Silence and Punish: Forgetting as an Apparatus of Torture. Deconstruction, Solidarity, and Popular Education as Modes of Resistance

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The following is a collaboration between Nicolás, an imprisoned student and teacher from the Argentinian educational collective Cuenteros, *Verseros y Poetas* [Storytellers, Tale-tellers and Poets], and Oliver, Joey, and Lucy, three British scholars who work in European universities and research topics related to imprisonment in Latin America. It is the result of solidarity work between Argentine lawyer Alberto Sarlo, *cartonera* (cardboard book) publishers from Mexico and Brazil, and academics at British universities. Sarlo is an activist who founded *Cuenteros, Verseros y Poetas,* which has run philosophy, literature, and boxing classes in Unit 23 of Florencio Varela Prison in Buenos Aires Province since 2010.

Our approach draws on Sarlo's critical reflections on the paternalistic fallacy of 'giving' imprisoned people a voice when this voice already exists.[1] We construct a dialogue between distinct critical perspectives on imprisonment, a dialogue marked by our starkly different positionalities and logistical challenges of communication. We build on the conviction that reflexive, collaborative knowledge production between incarcerated and non-incarcerated people can help understand imprisonment as a structural phenomenon that harms, and is resisted by, people both inside and outside prison.

When initially invited to collaborate on this article, we envisioned a standard impersonal piece. On reading Nicolás' early drafts, however, we realised that his writing had a power and personality that we did not want to dilute with academic norms. Rather than 'giving' Nico a voice, the main task for the research team was to make sure that his message is clear for readers who are unfamiliar with the context in which he writes. This work of contextualisation is informed both by academic literature and our own experiences in the United Kingdom, Argentina, and Mexico, among other countries, as educators, researchers, and, inevitably, privileged prison 'spectators' or 'tourists'.[2]

Nicolás' personal testimony serves as a vehicle through which to make broader commentary on the 'politics' of 'common' mass incarceration, power dynamics in prison, and modes of solidarity and resistance that counteract the widespread 'forgetting' about people inside prison. In translating his reflections on these wide-ranging topics, we have endeavoured to convey the particular intensity of the high-register, philosophically-inflected language that he mixes with visceral, humorous, and occasionally violent terms rooted in the *jerga tumbera* (prison slang) spoken by imprisoned people in their everyday lives.

The overriding relationship between imprisoned and non-imprisoned people in Argentina is defined by hostility felt by the latter towards the former. The general intensification of this animosity over the past thirty years has been discussed by Argentine criminologist Máximo Sozzo in terms of penal or punitive populism.[3] The concept of penal populism was

1. Sarlo, A. (2021). *Espectros del pabellón.* Edicione Cartoneros.
2. See Wilson-Nunn, O. (2022). Pedagogy Behind and Beyond Bars: Critical Perspectives on Prison Education in Contemporary Documentary Film from Argentina. *Latin American Research Review, 57*(4), 903–921; Whitfield, J. (2016). Other neoliberal penalities: Marching Powder and prison tourism in La Paz. *Theoretical Criminology, 20*(3), 358–375; Bell, L., Flynn, A., O'Hare, P. (2022). *Taking Form, Making Worlds: Cartonera Publishers in Latin America.* University of Texas Press.
3. Sozzo, M (2009). 'Populismo punitivo, proyecto normalizador y prisión-depósito en Argentina', Sistema Penal & Violência, 1.1, pp. 33-65. And (2016). 'Postneoliberalismo y política penal en la Argentina (2003-2014)', in Postneoliberalismo y penalidad en América del Sur, edited by Máximo Sozzo, pp. 189-283. CLACSO.

first developed by Anthony Bottoms to describe a process whereby politicians manipulate punitive discourses about crime and punishment for electoral advantage.[4] People in prison are typically constructed as irredeemably evil, in stark contrast to the supposedly honest and hardworking nature of 'the people'. At the core of these divisions are class and race, with imprisoned people in Argentina often referred to pejoratively as 'negros de mierda' (fucking low-lives). In this context, 'negro' is used in a pejorative way that, while racist, does not map neatly onto racism as it is typically conceived of in English-speaking countries, referring instead to a complex overlapping of lower socio-economic status and often non-white skin colour.

