

The Reproduction Of Social Control

A STUDY OF PRISON WORKERS
AT SAN QUENTIN



Barbara A. Owen

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1

Introduction: Working in the Pen

Bob Powers is typical of the old-time correctional officers at San Quentin. He is a white, 41-year-old male with prior military experience. After discharge from the army, he worked in a wide variety of manufacturing and service jobs. He eventually applied for positions in local police departments, fire departments, and the California Department of Corrections because he was interested in the job security provided by civil service. He came to work at San Quentin since it was the first to offer him a job. His wife was concerned about the danger of the job, and he admits that he didn't quite know what to expect. But it provided reasonable pay, decent benefits, and job security which he and his family needed.

The period when Bob Powers started work at San Quentin is now called the "good old days." Prior to the late 1970s, most prisons were sheltered from public inquiry and shielded by a hands-off policy endorsed by the courts. The warden of the "Big House" (Irwin, 1980) enjoyed almost absolute power over his prisoners and his workers. Prisoners' rights—soon to become an issue in the turbulent years to follow—were treated subjectively by the staff. The warden and his staff set the tone for the definition and treatment of prisoners. When Bob Powers came on the job in the early 1970s, the prison population was high and the number of officers was low. Most officers were similar to him in background and demographics—white men with military backgrounds. Like other new officers,

Bob Powers received little training for his new job. He described his idea of the job as,

guarding prisoners . . . well I thought that I would have a gun, or a set of handcuffs on an inmate—he was the bad guy and I was the good guy. But then they told me that I wouldn't have a gun on the ground and to always watch my back—and I still do that. That was about it for my training. But then once you get inside those walls, you find out it's a lot more than that.

As he became familiar with the world of the prison, Bob Powers learned the contours of prison culture and developed a personal strategy for dealing with prisoners. He found that interaction with prisoners was a key to the job and “talking to them and really listening” was the best way to get the job done.

During the 1970s, the prison was changing in many ways. Along with the increased racial/ethnic consciousness of the prisoners, the society outside the walls was beginning to respond to entrenched inequalities of race and sex. Affirmative action goals were set by the state and the prison made an active effort to hire minority and later, female workers in male institutions. As prisoners began to assert their claim to legal rights (Fogel, 1979), the courts began to grant them greater legal protection. Prison workers also began to organize during this period, becoming unionized as well as working for the professionalization of their jobs. These changes, along with shifting images of prisoners and the introduction of minorities and women into the prison labor force (Jacobs and Retsky, 1975), have significantly altered the occupational culture of “working in the pen.”

George Elliot was one of the first black men to join the correctional staff at the prison. His story illustrates many aspects of contemporary worker culture. He has a military background and several years of college preparation in law enforcement. A college friend who was on the staff encouraged him to apply for a job at San Quentin. For George Elliot, this was a step toward a career as a police officer on the street. Feeling that he was too young to

hit the streets, he thought that the prison would make him ready for that job, which he saw as more demanding. But working at San Quentin entailed a number of problems for the young 23-year-old correctional officer. Among these problems was the existence of a ruling clique of officers and administrators who ran the prison. Most of these officers were white and George Elliot was very conscious of his minority status:

When I first came here there were only a few black officers. When you would see one you would give a little smile and say, oh good, there is another one. When I first started working here, I worked a lot of positions where it was just me and the rest of them were white . . . just little old me out there. It was good when there was another black working because then you can go stand by them and you don't look so funny standing there by yourself. Now I know almost all the officers and it's different, but back then you were just looking for a friend, someone you could turn to and not worry that they would say something about you as soon as you looked the other way.

Along with Bob Powers, George Elliot also believes that talking to prisoners is the most successful style of working in the pen. "We talk about everything—girls, sports, the streets." Another area of agreement between Powers and Elliot is a shared attitude toward women. Both have an ambivalent perspective on female officers in a male, maximum security prison. Elliot explains:

In a way it is good and in a way it is not. The bottom line for me is that this is no place for a woman to work. I believe in equal opportunity, but there are positions that women should not work. There are big guys in here—she may be able to run fast and get help, but if it came down to a brawl, and heads were busted, it is no place for a woman. There are so many women now—I think it keeps the place calmed down. I don't think this is the place for a woman but it has worked out . . . if nothing is happening the women can do the job.

