



**HAL**  
open science

## Marking the carceral boundary. Penal stigma in the long shadow of the prison

Philippe Combessie

► **To cite this version:**

Philippe Combessie. Marking the carceral boundary. Penal stigma in the long shadow of the prison. *Ethnography*, 2002, 3 (4), pp.535-555. <10.1177/1466138102003004019>. <halshs-00283856>

**HAL Id: halshs-00283856**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00283856v1>**

Submitted on 21 Mar 2009

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

# Marking the carceral boundary

## Penal stigma in the long shadow of the prison (★)

Philippe Combessie

In 2002 :

*Maître de Conférences* at the University of Paris V – René Descartes  
Groupe d'analyse du social et de la sociabilité (Iresco-CNRS-Paris 8)

In 2009 :

*Professeur de socio-anthropologie du monde contemporain*  
University Paris Ouest – Nanterre - La Défense (France)

### ABSTRACT

Based on a comparative fieldwork conducted in and around four French prisons, this article analyzes processes at work in the '*sensitive perimeter*' that surrounds and isolates establishments of penal confinement. The first part retraces the nested dynamics of relegation at the planning and building stage that lead to the geographic isolation of carceral establishments – their expurgation from city centers and removal to distant locations devoid of economic and symbolic value. The second part focuses on the distortions induced by carceral divisions in ordinary interactions taking place in the bars and hotels located in the immediate vicinity of prisons. It is found that the dichotomous cleavage effected and materialized by the prison, with inmates embodying '*evil*' on one side and guards as carriers of '*good*' on the other, seeps through the walls and infects a wide range of social relationships. The prison both radiates and exports the penal stigma it is assumed to contain, thereby profoundly affecting its proximate social ecology.

### KEY WORDS

France, sociology, ethnography, social ecology, socio-anthropology, prison, confinement, stigma, relegation, penal policy, prison visiting, guards.

---

★. Modified text, in 2009, of an article published in a previous version in 2002:  
Philippe COMBESSIE (2002) "Marking the carceral boundary. Penal stigma in the long shadow of the prison", *Ethnography*, vol 3(4): 535-555.

Imprisonment entails excluding certain members of the society, at least in the sense of extruding them from the '*free world*'. Pursuant to a judicial decision which officializes a moral condemnation, penal confinement performs a break, a severing, within the social body. Confinement extends the stigma of conviction by incorporating within the person of the inmate the offence for which he has been sentenced to deprivation of liberty. This inscription of '*evil*' into the body of the prisoner produces effects whose strength is not fully appreciated. In this article, however, I focus on the effects of penal branding not upon the prisoner but upon the various agents affected in their everyday lives by social contact with and/or physical proximity to a carceral establishment.

Ethnographic fieldwork conducted in and around four prisons in France allows us to escape the dualistic logic of '*good*' and '*bad*', '*outlaws*' and '*law-abiding citizens*', which dominates common-sense views, juridical reasoning, and even many scholarly views of the prison, by showing how a whole range of agents and institutions contribute to drawing this '*sensitive perimeter*' that surrounds prisons and helps to isolate them, a zone which acts in the manner of the no man's land between two enemy countries, of the *limes* that separated the Roman empire from the worlds of the barbarians, or of the *cordons sanitaires* protecting the healthy population from the bearers of an infectious disease (Combessie, 1998). I shall seek here to trace, through two significant processes, the logics that drive persons and institutions external to the carceral system to develop strategies that intensify the isolation of penal facilities and the stigmatization of all those dwelling in them: the first process deals with the geographic relegation of the prison, the second with the warping of interactions with prison visitors. These practices, which often insinuate themselves even into policies aimed at the '*opening*' and relinking of prisons to the outside world, intensify the severity of penal confinement and, with it, the very cleavage which hinders attempts to analyze the full impact of imprisonment on society.

The data presented here were gathered in the course of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 1990 and 1994 in and around four major French penitentiaries. The aim of this research was to examine the interface between the prison and the external world, the nature and functioning of the boundary between inside and outside, and the '*peri-carceral space*' they span (Combessie, 1996). The selection of these four establishments combined two main parameters. The first was the social and geographic context of the prison, characterized broadly as rural or urban. The second was the age of the facility: the oldest have been in existence for over a century and I posited that habits there could have sedimented over decades; the most recent are less than a generation old and I knew that I would still be able to interview key figures associated with their beginnings (local councillors from the time of their construction, the warden and doctors who inaugurated them, the original local

residents, etc.). I retained four establishments, each corresponding to one of the four possible combinations of these two criteria. This design also gave me the opportunity to study the three major categories of French houses of confinement: *maisons d'arrêt* or jails (holding mostly persons on remand and awaiting trial), *maisons centrales* or prisons for long-term convicts, and *centres de détention* (where prisoners at the end of their sentence are being prepared for release). I thus studied the social ecology of prisons built at different times and located in distinct *sociogeographical niches* to analyze the articulation between the characteristics of the establishments and those of their respective environments. In the two illustrative cases presented here, I concentrate mostly on continuities and deep-seated trends which to varying degrees concern all penal establishments, older and more recent, the most rural like the most urban.

