population is increasing, the conditions of incarceration and rehabilitation policies vary widely across different historical and geographical contexts (Artière, 2005). Although prisons are institutions that have been widely studied in different fields, there is a shortage of studies on their daily dynamics, the forms of interaction between inmates, and the power relations

⁴ In 2017, the regional representative for South America of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Amerigo Incalcaterra (UN, 2017), stated that impunity in cases of torture carried out by public agents against prisoners has become the rule — and not the exception — in the Brazilian penitentiary system.

⁵ This number of prisoners includes those who are under house arrest, with or without electronic monitoring.

between the social groups that form there. To this end, legislation and regulations are completely insufficient as sources of research. In official records, prisoners are either silenced or their writings are used to corroborate their mistakes. Regarding the internal dynamics of prisons, other complementary procedures and additional sources are necessary for a more in-depth analysis of institutional practices, such as access to prisoners' written productions.

The purpose of this text arises from the discomfort caused by these silences, which make the history of prisons a shifting and unavoidable theme for present history. The first part of the text problematizes how the written productions of common prisoners can serve as sources for thinking about the different layers that make up institutional practices, enabling a broader view of the history of prisons. The analysis permeates disputes over memory that are intertwined with the binary dichotomy “political prisoners” and “common prisoners”. Finally, the article explores how research, based on these sources, can have its results transmuted into products that aim to reach a wider audience, focusing on the process of creating podcasts based on lives crossed by the institutional experience.

On writings of common prisoners

From the 19th century onwards, when prison became the main form of punishment in almost all countries in the Western world, the use of written works by ordinary prisoners as instruments of control became part of the panoptic system of surveillance. The act of writing, especially about the prisoner's past life and version of their crime, was sometimes encouraged as part of an exercise in surveillance and subjugation. The practice of writing became a method of control, contributing to the functioning of a panoptic effect, without the need for a heavy architectural structure, but reinforced through an essentially graphic entity. Prisoners were encouraged to write, generating material that served for their own surveillance and control. This active gesture of encouragement, selection and storage of records was sometimes responsible for the composition of files that served to establish who the inmates were, becoming part of their prison files.

Silencing can obscure the voices of prisoners, making a critical and reflective approach essential to problematize these narratives and understand their implications. Written productions, marked by subjective traits of those confined, allow us to connect past and present and think about the mechanisms of power that weave the history of prisons.

In Latin American prisons, the act of writing does not take on the character of a “graphomaniac machine” (Artière, 2005) that characterizes European prisons. On the other side of the Atlantic, not all prisoners could read or be read, since few were literate. Furthermore, there was no encouragement of writing by Latin American prison administrations. The objects necessary for writing, whether paper, pen, pencil, or ink, were (and sometimes still are) unthinkable luxuries for prisoners in some institutions. Even so, the institutions themselves, which sometimes denied access to writing, occasionally safeguarded these traces of the exceptional ordinary produced against the grain during the serving of sentences. Some prisoners’ written productions that reach researchers today did not meet the wishes of their authors in the past; they were intercepted before they reached their recipients, used by the institutions to serve as evidence of behaviors considered inappropriate and deserving of punishment.

In the Latin American context, texts written by ordinary prisoners reveal prison conditions, denounce injustices and act as a form of resistance against the systematic oppression that characterizes the prison system (Whitfield, 2016). However, in these countries, archives that preserve the writings of ordinary prisoners, especially from the 20th century, are rare. According to Ricardo D. Salvatore and Carlos Aguirre (2017), who analyzed archives in Mexico, Chile, Peru, Argentina, and Brazil, only a few letters have been preserved, mainly those addressed to prison and state authorities.

The authors argue that it is difficult to imagine the prison experience of both common criminals and political prisoners without considering the written word in its diverse forms, such as letters, petitions, denunciations, personal diaries, manifestos, poems, songs, plays, testimonies, novels, and books. Although most of these productions are associated with political prisoners, common inmates also engaged in written practices, albeit on a smaller scale. Factors such as

illiteracy, limited education, lack of time, and lack of privileges contributed to this difference. However, Salvatore and Aguirre (2017) emphasize that the history of confinement would not be complete without including the creative and intellectual aspects of prison life woven by common prisoners.