Sozzo notes that binary oppositions based on criminality, 'respectability', class, and race in Argentina are produced both 'from above' and 'from below'.[5] Supplementing Bottoms' focus on the discourse of politicians, Sozzo highlights that calls for hardline penal policies have also come from civil society, often in the aftermath of high-profile, intensely-mediatised crimes. In this vein, a crucial tension that runs throughout Nicolás's writing is the coexistence of hatred and forgetting, hypervisibility and invisibilisation, state violence and societal violence. His account undermines reductive discourses of crime and imprisonment that exacerbate feelings of anger and animosity at moments of acute violence and 'crisis' while obscuring the structural inequalities and unsafe material conditions that might elicit empathy.

The scarcity of empathy for people in prison and the common desire for their basic rights to be violated are particularly striking in a country that has often been at the international vanguard of human rights movements following the systematic state terrorism carried out during the country's last civic-military dictatorship (1976-1983). The motto 'Memoria, verdad y justicia' (Memory, truth, and justice) has been the lynchpin of much human rights activism in recent decades, leading not only to increased awareness of the estimated 30,000 people who were killed or disappeared by the state but also to the rediscovery of identity for people who, as children, were given to other families after their biological parents were killed or disappeared. The push for the memory of 'political' prisoners and disappeared people during dictatorship is matched by the forgetting of supposedly 'common' prisoners in contemporary Argentina. Nicolás' writing attests to the fact that 'common' imprisonment never exists in a political vacuum but operates within social, economic, and political systems and inequalities that trouble binary distinctions between the conditions of dictatorship and democracy.

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Cuenteros, Verseros y Poetas use writing to combat such dichotomous divisions that often structure both political debate and academic studies that exclusively prioritise 'political' imprisonment as the locus of prison-based resistance.[6] Their work is premised on the potential for language to shape reality. As Sarlo writes, 'I will use the term 'torture centre' to refer to the prisons because the battle must begin first in language, if it hopes to be materially effective'.[7] Following Nicolás, the group has developed 'cultural and intellectual weapons [...] as the only way to carry out a sustained, long-term resistance against social amnesia and the hegemony of class power. And these weapons work to transform, to create an oasis that seeks, by its very nature, to proliferate'. Nicolás' words that follow form part of this project, the 'epic idea of generating and transmitting culture' as a means of resisting systematic forgetting.

Nicolás' testimony

'Why is it that there is something rather than nothing? This question, which troubles us because it is the question of being, because it is the question of nothingness, lies, for man, in forgetting about it. In order to forget about this question, man must

4. Bottoms, A. (1995). 'The Philosophy and Politics of Punishment and Sentencing'. In C. Clarkson & R. Morgan (Eds.), *The Politics of Sentencing Reform.* Oxford UP.
5. See footnote 3.
6. See Barbara Harlow's *Resistance Literature* (1987). in which the analysis of prison writing is centred on the works of political prisoners whose resistance is associated with causes that are internationally recognised by the liberal consensus, such as anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa.
7. See footnote 1.

dominate other things, conquer them and subjugate them and even reduce other men to things, to objectify and dominate them.'[8]

Here, I offer a first-person account of how forgetting is used as an apparatus of torture that begins at the moment of our arrest and gets worse in the 'big house'. This would not happen if it were not for a punitive state that has been embraced by a large part of our society as the only suitable response to those who are presumed to have broken the law.

To speak about forgetting calls into question an issue that makes people feel uncomfortable because it is a common-sense mechanism in the lives of everyday citizens, one that encourages people to stop caring about crime once the state intervenes. 'Punishment is the remit of the courts'. Once we uncritically accept this idea, people stop caring about what goes on to happen to people who have been accused. This paves the way for impunity and corruption.

To varying degrees, everyone is complicit in this. 'They must have done something, there's a reason they're there, let them rot in prison'. People create and perpetuate these ideas tirelessly as the only possible explanation for the way things are, making full use of a variety of media platforms. Yet they never question the circumstances that trigger such criminal activity, nor the role of law enforcement, who, empowered by collective disinterest, use increasing levels of violence and enjoy increasing levels of power. Forgetting makes torture possible and more violent, detached from the multiple, structural perspectives that need to be considered in order to tackle this topic.

In this place where the offenders were waiting, everyone was guilty until proven otherwise. Punishment in these places abides by no rules.