The four prisons studied are located in Clairvaux, Fresnes, Bois d'Arcy and Joux-la-Ville. Clairvaux and Joux-la-Ville are small towns in rural areas while Fresnes and Bois d'Arcy are cities in the industrial outer ring of Paris. During the fieldwork phase, I would typically spend three consecutive days at each site, go home for a week to analyze the materials gathered there, then set off for the next site. As the weeks and months went by, the various agents within the purview of my study – prisoners and their relatives, local politicians, guards and other correctional staff, volunteers providing educational and social services, business owners and shopkeepers, nearby residents, etc. – saw me coming back regularly, at all seasons, alone or accompanied by my family (during school holidays or on weekends). This created a climate of mutual confidence. At each of the field sites I gradually developed privileged informants who showed a special interest in my research and with whom I communicated regularly by telephone to keep track of events on the ground. They counselled me as to the best moments to visit the site, depending on the presence of some major protagonists, the workload and schedule of the people I wanted to meet, and upcoming events of pertinence to my study.

At each of the four sites, I interviewed some 60 informants chosen on the basis of their involvement in the interface between the prison and its environment. I tape-recorded a total of 208 interviews, ranging between 40 minutes and two and a half hours, 154 of which were transcribed. About another 50 interviews or in-depth discussions were not recorded but summarized in my fieldwork diary. Alongside the interviews, I collected photographs, fliers, letters, administrative reports and other documents; I took notes in the various committee meetings to which I got myself invited. I also searched through several archives, in particular those of the municipalities and *départements* concerned, to reconstruct the historical background of each prison. On site, my activities and methods were comparable to those of an ethnologist and the data collected could have led to four monographs but my

objective, to gain a broad grasp of the generic relationship that prisons entertain with their surrounding social ecosystem through comparative analysis, was more distinctly sociological(1).

## **Spatial outliers: how cascading relegation intensifies the isolation of prisons**

Studying the motivations determining the location of these four major French prisons must begin with an overview of two centuries of public policy, since the earliest dates from 1808 and the most recent from 1992.

### ***An abbey turned prison off the beaten track***

The establishment situated at Clairvaux in the *département* of Aube is one of the oldest penitentiary sites in operation in France. Prisoners have been held there since 1808. But, before becoming one of the most famous French prisons, the place was renowned for its rich abbey, from which sprang the movement of the Cistercian order(2). How did a site so emblematic of Cistercian power become a prison? To explain it, a brief look at several centuries of European history is in order.

Clairvaux had its moment of glory in the Middle Ages, when the nation states had not yet taken shape and European trade developed along a line running from Amsterdam to Venice via the fairs of Champagne. Between the 16th and 18th centuries, most European states, and notably France, became centralized with the king assuming ever greater powers, at the expense of the local feudal and religious authorities (Elias, 1976). Then came the shock of the French Revolution. In August 1789 the newly created National Assembly voted the abolition of feudal privileges and the nationalization of the property of the clergy. The most prestigious buildings of the Church were taken over by the new authorities (municipalities, districts,

---

1. My analyses resulted in two books, a descriptive account of the fieldwork (Combessie, 1996), to which the reader is referred for more details on the design and implementation of the study; and a more synthetic overview of existing sociological and anthropological analyses of the prison based mainly on field observation (Combessie, 2001 – renewed and reprinted in 2009).

2. The Cistercians are a monastic order originating from the Benedictine abbey of Cîteaux, near Dijon, founded in 1098 by Robert de Molesme. Under the leadership of Bernard (later canonized as Saint Bernard), who founded the Abbey of Clairvaux with 30 followers in 1111, the order expanded throughout Europe. It was characterized by a strict return to the rule of Saint Benedict, greater austerity, and an emphasis on manual work.

*départements*, even private estates) while the most run-down were sold to anyone who would buy them and/or turned into prisons. Such was the fate of Clairvaux. In 1792 the abbey was sold to local entrepreneurs, who made it over successively into a glassworks, a paper factory and a brewery. Then, in 1808, as Napoleon was devastating Europe with his military campaigns, the need arose to incarcerate men who refused conscription into the Great Army. The buildings of the abbey were purchased back from the businessmen by the state and the ancient religious structure became a prison, first to house those who refused to fight in the military, then vagabonds and miscellaneous criminals.