Thus, researchers rarely come across personal writings by ordinary prisoners. Despite the widespread dissemination of studies that use archives on offenders, there are few sources that allow us to address prisons in the 20th and 21st centuries, and even rarer are testimonies from regular inmates (Artière, 2008; Chauvaud; Petit, 1998). In addition to the limitations discussed, there is social shame and the stigma inflicted by prison, which are responsible for inhibiting testimony (Perrot, 1988, p. 238), intimidating writing. According to Michelle Perrot (1988, p. 238), “in a hostile world, only the great rebels, or the great convicts, dare to speak. The others, the mass of inmates, bury themselves in silence” and when released, they only want to hide, to erase their past in prison in order to be accepted by society. Whitfield (2016), analyzing the writings of Latin American prisoners, examines how the written productions of ordinary prisoners reflect and respond to the specific political and social conditions of their contexts of creation, often linking the prison experience to the broader struggle against oppression and for social justice. In the context of Latin America, these texts are particularly significant due to the history of authoritarian regimes and political repression in the region, in addition to bringing important aspects regarding complaints about human rights violations infringed upon ordinary prisoners that marked the 20th century and continues to the present.⁶

Brazil stands out in this scenario for having the third largest prison population in the world. The stereotyping of the common criminal that makes

⁶ To cite just one Brazilian case, the São Paulo Detention Center, known as Carandiru, was the scene of the deaths of 111 prisoners by military police in 1992, in an action to contain a rebellion that became known as the Carandiru Massacre. The Report of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights uses the term massacre, in addition to widespread extermination and indiscriminate killing, to describe the way in which the victims were executed. In the testimonies of survivors, it was reported that the number of deaths was much higher than 111. On this subject, see: <https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/mem%C3%B3ria-massacre-carandiru/XglS6ep1-mKqIlg?hl=pt-BR> and <https://www.massacrecarandiru.org.br/>. Accessed on: April 22, 2021. It should be noted that files of prisoners at the Detention Center were not safeguarded, which allows access to stories marked by subjectivity, such as the oral accounts of survivors that gave rise to several autobiographies and films, in addition to the famous book *Estação Carandiru* (1999) written by Dr. Dráuzio Varella who works at the institution. In this regard, see: (Borges, 2022).

Cesare Lombroso's ideas a shadow of a past that currently persists in Brazil and elsewhere, especially in Latin America. It is reinforced by discourses that associate degeneration with the poorest communities, leading thousands of young black and disadvantaged people to prisons in Latin America. In general, we can say that today it is young people, mostly between 18 and 25 years old, black or mixed-race, poor, with little or no education, without access to the press, justice, or possibilities for political participation and channels of visibility, who populate Brazilian prisons. Historically, those imprisoned for common crimes belong to the lowest social strata, often labeled as "dangerous" and with low levels of education (Benedito, 2017). These individuals are often described as degenerates, with character flaws, and immersed in "promiscuity" and "moral baseness" (Oliveira, 2017, p. 79).

Myriam Sepúlveda dos Santos (2018), who worked on the organization of the Museu do Cárcere (Rio de Janeiro), points out the difficulties in obtaining written records and testimonies left by common prisoners in the archives linked to the penitentiaries of Ilha Grande, in Rio de Janeiro. On the other hand, according to the author, "political prisoners, mostly from sectors of the population that held more resources and power, managed to give visibility to what they experienced and witnessed" (Santos, 2013, p. 237). Michel Foucault (2010, p. 8), in his involvement with the Prison Information Group (GIP) in the 1970s, already pointed out that political prisoners had privileged means of expression in relation to common prisoners, the latter without "knowledge, social relations, external contacts that allow us to know what they say, what they do and, above all, the political support that makes their action rebound" (Foucault, 2006, p. 8).