Crossing Between Worlds

I had managed to evade the law for over two years. Usually, money would settle everything in the first few hours with the police, but not this time. Too many witnesses. I was caught with my hands in the air, gesturing to them to cease fire. They were shooting and just a few metres away a crowd of kids was coming out of a primary school. I was cornered and now unarmed, so I thought it best to cooperate. Once I was handcuffed and on the ground, they kicked me all over. Their boots buried in between my ribs, they tried to stop me from protecting myself by stamping on my face. That was just the start. When, at last, they threw me into an empty cell and closed the porthole, I collapsed, too weak to stay standing. The merciless cold of the concrete pierced right through my back and I slumped into a dirty corner of the most secluded dungeon in the building. In this place where the offenders were waiting, everyone was guilty until proven otherwise. Punishment in these places abides by no rules.

The next morning was a long time coming. I saw the shadows of two men, clearly in a hurry: 'Up! Come on! Up, up, up!', they barked. 'Against the wall, hands behind you!'. They crushed my hands in handcuffs that they tightened forcefully, waiting to hear me squirm. The day before, I could make sense of their adrenaline-fuelled anger after a lengthy chase; but violence became a habit throughout my stay. The guards would use the same tone whenever they spoke to the prisoners. With time, I came to understand this 'punitivism' and its wide-reaching effects. Those who dare to react in more thoughtful ways are condemned to never-ending persecution.

After a few days, I was sent off to await my trial in Ezeiza federal prison complex. It was the first time that I had been inside a prison and only a few months had passed since my eighteenth birthday. Eighteen brings with it unyielding responsibilities, duties, and demands that, whether we understand them or not, are imposed on us. And this is what I did, clinging faithfully onto the lessons that a lifetime of poverty had taught me.

The entrance of the prison complex looked like the border between two countries at war. Giant spotlights on top of buildings set against the background of the dark night's sky and silhouettes of uniformed, camouflaged, and armed officers. Dogs, barriers, inspection points. Everything came together to create a world that was drastically different from the one that I had previously taken for granted.

What goes unseen and unheard gets forgotten. That's why those walls are so high. They build spaces for mass incarceration in isolated locations, miles away from city centres. You might think that they were built like this to stop inmates from escaping. In reality, it is so that nobody can see us, so that nobody listens to us. If they did, that grand fortress of lies that they call democracy would come tumbling down.

Bodily and Symbolic Violence

'Hands behind you, head down, let's go, run!', said the first person waiting in line for me to run the gauntlet that ran from the truck to those monumental

8. Feinmann, J. (2013). *La filosofía y el barro de la historia.* Planeta.

cell blocks, thirty or forty metres wide, where people were left to fend for themselves.

All of a sudden, the first well-rehearsed blow took me by surprise behind my ear. I immediately forgot everything. Next, a blow to the head, another to the back, and another to the ribs. The last people kicked our ankles, willing to see us fall over. I had given up trying to stop them, all I wanted was to reach the end. With this initial ordeal coming to a close, I instinctively covered my temples with my hands. 'Go on then! Defend yourself! Defend yourself!' they mocked churlishly, looking for unprotected parts of my body to pound down. Trying to defend myself only made things worse. Two of them then lifted me up and twisted my arms behind my back. A few hours later, I ended up in an individual cell and, when the huge metal door closed behind me, I felt inexplicably safe.

On the wing, I looked up to a horde of helmets, shields, batons, and faces. They came in beating their shields with their batons like medieval knights. The sound of the whistles marked the beginning of the search. After a few minutes, all of us on the wing were crammed into a corner of the tiny inner courtyard. The shields were rammed into us from all directions in synchronised response to the superior's call to 'crush them'. And so they did, over and over again. The air between us started to disappear. A whack on the back was another sign to turn around and strip as quickly as possible. Body search. When my turn came, I received one standard blow and then a real sucker punch.

'First name, last name, and cell number'. Whack. They were in a hurry, I tried to comply but I could only let out a weak, incoherent stutter, which annoyed them even more. They realised that continuing to hit me was not getting anywhere, so they had to leave me to one side and wait for me to get my breath back. One by one, they made their way through the pile of guys, sending them to another corner but now entirely naked and piled on top of each other. These people would still maintain the line of social reintegration, no matter how little they believed in it. When I got to my cell once the search — or, rather, beating — was over, all I could do was curl up in the foetal position on the metal sheet that served as a bed. With nothing left to do, I fell asleep.