One of the women who "can do the job" is Kathy Peters. She is white and has a bachelor's degree in social science. At 26,

starting work at San Quentin was a considered choice, a challenge to her social ideals. When she came to work at the end of the 1970s, the open violence of the earlier decade had been replaced by a more stable order due to the tightening of security. Racial conflict among the prisoners remained a basis for social organization, but racism had become less of a problem among the officers. Sexism and a resistance to female officers, however, continued to divide the staff. Peters is seen by some male workers as a good officer because she "works like a man" and "isn't afraid of popping them [prisoners] in the mouth if they deserve it." This is in contrast to opinions on other women who "act too macho" and "seem to forget that they are women when they walk through the gate."

Bob Powers, George Elliot, and Kathy Peters represent three significant elements of correctional officer culture. Their careers illustrate shifts in both the structure and culture of the prison and the implications these changes have for the worker culture. This study focuses on two basic relationships in correctional officer culture: relations with prisoners and relations with coworkers. This emphasis leads to the investigation of a broader issue in prison studies—the reproduction of social control in the prison.

The prison has long occupied a central role in the study of social control. These studies, however, have been limited to describing the nature of the *prisoner* culture, ignoring the role of the prison worker in the production and maintenance of social control in the prison. As Melossi (1985) has recently suggested, the "motivational constructs employed by agents of social control" require investigation. This study is concerned with these social accounts—the way prison workers come to define their role in the prison, and, in doing so, become an agent of the institutional mechanisms of social control. The study of the worldview of the worker and its role in the reproduction of social control blends two separate approaches to the study of the prison. One approach has been a concentration on a structural analysis of the prison (Haynor and Ash, 1939; McKorkle and Korn, 1954; Sykes and Messinger, 1960; Garabedian, 1963; Thomas and Petersen, 1977; Duffee, 1975; Sykes, 1956; McCleary, 1960; Jacobs, 1979; Wright, 1973; and Cloward *et al.*, 1960). Microsociological descriptions of prison

culture constitute a second approach to the study of social control (Clemmer, 1940; Schragg, 1944; Irwin and Cressey, 1962; Irwin, 1970; Manocchio and Dunn, 1970; Cressey, 1960; Irwin, 1980; Carroll, 1977 and 1974; Jacobs, 1974; Davidson, 1974; Burns, 1969; Jacobs, 1977; Weinberg, 1942; and Sykes, 1956). These two approaches have left a gap in understanding the prison as an active, living institution of social control. A description of the activity by which social control is translated from the interactional level to the structural level is needed to elaborate the connection between the culture and the structure of the prison. A description is needed of the ways in which social control is both produced and distributed differentially throughout the prison community. This study also examines social order and the ways in which it is produced and maintained through the actions of its members.

In the prison, social control affects the workers themselves. As employees, the worker is also subjected to the very forces which he or she is, on the surface, charged with introducing onto the prisoner. Social control is a product of relations among human beings, acting and reacting within the institutional context of the prison. This context is shaped by power and the expression of interests specific to the prison community. These interests flow from the prison administration and the central administration of the state and may not be identical to the interests of the line worker in the prison.

The reciprocity of social control is the key to understanding its reproduction. This study suggests that the worker is both a subject and an object of social control within the dynamics of the prison social order. As the worker subjects the prisoner to the demands of social control he or she is also subjected to the very same demands for rule-governed behavior. In the prison, these rules are both formal, as articulated in the laws and administrative codes, and informal, as power and interests are negotiated through interaction. The paramilitary organization of the prison formal social structure, the high levels of competition among workers, and the traditions of racism and sexism in the prison create a subtle, yet complicated, web of social control for the worker as well.

Like other concepts which explain life in prison, such as prison

culture and the deprivations of imprisonment, description and analysis of the worker meaningworld illuminates the very structure of the prison itself. As conveyed by the concept of "structuration" (Giddens, 1979) and the "self-production of society" (Touraine, 1977), this inquiry assumes that social structure is, in fact, a process which exists only through the actions and interactions of its participants. Examination of these actions and their attendant meanings also reveals the very nature of the institutional structure. Touraine makes this point well:

Human society possesses a capacity of symbolic creation by the means of which, between a situation and social conduct, there occurs the formation of meaning, a system of orientation of conduct. Human society is the only natural system known to possess this capacity to form and transform its functioning on the basis of its investments and the image it has of its capacity to act on itself (Touraine, 1977, p. 4).

The development of meaningworlds reflects the ongoing, lived experience of the worker. Social control, like other institutional forms, is a skilled performance of social beings. These skills are obtained through direct contacts with other actors whose behavior reflect relations of power and interests. Giddens (1979) argues that social practice is embedded in language. Through a process of symbolic interaction, individuals interpret these offered meanings and tailor them to their own subjective interests. This book describes this reproductive process.