The adjective "political" establishes a structure of differentiation marked by conflicts. It allows acts of violence by the state and the police, as well as certain forms of punishment within prisons, to be understood as "non-political," and ends up forging deep hierarchies of values (Galeano; Corrêa; Pires, 2021). The categories "political prisoner" and "common prisoner" do not have fixed or widely consensual definitions; on the contrary, they are shifting and complex constructions, subject to political and legal disputes, and are at the center of disputes over memory. The difference lies in how the state and society classify crimes and the nature of the

acts committed, based on a historical and political process that shapes these categories over time. A “political prisoner” is, in general, an individual incarcerated for their actions against the current regime, such as involvement in political or union activism, or any form of opposition to the government. In memory battles, political imprisonment is invested with a heroic aura, being a source of pride, a reclaimed memory. In contrast, the “common prisoner” is often associated with crimes perceived as misconduct without political motivation, usually linked to social factors such as poverty and marginalization. The construction of these categories goes beyond the simple nature of the acts, being shaped by political interests, legal, economic, and social contexts, and by memory disputes linked to cultural heritage, the preservation of archives and buildings. As a result, this frontier is constantly changing, adapting to variations in political and legal regimes over time (Galeano; Corrêa; Pires, 2021).

In this debate arena, every prisoner can be understood as a political prisoner, marked by public policies that aim to silence and erase diverse, marginalized minorities. However, when we analyze the battles for memory and heritage in more depth, the issue gains entangled layers, which mark the split between the two categories more deeply. Two examples will be used to explain the topic. In Brazil, the case of the DOI-Codi in São Paulo is emblematic for understanding this divergence. It concerns the preservation of the memory of political prisoners whose families insisted on claiming their dead and missing and on elucidating the crimes and torture, seeking the criminalization of those responsible and the recognition of the historical importance of the assets and places related to the regime⁷.

The DOI-Codi (n.º 66578-2012) listing process was proposed by Ivan Seixas⁸, one of the survivors of the torture that took place there during the military

⁷ Case No. 414, available at: <http://condemphat.sp.gov.br/benstombados/conjunto-das-antigas-instalacoes-da-oban-e-doi-codi/>. Accessed: March 2021.

⁸ Ivan Seixas “was arrested in 1971, at the age of 16, along with his father by Operation Bandeirante - OBAN. Taken to DOI-Codi/SP, they were tortured together. His father was killed under torture at DOI-Codi/SP on 04/17/1971. His entire family, his mother Fanny and his two sisters, Ieda and Lara Seixas, were also taken to DOI-Codi, where they were also violated and saw Joaquim being killed”. Information available at: <http://www.memorialdaresistencia.org.br/memorial/default.aspx?c=entrevistados&identrevistado=4&identrevista=8>. Accessed on: February 18, 2021.

dictatorship⁹. In the process, historian Déborah Neves highlights the importance of the place as a fundamental physical support for the violation of human rights, essential for us to consider the “reasons that led to its recognition as a cultural heritage of the state”¹⁰. The DOI-Codi, a place of imprisonment and torture, was preserved at the request of victims and their families, fulfilling the role of shaking the official memory, preventing its sometimes-appeasing action and its attempts at erasure.

On the other side of the coin is the Carandiru case. The São Paulo Detention Center, known as Carandiru, was the scene of the deaths of 111 prisoners by military police in 1992, in an action to contain a rebellion that became known as the Carandiru Massacre. Ten years later, in 2002, what was once considered the largest penitentiary city in the country and one of the largest in the world began to implode. First, pavilions 6, 8 and 9 were destroyed, the latter being the scene of the massacre. In 2005, it was the turn of pavilions 2 and 5, ending the process of implosion and deactivation of the Detention Center. The Youth Park was created on the site, and the two remaining pavilions of the Detention Center, 4 and 7, were substantially altered, giving way to a technology college, a library and spaces for concerts and soirees. Carandiru represents the erasure of an unclaimed memory, marked by a type of violence that continues in the present. Ordinary prisoners are not seen as subjects of memory, and memorials are not dedicated to them so that society can remember the victims of state violence, because within prisons brutality is naturalized as part of the system. State violence, in this case, is not memory, it does not need support, it should not be remembered because it is embedded in the present. In an attempt to appease and silence the memory of the Carandiru massacre, the State created the Museu Penitenciário Paulista and the Espaço Memória Carandiru. The museum, opened in 2014, displays a vast collection on the history of prisons in São Paulo and opts for the term “riot” instead of “massacre,” a subtle choice of words that has incredible potential to

⁹ According to a survey by Brasil: Nunca Mais, at least 1,843 people were subjected to some type of torture at the DOI-Codi in São Paulo between 1969 and 1975. Some of the victims include well-known cases, such as that of journalist Vladimir Herzog and former president Dilma Rousseff. Information available at: <http://spressosp.com.br/2014/01/27/ivan-seixas-e-adriano-diogo-tombam-o-doi-codi-de-sao-paulo/>. Accessed on: March 1, 2021.