This was no accident. The prison system takes zealous care to grind down the energy of the few people who support us, the few who still remember us as human beings. People are forced to travel hundreds of kilometres with items that are crucial for the survival of prisoners yet are never provided by the failing infrastructure of the institution. The endless, unannounced transfers that we might be subject to on any given day to any one of the thirty-five federal prisons across the country's thirteen provinces or any one of the fifty-eight provincial prisons scattered across Buenos Aires province represent another uncertainty for families. Following us becomes an impossible task. After just a few years or, perhaps more accurately, a few months, the human body just cannot take it any longer.

Visitors are subject to extreme humiliation at the hands of prison officers. The officers break lots of the items that visitors bring and refuse to let in lots of others for supposed security reasons. They are left to stand completely naked on icy concrete, unable to say anything about their situation out of fear that they might make things worse or delay their entry. Whether someone is allowed in or, for some small reason, made to go outside and queue all over again is down to the whims of the guards. After a while, you just cannot deal with it all, not physically, not mentally, not economically. Typically, it is women and children that you see in the never-ending queues to get into prison, exposed to the elements, out in the open for hours on end just to hug and help their loved ones. This is how we become gradually cut off from love and care, just as we have been from material necessities.

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Permanent Strangers

One night, without warning, the guards announced, 'Kid, you're being transferred'. They opened the door and stood waiting for me to gather my belongings. I asked where I was off to, to which one replied, 'Come on, get on with it, get your stuff ready and get out. Why so many questions? You scared?'. Of course I was scared, but I did not say so because that is what they wanted.

The sudden transfers that come without any logical explanation, offering little hope of better surroundings, transform people into permanent strangers. Wherever they are, always thinking about leaving, in a constant state of insecurity. Cherishing anything that you have around you becomes pointless; anything and everything is a potential weapon to defend yourself. You think about freedom all the time but more of your attention is taken up trying to work

out where the next blows will come from, what the intentions of the new people around you are, and how to defend yourself, even if it is not always possible, especially when the people who pounce are those you least expect.

I arrived at the admission cells at Devoto prison at 3am. It was a cold, winter morning, so as soon as I got to the wing, I automatically went over to the fire of a camping stove. It had been a long time since I had seen or felt any kind of heating. They gave me some powdered milk and, as I was keenly mixing it with water, I started to greet and take stock of the people around me. Some were surprised by my behaviour; you would expect a new arrival to be more concerned about first impressions and formalities. But honestly, I was hungrier than I was interested in socialising. The information that I had heard about the place was fifty-fifty good and bad. I, like any other prisoner, had to know in advance who and where the people setting the rules on the wing were so as not to fall into the trap of arriving as a complete stranger. Nobody would risk helping a stranger.

'Prisons shall be healthy and clean'

I was on my way to the second floor of Cell Block 7. Hot shower, food and a phone to speak to my family, who I hadn't heard from in a long time. I hadn't had the best of starts, but at last a respite would come in the midst of so much tension. So I thought. When I got close, I saw four guys carrying a freshly stabbed man on a blanket. The wounded man made no sound, no complaints, he just bled with his arms bunched up inside the blanket. Drops of blood fell from the blanket, creating a line of small reddish flowers on the ground. I stood there paralyzed, staring at the bleeding sack until I lost sight of them as they turned down the hallway. The guards commented that he was from Block 7.

I could hardly walk any further. My belongings now weighed twice as much. I sighed heavily and moved on, what else could I do? I started the ascent with my stuff on my back up the stairs to the second floor. Unpainted, dark, covered in grease and fresh blood. In the previous prison there had been individual cells; here, there were collective blocks. Eighty people in a rectangle; kitchens, bathrooms and showers shared for every waking and sleeping moment. Anger, sadness, envy, hallucinations, nightmares, separations, and family deaths. We went from maddening silences to total chaos every day. I was entering another world, one incapable of affording people the time, space, or calm needed to achieve the personal development that the words of the law demand: '...prisons shall be healthy and clean for the reintegration of prisoners and not for punishment' (Article 18 of our constitution). Of course, this situation is no accident. It is a strategy.