Studying social control is not a simple task. As E. P. Thompson says about the difficulty of studying another sociological construct, "class":

Like any other relationship, it is a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and atomize its structure. The finest-meshed sociological net cannot give us a pure specimen of class, any more than it can give us one of deference or of love. The relationship must always be embodied in real people in a real context (Thompson, 1963, p. 9).

Toward this end, this study examines the reproduction of social control as it exists in the meanings, actions, and relationships of those charged with custody and security in the prison.

THE LOCATION OF THIS INVESTIGATION: SAN QUENTIN

Among institutions of social control, San Quentin stands as a symbol of severest punishment. Inside these walls are prisoners judged to be the most dangerous to society. As part of a large state prison system, San Quentin receives California's maximum custody prisoners. San Quentin is also a place of work for several hundred employees. During the course of the workday, the prison worker interacts with all members of the prison community. This interaction and the corresponding relationships shape the social organization of the prison. Relations with prisoners illustrate the translation—and the transmutations—of social control in the prison. Relations with workers reveal the ways in which these forces of social control act upon the workers themselves. The following chapters describe these relations which sustain the reproduction of social control.

San Quentin State Prison is a maximum security prison on the San Francisco Bay. Traditionally this prison held prisoners convicted of serious felonies. The prison has the walls, towers, and physical dimensions of the "Big House" as described by Irwin (1980). The physical dimensions of the prison are marked by five-tiered cell blocks, the "Big Yard," the walls that surround the entire housing area, and gun towers which guard the perimeter of the prison.

Until the early 1980s, prisoners of most classifications had some amount of movement inside the prison. For those who were able to "program," jobs, school, and vocational training allowed movement during the daylight hours. Other activities, such as visits, meals, appointments, errands, and "hustles" also contributed to a constant flow of prisoners throughout the prison. Due to changes in policy and the escalation of violence within the institution, these

activities have been severely modified. Movement within the institution and the availability of programs appear to have decreased as the social order of the prison shifts toward a more restrictive order.

Prison social order is shaped by the nature of its population and the policies of the administration. At the time of this research, the population was a somewhat heterogenous mix of custody levels. Once a prisoner was assigned to San Quentin, his routine within the institution was determined primarily by this custody level. In the honor block, for example, the levels of privileges were only limited by the walls of the institution. Prisoners who lived here had access to their own canteen, exercise yard, and ordinarily did not have to "lock up" (return to their cells) until 10 P.M.. The majority of prisoners with custodies between medium and maximum are designated "general population" or mainline. Prisoners requiring the greatest security and those sentenced to death are housed in separate units. For example, at the time of this research, the North Block housed maximum security prisoners and segregated these prisoners according to gang affiliation (with corresponding tiers for those designated "nonaffiliated"). Movement in North Block was severely restricted and under escort by a correctional worker. These prisoners are likely to spend the most time in "lock down." Death row was also a separate unit. Prisoners here await determination of their death penalty sentences and live in a self-contained unit. The Adjustment Center (AC) held the prisoners deemed disciplinary problems. Irwin (1980, p. 203) suggests that such custody designations are systems of "hierarchical segregation that encourage withdrawal and conformity and greatly reduce contact between prisoners. As such, prison architecture itself functions to produce and maintain social control."

These living units and their levels of privilege undergo constant change. During the fieldwork, the honor block lost its level of privileges and mobility and was converted to a "workers' " block for prisoners whose labor maintains the institution. Much of the South Block and East Block, which formerly housed mainline prisoners, had been converted into lock up units, much like the North Block. These changes altered the day-to-day activities of the prison

community and changed the stability of the prison social order. Previously, San Quentin was seen by many convicts and workers as "the best place to do time." Although confined to a life inside the walls, the availability of activities and programs provided some semblance of a productive life among the prisoners. Since many prisoners had lived continuously at San Quentin for years, and many expected to remain there, a prisoner social system developed that was somewhat stable and predictable. Prisoners who amassed "juice" (that is, influence and power) developed a vested interest in the existing social order and exerted their influence over other prisoners to not rock the boat. At San Quentin, it appears that the prisoner population is becoming much younger, more violent (in terms of criminal and institutional histories), and less involved in the activities which contribute to the stable social order of the prison. In some respects, the rise of the gangs—and the corresponding fear of this rise—has also shaped the prison social order (Irwin, 1980; Porter, 1982).