¹⁰ Case No. 414, available at: <http://condephaat.sp.gov.br/benstombados/conjunto-das-antigas-instalacoes-da-oban-e-doi-codi/>. Accessed on: March 1, 2021.

minimize the gravity of what happened. The Memory Space, created by State Decree No. 52,112, of August 30, 2007, addresses the history of the Carandiru neighborhood, the Penitentiary Complex, and the Youth Park, without including the massacre in its "mission." The State controls memory, which can be said about the massacre and about common prisoners. The Carandiru massacre is an allegory for thinking about the battles of memory that configure the binary distinction between "political prisoners" and "common prisoners."

Archives related to common prisoners also do not survive these erasures; they are often "lost" due to the lack of investment in their preservation. This is a selective and intentional neglect since the sources can compromise the State itself by allowing the institutional routine to be exposed. The sources are dangerous, they have the power to shake the system's structures, to denounce and bring to light what happens in institutional practice. This is why sources that document the time spent in prison by common prisoners are scarce and difficult to access. Handling these documents with ethical care is certainly necessary, but it begs the question: Does making them difficult to access for research, or not even guaranteeing the preservation of collections, serve the protection of prisoners' identities, or the State's fear of what might emerge through research? A consensus seems to have been created that the memory of incarceration concerns only political prisoners, corroborating an attitude of indifference towards common prisoners, whose abuses are naturalized (Borges, 2023).

Against the current, throughout the 20th century, common prisoners insisted on smuggling letters, and on certain occasions confronted the power of the State, challenging prison administration and institutional practices (Süssekind, 2014). Unlike political prisoners, most of whom were literate, common prisoners rarely wrote their own memoirs, or even left traces of themselves in prisons. Thus, how can we address the history of prisons without access to traces of the lived experiences of their main inhabitants?

Inconvenient writings: neither delivered nor sent

Antonio Castillo Gómez (2003), in *Escrito en prisión: Las escritas carcelarias*, analyzes in detail the writings of prisoners from the 16th and 17th centuries,

arguing that writing in prison transcends the desire for communication, being a form of resistance and preservation of identity. He emphasizes that writing, whether in letters, notes or even through graffiti on the walls of cells, is a work of affirmation of identity in an environment that seeks to dehumanize. Writing allows the prisoner to recover his identity and maintain a connection with the outside world, whether through pleas, hidden messages, or diary entries. Castillo Gómez (2003) sees these writings as acts of rebellion and survival, subverting the silence imposed by the prison regime. The use of any available materials to write highlights the importance of this form of expression, even in extremely adverse conditions.

As aforementioned, the writings of ordinary prisoners are rare sources in Latin American collections. In general, the practice of writing was not (and still is not) encouraged by prison administrations. Access to the materials needed to write was difficult, and low levels of education and illiteracy are strong characteristics of prisons. These particularities continue to this day and are a present past in most Latin American prisons. Furthermore, there was a lack of interest on the part of the authorities in preserving and disseminating documents produced inside prisons. The testimony of prisoners can certainly destabilize and cause discomfort, denouncing human rights violations and the precariousness of these institutions. Institutional walls should not have gaps through which one can spy. Nor does society, in general, want to know what goes on inside prisons. Therefore, who would be interested in preserving these sources? However, it is almost impossible to imagine the prison experience without the written word, which persists even in the midst of so many adversities.