The words of the law demand: '...prisons shall be healthy and clean for the reintegration of prisoners and not for punishment'

Hierarchy and Protection

The guard responsible for the 7th floor appeared with a notebook and pen, asking me for personal information. When he finished, and for no other reason than to play at being one of the guys with a newbie, he said: 'Here's your mattress, your bed is number 52 and the guys will explain to you what you've got to do.' I did not know much about prison, but it was clear that I could not let this pass. On this side of the bars, we managed our own lives, he had no business doing this. An officer could not give me an order on how to live or what to do inside the cellblock and I could not just accept it. People remember all your words and actions, ready to discredit you or break your self-esteem, in case you become a rival. Or they might be used immediately so that you never become an enemy with the right to fight. I didn't want any of that to happen, so I exploded with fury:

'You stick to opening the lock. Not you or anyone else is going to tell me what I have to do or how I am supposed to live, that's why I became a crook!' I exclaimed. He didn't answer, he just opened the lock and a guy who was much taller than me with curly hair rescued my stuff and dragged it to his bed. It was Big Ariel, who had been in prison for a long time:

'Look, Nico, I'm not usually one to welcome someone I don't know, but you were right in what you said to that screw. They always want to play smart, waiting for a reaction, but if you hit one, all of them will hit you. That's how they handle things. There's only a few of us in our crew but we all fight, so here you'll get your bed and your own little shank. You go ahead,' he said to end the welcome. That was the first time I had my own knife in prison. It represented a chance to survive.

'Hey, but is it all cool with the people around here or is it as bad as everywhere else?' I responded innocently. I asked mainly because I was surprised that this was the first thing he was telling me. Many years later, the knife alone would have been enough to get my gratitude.

'Oh sure, don't worry, we're cool here, the best, but sometimes shit goes down and we can't drop our guard.'

Before he stopped speaking, I saw a plastic chair fly and explode into pieces against the bars. One of our guys ran by, looking among his things for a metal rod that he had attached to the end of a stick, ready for anything. That night we all fought, crew against crew. When it was my turn, something became very clear: I had no idea how to fight. All that I could think to do was to imitate the moves that I had just seen others making. Suddenly, my opponent's first swing went for the centre of my stomach. A jump backwards kept me alive. The terror of dying paralysed me once again, so I dodged stabs almost instinctively. I didn't even want to try to hurt my opponent, only to dodge when the blade passed close and to cover the attacks from a distance with the harpoon.

An hour later the guards came in, hitting and humiliating us as usual. That night I understood the real value of being welcomed and given a knife. Otherwise, they would have hurt me and stolen everything. That was the beginning of many long years in prison. Less than two months later I was holding towels on two near fatal wounds that Big Ariel suffered. The fights didn't need big motives, in fact the causes were always absurd. Taking someone else's kettle off the flame, using someone else's washing line, half an onion, things that in themselves had no rational explanation could unleash the worst filipinos, as we call the all-against-all fights. I started taking cocaine, pills of all kinds and whatever it took to get me out of that unbearable reality. More than once I ended up in hospital.

To enter prison is to leave your life in the hands of fate, to enter a place where poverty, illiteracy and violence are exacerbated and reproduced. To have been a prisoner in Argentina leaves you branded with a mark that is impossible to forget for both your community and the working world that you are supposed to enter back into. In these shadowy places, no one looks and nothing is seen. If something is shown to the world, it is always made bizarre, alien, and morbid. Here, the law is but a poem.

Unattainable Duties

On the outside, my life did not improve, quite the contrary. Things were not much different from the years before my conviction, so it didn't take long for me to repeat history and for history to repeat itself in me.

I was taught at school and at home about good and evil, about how a man should become honest, worthy, and respectable — criteria based on the opinions or approval of others. But nothing was said about the real costs, what it costs to keep up the appearance of these traits, let alone embody and sustain them. For those who are deprived of dreaming in the long term, all you can do is deal with each day as it comes and plan the next one when it arrives. But the rewards were there for those who did everything to the letter. School grades symbolised the pillars for success, those beacons that would light the way to happiness. They offered promise but were sustained by theories that were far beyond the reach of the working class in those marginal neighbourhoods. It didn't add up but it was drilled into us — it still is. The images and symbols of meritocracy were everywhere. They were revered. Seemingly close and attainable. In my confusion, I learned to steal for fear of being left behind and ignored, without food and without a home. Fear of not becoming 'someone in life', of passing through the world without seeing it. Stealing was my education, the one with better offers and concrete solutions for the here and now where *negros* live, not for some uncertain future.