These recent changes must be understood against an historical context. Two representative studies of the history of San Quentin and the California prison system are Lamott (1961) and Yaley and Platt (1982). The most definitive history of San Quentin itself is found in *Chronicles of San Quentin* (Lamott, 1961). In providing details of the day-to-day activities in the nascent California prison, Lamott gives insight into the development of the themes and traditions that shaped this contemporary prison.

Lamott's work is also important in that he provides concrete information on the development of the work force. The initial workers at San Quentin were recruited from wherever they could be found. The first prison director was ambivalent about his new work force, noting that they were "brave and desperate men, but somewhat addicted to dissipation" (Lamott, 1961, p. 25). This dissipation included drinking and consorting with the female prisoners. Alcohol was not only readily available to the new workers, but also available to certain prisoners. Lamott notes that the

democracy of drinking . . . blurred even the line between the guards and the convicts. In fact, many visitors complained they could not tell the

difference between the two. Both guards and prisoners wore shabby clothes and appeared to be drunk. Some prisoners even carried guns. The problem of alcohol among the workers continued, causing some writers at the time to claim that the guard line at Point Quentin was a refuge for reformed alcoholics (Lamott, 1961, p. 26).

The low pay, the long hours (originally 18 hours, seven days a week), and the dangerous conditions did not attract a competent work force. Escapes were commonplace and many workers were killed or maimed "whilst in the discharge of their duty" (Lamott, 1961, p. 25).

Yaley and Platt (1982) illustrate the historical development of social control in the prison within a political-economic context. The following chronology is taken from their work on the dynamics of the developing California prison system. In 1851, the California legislature contracted with General Vallejo and his partner, Major Estell, to "provide for the security of the state prison convicts" (Yaley and Platt, 1982, p. 72). Previously, felons were incarcerated in old Mexican jails and barges scattered around the state. In December 1851, the barge *Euphemia* was floated on San Francisco Bay to be used as a prison ship. The conditions on the *Euphemia* were said to be horrible; the ship was a "private hell hole" with air so foul that "only the most seasoned and resolute guards were able to descend into the ship to unlock the convicts" (Brown, quoted in Yaley and Platt, 1982, p. 78). On other prison ships, such as the *Wabu*, guards refused to go below until the ship was aired out.

On July 7, 1852, land at Point San Quentin was purchased for the new prison. By 1854, the first cell block was erected, using convict labor. In 1859, the "Dungeon" and the women's prison was built. This structure is now used for the prison hospital as women were moved to a new facility at Tehachepi in 1932. Upon completion of this construction, a committee formed by the California legislature found that the new prison was "no paradise for scoundrels," it was a "real penitentiary—a place of suffering and expiation" (quoted in Yaley and Platt, 1982, p. 87). Yaley and

Platt suggest that mismanagement and corruption plagued the private administration of the prison. Prisoners were ill-clothed and inadequately fed. In 1855, the state began to assert control over the prison and by 1858 the state assumed total control. Inedible food, harsh discipline, and inhumane conditions characterized the prison. Escapes were common and brought unwanted attention. By 1864, the state increased the number of guards in response to citizen complaints. To induce compliant behavior and a willingness to work, an incentive system of “good time” credits was also introduced at that time.

In the 1930s, the inhumane prison conditions received public attention. Brutality by the guards and the unrest of the prisoners were investigated by the state authorities. In 1938, Governor Olson conducted an investigation of the brutal conditions, which established new policies concerning physical brutality. Despite this intervention, physical punishment continued to shape social control in California’s prisons. In the early 1940s, California began to search for new forms of social control to handle its prison populations. Yee (1973) describes this shift toward rehabilitative ideal and its effect on California prisons.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the revival of the rehabilitative ideal introduced the concept of pathology to definitions of the prisoner. This image supported a clinical model of “corrections” and implied the notions of sickness and treatment. This treatment was to be delivered by a new wave of workers, most importantly the “correctional officer” and a staff of counselors and psychologists. A wide range of treatment strategies were developed within this context of the “rehabilitative ideal” as the new institutional response. Dissatisfaction with rehabilitation (American Friends Service Committee, 1971; Fogel, 1979) led California to reconsider its mode of social control. In 1977, California returned to a determinate sentence model and abandoned much of the rehabilitative model. Despite the movement toward punishment or “just dessert” models, many institutions continue to use the language of the correctional model in describing this world. Correctional officer is now the standard term used for the prison worker.