Many of the writings composed by common prisoners while serving their sentences are simple, unpublished manuscripts, sealed and attached to institutional archives, many of which are incorporated into other documents that make up the inmates' files. Returning to what was explained earlier, many of these records reach researchers today precisely because they did not meet the wishes of their authors, intercepted before they could serve their purpose. These are documents seized with the purpose of attesting to behavior, benefiting those who followed the rules and punishing those who broke them. They are part of the

panoptic machine, and on the other hand, they allow cracks to be forced into its structure, but they are also desires to be heard through writing. Many writings were addressed to the prison administrations themselves, expressing their desires, detailing their versions of the crimes, and denouncing the living conditions in prison.

The writings produced by ordinary prisoners are generally found in the prisoners' files or medical records and provide the possibility of a detailed analysis of institutional practices, marked by subjectivities that are difficult to access. This type of source is essential for thinking about prison life, as it allows us to perceive the internal structure in full activity: how the lives of prisoners and their daily conflicts were managed, as well as how the trajectories of individuals who would otherwise remain anonymous were guided (Borges; Salla, 2023). These sources offer a unique mosaic of varied documents about the period in which the individual served their sentence. They not only document the prisoners, but also produce them as subjects, as a result of a relationship of knowledge and power, composing a discursive and institutional exercise capable of shaping the identity of prisoners, marking them indelibly. Prison archives, therefore, are active and productive gestures that organize and mediate facts, ensuring the intelligibility that allows historical debate (Trouillot, 1995).

By establishing the contemporary penitentiary organization, incarceration also creates a vast mass of documents intended to serve the institutional routine as well as control individuals. The official objective is not only to punish, but also to reintegrate inmates into society, although in practice this often results only in their exclusion (Perrot, 1988, p. 236). Archives are the sources that best represent this machinery of records, containing detailed information about inmates and administrative and disciplinary routines. The volume and diversity of this information varies over time and may include data such as place of birth, profession, date of birth, age, education, type of crime, absences and punishments, insertion in workshops and educational activities. Physical characteristics such as scars, tattoos, size of head, eyes and ears, skin and hair color, as well as criminal records and information about ancestors and descendants are also recorded. These records, filled out by guards, directors, and

doctors, show the importance attributed to physical traits to identify delinquents and reveal the influence of the thinking of Cesare Lombroso, Alexandre Lacassagne and criminal anthropology in Brazil since the end of the 19th century (Borges, 2024).

Despite being essential sources for prison studies, the use of inmate files has been quite limited in research in Brazil (Borges; Salla, 2023). This is due not to the negligence of researchers, but mainly to the loss of this documentation and the lack of concern of authorities with its preservation, resulting in its continuous disappearance from institutions. Long-term sequential files of common prisoners' medical records are rare, which limits research and makes it difficult to prepare a comprehensive overview of prison life in certain periods and different Brazilian states. The Florianópolis Penitentiary archives, belonging to the Institute of Documentation and Research in Human Sciences (IDCH/UDESC), for example, is an exception, preserving 4,200 inmate files between 1930 and the late 1970s. In it, works written by common prisoners can be found.

Like other institutions, in the Florianópolis Penitentiary, receiving or sending letters was considered a privilege. According to the Internal Regulations of the Penitentiary, according to a document from 1931: "inconvenient letters will not be delivered or forwarded" (Santa Catarina, 1931, art. 47). It is very common for documents that make up the records to have few records of prisoners' memories and, when they exist, they were generally read, filtered, transcribed and/or marked by employees, by agents who can give new meaning to what was said. In some cases, records written by prisoners can be found with highlighted passages and observations recorded by employees, indicating what could be considered "inconvenient". In this sense, I cite a case from the Florianópolis Penitentiary.