Due to my social class, the idea of 'duty' kept me as a debtor rather than acting as any kind of ethical guide. We came into the world with debts, no guarantees, not even the basic ones. Debts that we will never get rid of — 'case closed.' Any attempt to swerve away from such a fate, by the shortest path, let's say, would lead to loneliness, jail, and death, in the order that destiny prefers. The real storms had not yet appeared, but immediate material needs had. My patriarchal upbringing insisted on being 'the man of the house', the one who did anything necessary to help with the family finances, to take care of my sisters and my old lady. Innocence takes everything literally. When you die of abandonment so many times and you understand the bottom line, you can see the constant that repeats itself, the particular places where the hunt takes place, which people pay for their crimes with jail, which ones do not and why. There are broader networks that escape glassy-eyed citizens and they do so very efficiently.

State Policy and Popular Organisation

A few weeks after being sentenced again following a plea bargain, I was transferred to Unit 23, where I am today. I write from my position as a member of the cartonera publisher Cuenteros Verseros y Poetas, which operates in Cell Block number 4 of a forgotten prison in Buenos Aires. The story begins with a Boca fan from the city of La Plata, who had the misfortune of seeing prisons from the inside, but chose not to forget, he could not. As part of his law degree at the end of the 1990s, Alberto Sarlo visited Penitentiary Unit No.1 in Olmos, one of Argentina's worst prisons. There, his whole vision of reality would crumble and his drive to reveal what was happening in this ignored and

forgotten world would be born. A normal guy who simply turned his eyes and ears away from the worldview that privilege had taught him and entered and then re-entered these buildings.

Sharing mates (Argentine tea-like drink), chatting about the conditions that we guys faced every day, talking about books, football, dreams, history, philosophy and the fate we had to go through. These were the real spaces of the work, where we met with joy and sadness. Companionship generated a real means of enduring oppression. We were all learning to write, read, and edit — ways to express ourselves and be heard. For a small group of people trapped in a world where they don't belong and nobody wants them alive, this could become the moment to learn to perceive ourselves as human beings, to not go on as the blinded and restricted people that we had been.

It saddens us like never before when we see and experience the state policies imposed on people of our social class, our families, friends, and neighbours, and even more so with what the leaders propose for those of us who live in prison. To understand the consequences of this state apparatus, it is important to understand prison life, its internal system of order, what keeps its gears grinding, and the abyss between the law, judicial resolutions, and reality for human beings in prison. Prisons are mostly divided into maximum, medium, and minimum security sections. In reality, the terms refer to the different levels of self-management, that is greater or lesser intervention by the penitentiary service. They also determine the number of hours of confinement per day inside the cells, designed to hold two thirds of the people who occupy them today.

According to the principle of 'individualised treatment' (which has never been individualised at all), incarcerated people are supposed to be able to progressively advance towards obtaining the benefits and rights that the law dictates as rewards for their 're-socialisation'. They must demonstrate their voluntary evolution by obtaining certificates from vocational training courses, basic education, or university studies. As they complete these requirements, they may be re-housed in blocks and/or units with a lower security level. According to the laws around sentencing, progression, and parole, the length of the sentence should be determined by these factors. But there is a problem. There is a long list of requirements demanded of prisoners, but the system makes it impossible for most people to fulfil them. They are only available to the highest bidders.

At this point, the concepts of solidarity, community and popular education take over. They arise from the exhaustion of waiting for the same justice system that controls and imprisons us to recognize our rights. Cultural and intellectual weapons emerge as the only way to carry out sustained, long-term resistance against social amnesia and the hegemony of class power. And these weapons work to transform, to create an oasis that seeks, by its very nature, to proliferate.

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Deconstruction and Resistance

The first thing that had caught my attention about Cell Block 4 was the boxing school. It sounded interesting to practise a discipline, especially one that was actually possible within the space we live. In places where simply coexisting generates endless fights — with knives, sharpened objects or anything that might do damage — they were teaching people to fight as a discipline. When I eventually entered, I was met with a surprise. The boxing school was but one of many parts of the project, which has now been running for more than twelve years and almost seven without any cases of violence.

With no exceptions, the main requirements to be part of this group are to not take pills (sedatives or antidepressants) or possess knives (or sharpened metal shanks). If these conditions are not met, you must leave, but with all your belongings and without being harmed. This way of resolving disagreements is exceptional. Usually, if you do not abide by the rules or try to change them, you are lynched or stabbed and thrown out without your belongings. I didn't quite understand what I saw when I first entered. Mistrusting our first impressions is a tool that usually keeps us alive in prison.

But there, in that high-risk cell block in a maximum-security prison, they were discussing whether essence precedes existence or vice versa, whether they agreed with David Hume's proposals about empirical knowledge or with Idealist Cartesian concepts, or with Hegelian dialectics and Historical Materialism. Then I saw another group of people who, between sips of maté, were teaching a rather grey-

haired guy to read, how to pronounce syllable by syllable, laughing at his failed attempts, but in total solidarity and empathy. Arriving at a place with these characteristics, having just nearly died in hospital from a stab wound to my neck, made me doubt the truth of its existence. How was such a place possible? Going to sleep without being conscious that someone wanted to take your belongings, even just taking a bath without taking a hidden knife. Such things have an incalculable value, unknown to those who have not lived through such an experience. They asked me if I had eaten, if I had hygiene items or something to cover me from the cold. Nobody was calculating how much they would make by selling my sneakers or my jacket, or all my belongings together. It was fantastic, literally the stuff of fantasy.

As the days passed, the intensity of the debates and the discovery of the meaning of words such as subjectivity, alienation, community, deconstruction, holocausts, modern warfare, structures, ideologies, capitalism, liberalism, resistance, and power relations encouraged me to participate actively in the task of transmitting knowledge. Due to the exploitation to which my parents were subjected as they raised and educated me in a marginal, extremely hostile, and neglected neighbourhood, I only attended primary school. It had a diverse but disordered curriculum, the content was absurd and fragmentary, typical of state schools in those kinds of places. The fact that I knew how to read and write relatively well compared to my comrades was not saying much, as most people inside cannot at all. In jail there are only forgotten guys from forgotten neighbourhoods. I asked myself if it wasn't too much of a coincidence that bad people only come from these places, at least according to the news, the enemies of history... I wondered if it was only the poor who became violent addicted thieves who transgressed society's norms. Poverty was the common denominator, otherwise, people from all social classes would be rubbing shoulders in prisons, but they don't.

In 2016, I made my limited faculties known to those leading the project and I joined the coordination team. Of course, trying to build a space like this in a place where so many intensities converge, with people conditioned by a very specific way of living life in prison, will always involve some unwanted tensions. That is where the work of deconstruction (a concept developed by Jacques Derrida) begins for the coordinators. Having the right temperament and enough intellectual and emotional maturity to understand that changes and processes in people require time, energy and, above all, mutual will is the main thing you need to maintain internal balance. What distinguishes us from other educational spaces is our empathy and solidarity. We know which situations are the ones that worry the comrades, when the feeling of impotence in the face of systematic torture strikes, when the anguish in response to reprisals against family members arises, and when the distress of discouraging bureaucratic requirements that are impossible to achieve surfaces. We go into the cells when people get sick and collect medicines, and nobody goes without food either.

We explain that we are not looking for the best readers, writers, or boxers in the world, but for people to show camaraderie in cohabitation and respect for everyone's effort in creating this space. In return, they will develop a wide array of tools that will be vital both for coping with life inside these torture centres and for facing reality on the outside in different ways. The recommended readings vary according to different levels of comprehension and literacy and are presented in group meetings where everyone explains their own interpretations. In this way we can more carefully tailor our work, both individually and collectively. First letters, then syllables, then words, and finally sentences. That's how we ensure that no one is left out of learning about culture and the art of expressing themselves.

The project is completely self-managed. As a collective, we discuss the topics that will be addressed, form ideological opinions based on real data, and even consider how to manage leisure time so that it can take place as harmoniously and as respectfully of each other's timetables, noises, spaces and habits as possible. We teach literacy inside and outside the cell block, we offer classes in music, technical drawing and painting, muralism, grammar, silk-screen printing and boxing; we also formed a rock band called The Warsaw Ghetto and a theatre group that has already participated in film festivals with short films. Currently each member chooses what artistic expression he wishes to experience or develop. In philosophy and history classes or in sessions where a classmate prepares a specific topic that he wants to share with the group, as well as those classes where we debate and analyse various topics with Alberto, we all attend without exception. On days when cartonera books are published, we all work together. We have written, corrected, edited, published, and donated more than thirty-two thousand books of different literary genres to playgroups and community centres in the most precarious sectors of the provinces.