"Homosexual Practice and the Environment" is the title of a 12-page essay written in 1959 by an inmate at the Florianópolis Penitentiary (Borges, 2024)¹¹. Oscar, the author, used writing to describe a series of observations about the "types" of individuals in prison, bringing to light issues related to homosexuality, sexual violence, and the notion of masculinity in the prison environment. Arrested

¹¹ The case was treated more carefully by Borges (2024).

in 1958 at the age of 20 for theft, Oscar was sentenced to 3 years and 4 months in the Florianópolis Penitentiary. To prepare his request for parole, a report on his "penal life", signed by the deputy director of prison on March 9, 1959, concluded that Oscar had good prison conduct, "demonstrating perfect assimilation of the correctional methods applied" and "complete absence of the dangerousness that he carried", considering him "capable of returning to society and maintaining himself in it honestly". However, four months later, on August 25, 1959, a new report reclassified Oscar as a person of "very bad character whose signs of dangerousness are evident", causing him to remain in prison. Between these two reports, an essay written by Oscar and entitled "Homosexual Practice and the Environment" was attached to his file. Although the text is not directly mentioned in the official documents, the change in treatment, the loss of privileges and the permanence in the institution indicate an attempt to discipline and discourage behavior considered inappropriate. Some passages of Oscar's essay were underlined, possibly by the institution, as it was common for observations and notes to be made in the writings seized and attached to the files of prisoners. The underlined passages are those in which Oscar suggests that the institution, or "the environment", contributed to abusive and violent homosexual practices, denying inmates the right to repentance.

The act of archiving these records alongside the prisoners' files therefore involves a selection that implies both the inclusion and exclusion of narratives, as well as the emphasis on certain passages through markings, directly influencing what should be remembered and what should be forgotten in the history of prisons (Trouillot, 1995). Archiving is an active, conscious, and intentional attitude, both to include and/or place at the center, and to exclude and/or push to the margins, and therefore capable of shaping what is remembered and what is forgotten or marginalized.

The quote that opens this article, evoking the gesture of picking up a pen and writing, is also from an inmate at the Florianópolis Penitentiary. In the files of inmates' files under the custody of IDCH/UDESC, it is possible to find several works written by inmates. So far, 2,830 of the 4,200 existing files have been

examined, covering the period from 1930 to 1966. Within this set, 547 files¹² contain some type of written work, such as letters, notes, memoranda to the administration, requests for forgiveness, a diary, an essay, postcards, and photographs with dedications, among others. In general, these writings are simple and direct, and in many cases reflect the educational limitations of the prisoners, many of whom had only primary education. The institutional criteria for defining literacy were sometimes imprecise, which adds a layer of complexity to the understanding of these documents, and many learned to read and write within the institution itself. They are written on a variety of, often unconventional, media, demonstrating the limitations of the institution itself in promoting writing.

Even though there was no incentive to write as part of the control system, encouraging literacy among prisoners was an important point for the institution. According to a 1933 Report, a teacher was appointed to the Penitentiary, even though the school supplies were considered insufficient. The Report indicates that 74% of the convicts attended the school established in the penitentiary, a significant contingent of prisoners who, for the most part, arrived at the institution illiterate. According to Miranda, “the fact that they had learned to read and write in prison served as justification in the arguments of the Penitentiary Council for granting them progression to the regime, whether to the semi-open regime or to conditional release, as well as to demonstrate the efficiency of the application of the penitentiary regime” (Miranda, 1998). Literacy, taken as part of the institutional discourse and its effects, enabled writings that often questioned or called into question the efficiency of the institution.

Why tell these stories?

The writings of ordinary prisoners have enormous potential to denaturalize prison history, but how can historians harness these sources to reach a wider audience? Why should these stories be told?

¹² The data are generated by the Marginal Archives Extension Project. In a recent article, Borges (2024) mentions the survey carried out between 1930 and 1965, which identified that 532 records/files contain written productions of prisoners. Currently, the project has reached the year 1966 and there are already 547 files with written productions.

These questions motivated the creation of the podcast series *Marginal Stories*. The proposal problematizes the history of prisons in Brazil based on the life experiences of incarcerated individuals. To this end, it prioritizes the use of written productions, such as letters and inscriptions on cell walls, amplifying voices that are normally silenced and challenging the conventional notion of which materials are considered valid for the construction of historical narratives. This approach not only enriches the understanding of prison history in Brazil, but also highlights the need to revisit which stories are told and how. The project, which integrates extension¹³ and research, seeks to capture the experiences of these individuals through unique details and personal moments lived during their time in prison, emphasizing the importance of “smaller archives” (Artière, 2016) in historiography.

The proposal seeks to build historical knowledge accompanied by a public dimension, developing a continuous reflective practice, “a continuous learning process, based on the reconstruction of work practices from concrete experiences” (Santhiago, 2018). This concern with the practical consequences of what is produced and with the dynamization of the results in different languages for different audiences, resulted in the creation of the *Marginal Stories* podcast series.

In the series¹⁴, life stories are triggered by various themes, such as prison life, gender, racial issues, homosexuality, masculinity, among others, emerging from written productions left by prisoners and attached to their files. The structure consists of six episodes and three interviews with experts in the field, invited to comment on the stories. In the first season, released in 2022, all cases come from the Florianópolis Penitentiary, with a bonus case coming from

¹³ The series is an initiative of the Marginal Archives extension project and carries out actions aimed at safeguarding archives and disseminating historical information related to institutions of social kidnapping, with a focus on the history of prisons in recent years. Foucault defines institutions of kidnapping as places that forcibly remove individuals from their family or wider social environment and admit them for a long period, with the aim of shaping their conduct, disciplining their behaviors, and formatting their thoughts (Foucault, 2013). The project supported the donation of the archive collection of prisoners from the Florianópolis Penitentiary to the Institute of Documentation in Human Sciences – IDCH/UDESC, in 2013, supporting the safeguarding and dissemination of the collection, prioritizing ethical care linked to sensitive sources.

¹⁴ Available at: <https://open.spotify.com/show/6Pw1em7TNiBbTLKBqQaZHC?si=f9fde4014aa14d9a>.

Portugal. In the second season, scheduled to air in the first half of 2025, the stories cover different Brazilian states, with a bonus case coming from Italy.

Public history can be seen as a means of provoking reflection with practical consequences, encouraging the review and revitalization of the researcher's principles and practices (Santhiago, 2018). The proposal for creating the Marginal Stories series follows this perspective and intertwines with the concerns of present-day history and its listening to the uncomfortable themes of today. The series focuses on elements that are often neglected, marginalized, or inaccessible in the historical narrative of prisons. The meticulous research in prison file archives reveals the daily lives of ordinary individuals entangled in the Brazilian prison system. Each story is woven into a mosaic that, instead of obscuring individual experiences or using them to construct sensationalist narratives, places them in a broader context in dialogue. The challenge of the series is to intertwine these individual narratives into a comprehensive collective account of the lives of prisoners in 20th century Brazil, weaving together the social and historical structures that configure the prison universe and connect it to other states and countries.

Philippe Artière (2022), in the preface to the book *Marginal Stories*, which contains the transcription of the episodes from the first season of the series, states that: "Without ever giving up the rules and methods of social sciences, the authors propose a popular history of prison in Brazil". For the author, the result presented sets up a popular history in the sense presented by Howard Zinn¹⁵, in articulation with the conceptions of Frantz Fanon, that is, a history written from the sources left by the defeated, by the deviants, those whom the philosopher and psychiatrist Fanon (1961) calls the "wretched of the earth".

The series is based on the "smaller archives" (2016), which are generally numerous, scattered, and incomplete, sometimes forming a jigsaw puzzle of loose words seized by institutional control. The format is non-fictional storytelling. In this case, not only real cases, but episodes entirely constructed from historical

¹⁵ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (1980), paru en France sous le titre: *Une histoire populaire des États-Unis de 1492 à nos jours*, (trans. De l'anglais par Fr. Cotton), Marseille, Agone, 2002.

sources, allowing those interested to follow the process of creating a product from the raw material of the historiographical operation. It is an auditory experience aimed mainly at young people entering history and law courses, but also at a broad audience interested in the subject. Pseudonyms are used in the episodes and in the first season, for example, the characters were called by the names of prisons in Brazil and abroad, indicating that these marginal stories could be part of any of these places. The series was designed to foster reflection, to broaden the debate, and to produce knowledge about the history of prisons using a resource that goes beyond the academic text, employing other rules that operate meaning in academic production.

Final considerations, or why tell these stories?