We resist being forgotten through a vibrant project with the epic idea of transmitting and generating culture, expressing the voices of the nobodies through art and awakening in people ideas that go beyond the material world and their personal situation of confinement. We philosophise, publish books, and develop skills that we didn't even know we could have, but above all we create community. We rethink the concept of resistance to wrestle it away from future plans of individual merit or progression and more about the development of a critical awareness of ourselves

and the world around us. We emphasise the need to make this project visible so that it cannot be easily dismantled. Since it is not a government organisation, its existence depends strongly on this visibility. We are not trying to find or sell a checklist of how things should be done, to install an ideal type of morality or a safe path to follow. Each life and each hell is unique and non-transferable, we can only invite you to reconsider the possible alternatives, like this one that exists and resists through Cuenteros Verseros y Poetas, building from our individualities to more general, communal struggles.

Conclusion

Where Nicolás speaks of forgetting (olvido) as a mechanism of torture, he is describing the fact that imprisonment is a mechanism of control characterised by systematic abandonment.[9] The politics of abandonment by state authorities takes place to some degree across the region of Latin America. Levels of state intervention and presence vary hugely across prisons, while new regimes and governments mean that power and conditions are constantly shifting. Overall, however, our research and experiences lend support to and further our understanding of the findings of the Peruvian scholar José Luís Pérez Guadalupe. In his comparative study of Argentina, Chile, Peru, Bolivia and Brazil, Pérez Guadalupe concludes that although the state and prison authorities have huge power, it is prisoners themselves who play the 'primary role in the social construction of carceral reality'.[10] Joey's readings of prisoner writings from Latin America led him to write that the state is often arbitrarily absent, felt in the form of an extorting guard or a distributor of vindictive or even random acts of violence.[11] In a comparable vein, David Skarbek popularised the term 'self-governance' to describe situations in which the state has a nominally minimal impact on the organisation of prison life.[12] Elsewhere, Sacha Darke, writing on Brazil, has called this phenomenon 'inmate governance' to refer more specifically to the hierarchical relationships among prisoners, where some take on 'governing' responsibilities over others.[13] More recently, scholars of Latin American prisons have developed the term 'co-governance' to push against the idea of an entirely 'absent' neoliberal state, while others prefer 'contested governance' to capture the conflictive nature of this relationship.[14]

Nicolás' descriptions of his own experience cuts across the categories of self-governance and contested governance, demonstrating the difficulty of defining and differentiating mechanisms of power. Even within a single prison, he outlines markedly varied modes of governance in different spaces and at different times. The exceptional nature of the situation in which he now writes in Cell Block 4 cannot be over-emphasised. Not for the degree of prisoner control per se but rather because of the nature of the organisation of which he is part. As he explains, most cell blocks are ruled either by gangs operating according to a dog-eat-dog logic of strength and violence, or by evangelical Christian groups. The community that Nicolás now belongs to, by contrast, defines itself as a community in resistance.

Nicolás' writing helps us to push against some of the critiques levelled at the term 'resistance' within some areas of Latin American Studies. Political rhetoric of resistance has sometimes been described as being in 'crisis'.[15] It is has also been taken to refer to individual acts of resistance, often implying fleeting moments of protest without a worked-out political programme.[16] The men of Pabellón 4 have formed a community that lives in resistance in a manner that is closer to how the term is used by groups such as the Zapatistas in Mexico. There, to 'live in resistance' means to refuse the imposed political logics of capital and the Mexican state and to carve out autonomous communities that determine, as much as is possible, the conditions of their own realities. In the case of Cell Block 4, these conditions are determined not by the hierarchical logics of a coercive and neglectful state, predatory gangs, or religious fundamentalism but by free association, collective decision making, and mutual aid. Resistance here is not fleeting, futile or non-programmatic. It is a mode of sustaining survival and recovering dignity. The co-creation of this article — and the moral, symbolic, and material solidarity that its creation has afforded Nicolás — aims to play a small role within these processes.

To cite this article: Almeida, N., Wilson-Nunn, O., Whitfield, J., Bell, L. (2024) Silence and Punish: Forgetting as an Apparatus of Torture. Deconstruction, Solidarity, and Popular Education as Modes of Resistance. *Prison Service Journal,* Issue 272.

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