The creation of the podcast series *Marginal Stories* shows how public history, articulated with the concerns of present-day history, can streamline access to historical knowledge. The work connects historical issues to contemporary prison conditions, showing the reverberations of the past in the present. Using engaging and accessible audio narratives, the series expands the debate on prison policies and human rights, raising public awareness of the problems surrounding the prison system. This participatory and reflective approach reinforces the commitment to producing historical knowledge that has practical consequences, democratizing access to prison living conditions and promoting critical reflection on the social and historical structures that shape the prison universe. By intertwining these individual narratives into a comprehensive collective account, the series contributes significantly to a broader debate on the dynamics of power and resistance in prisons, enriching historiography with new perspectives and essential voices.

One of the impacts of the research and extension work presented here is the growing interest of people in finding information about family members who have been in the Florianópolis penitentiary. This movement is driven both by the impact of the podcasts and by recommendations made by the prison institution itself. Most of the time, these are silent searches for specific information for

bureaucratic purposes, such as compensation, confirmation of date of death, date of entry or exit from prison, etc. In some cases, whenever possible, we schedule a conversation with the interested party to find out the reasons for seeking the file.

On June 28, 2023, I received an email from Edson Silveira da Rosa, a retired journalist, interested in researching the files of common prisoners from the Florianópolis penitentiary to reconstruct the judicial and criminal history of his father, who had served time both in the Florianópolis State Penitentiary, formerly known as the Pedra Grande Penitentiary, and in the extinct Agricultural Penal Colony of Canasvieiras, where Edson was born and spent his childhood during the 1960s. The search for documentation of his imprisoned father was defined by him as a “personal project with an affective objective, for the emotional understanding of my own life trajectory”.

The interview with Edson revealed fragments of the poorly documented history of the penal colony. We discovered the presence of families living with the prisoners, the daily life marked by segregation and the prejudice faced by the children of the inmates, who studied and circulated only within the confines of the colony, separated from the rest of the neighborhood. The difficult social reintegration of those who, after serving their sentences, tried to resume their lives outside this environment also emerged. The interview is very powerful material for understanding a series of questions about the prison experience and its social repercussions in the present that deserves to be analyzed in greater detail, which goes beyond the scope of this text. But mentioning this case is important to conclude this article.

A few months after the interview, I received a message from Mr. Edson, who said he had completed another stage of research on his father; he had found and transcribed a book of memories of his grandfather – an excerpt about the prison experience of a son who was contacted by a father. He said he would like these records to be included in his father’s prison file and asked that, if possible, the material be attached. What he requested was the recording of a counter-memory, deposited with the old prison file, as a conclusion to his father’s story, the family’s version of the experience of confinement, making the archive a living element,

updated by the memories that connect present and past. Is it possible to do this? Finally, Edson thanked the Marginal Archives Project for the opportunity to “pick up the pieces” of his existence.

One of the possibilities of the history of the present time is to contribute to the redefinition of uncomfortable pasts and subjects, whether for those most directly involved or for society in general. Written productions allow access to the prison worldview developed by those who lived the institutional experience, enabling the researcher to explore multiple issues, such as the conditions and means of writing, the possible supporting material, the themes, the strategies for constructing narratives, the recipients, and the subjects mentioned. They make it possible to take a glimpse of institutional practices in their most ordinary and insignificant forms, such as the demands and complaints of everyday life, the arrangements, the informalities, and the interactions between incarcerated people.

In a world with a significant increase in the number of people incarcerated, a more democratic future must require broad social discussion about incarceration practices. Recognizing prison as one of the crucial problems of the present time is essential to encourage public debates about contemporary forms of punishment. Historically, prisons have been associated with human rights violations and degrading conditions, reflecting a systematic disregard for marginalized groups, such as slaves, indigenous peoples, low-income workers, political dissidents, and various minorities (Alvarez, 2023). It is necessary to create means, spaces, products, and pathways to incite public debates about forms of punishment and the punitive practices that mark the present, especially about incarceration. As previously stated, prison has crossed the centuries showing its failure and imposing itself as legitimate and insurmountable, permeated by violence, torture, and mistreatment. Bringing to light the trajectories of lives affected by the institutional experience of incarceration helps to promote a critical reflection on the social and historical structures that shape the prison universe.

I believe these accounts answer the question: **Why tell these stories?**

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