Thus, at the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Clairvaux Abbey became a prison because it had become a run-down, neglected site that interested no one. It is remarkable to note the degree to which this forlorn status has endured. Clairvaux has remained a backwater, left outside the central currents and trends of the country, as shown by the decisions made in the late 1960s regarding the renovation of the prisoners' quarters. At that time, inmates were still housed in the austere and insalubrious buildings of the old abbey. At night, they were locked in '*hen coops*', wooden cells which each contained one prisoner, roughly two metres in each dimension. The disparity between the quality of life of free citizens and these prisoners was too great; it threatened to provoke a mutiny, not to mention health hazards. It was therefore decided to build new cell blocks - effectively a new prison inside the old. What is remarkable is that the new detention facility was built within the confines of the old establishment, which forbade any cultural (not to say religious) use of the former monastic site. At a time when Minister of Culture André Malraux was conspicuously refurbishing France's cultural heritage, even the prestigious Cistercian past of Clairvaux was not sufficient to goad the authorities to build the new penal accommodation a few hundred yards from the ancient abbey. Cost cutting and the weight of habits tipped the scales in favour of the easier solution<sup>(3)</sup>. The whole story shows clearly how the now-marginal situation of this once central region allowed a prison to be maintained there.

---

3. For more details about the choice of this site for the new penal facility, on how it was premised and in turn contributed to the perennial image of violence attached to Clairvaux in the French penal imaginary, see Combessie (1996: 219-224).

## ***Paris rids itself of its jails for the Universal Exposition***

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the whole world looked to Paris as the capital of fashion and good taste. The Universal Expositions left the City of Light with various monuments, the most famous of which, visited by millions every year, is the Eiffel Tower, built by the architect Gustave Eiffel, who a few years later designed the skeleton of the Statue of Liberty, given to the United States by France. One of the concerns of the French authorities at the time was to present the image of a clean and modern metropolis to the countless tourists who flocked to the expositions. It was therefore decided to close down the old prisons of the Seine *département* located intra-muros, as explained by an official document from the *Préfecture*:

The work will be pursued as expeditiously as possible, so as to be completed before the Universal Exposition of 1900. The completion of the programme will have the advantage of giving [...] a more attractive physiognomy to the neighbourhoods adjacent to the prisons being eliminated.

The criteria for the new site were clear:

To replace the Mazas, Sainte-Pélagie and La Grande-Roquette prisons, a sufficiently isolated location is required... in a region to which visitors do not resort.

(Préfecture du Département de la Seine, 1895: 28-29)

Fresnes, a small village of 640 inhabitants (as of the 1891 census) sustained mainly by agriculture and crafts, was 'indeed at the time one such 'isolated' site 'to which visitors do not resort'; its heavy subsoil provided material for two clay quarries and a brickworks, but the northern part of the *commune* was a marshy, unhealthy area.

The local population reacted vigorously to the decision to locate the new prison in their *commune* and manifested their opposition in a variety of ways: for half a century they continued to request that the facility should not be named after the *commune*; and they insisted that the mortal remains of inmates who died in the prison not be buried in the same place as those of 'honest citizens' (a similar segregation is in effect at Clairvaux). In some dictatorships, beggars and tramps are locked up before the visit of a top politician; during French Third Republic, prisons were removed from Paris before the Universal Exposition of the new century (1900).

## ***Bois d'Arcy, penal dumpster of Versailles***

A similar logic was at work when the prison that once stood in downtown Versailles was closed so that another could be built, further away, in Bois d'Arcy. In France, Versailles is the symbol of the monarchy, with its celebrated chateau, the official residence of the country's kings since Louis XIV. The Republic has kept a special place for it, since it is there that the Parliamentary Congress convenes when amendments need to be made to the Constitution. In the 1970s it was decided to shut down the prison in the town centre and replace it with a brand new facility to be erected some distance away, in a small neighbouring town, still partly rural, with a significant working-class vote (the town council had a Communist majority). The premises of the old prison in Versailles were refurbished and turned into courtrooms(4). It is undoubtedly more noble to erect a '*palace of justice*' (as court buildings are called in France) than to retain a prison in which are locked up the people that the decisions of justice stigmatize as social pariahs.

The reaction of the town councillors of Bois d'Arcy was immediate: to show their staunch opposition to the project, all members of the council chained themselves together to the town's war memorial. Since then, councils have come and gone but opposition to the prison remains solid. When I met the then-mayor in 1993, he sought to enroll me to attest to the inappropriateness of the site:

*It's next to a busy main road, and the prison wall is directly adjacent to the town sports and leisure centre! It's really very... You are a sociologist, you must have a lot to say about it!*

Having failed to block the building of the prison, the councillors fought, as at Fresnes, to prevent it from being christened after their town. In this they were successful, since the establishment is officially called '*Maison d'arrêt des Yvelines*' (after the name of the *département*) and not '*de Bois d'Arcy*'. Then, for twenty years, town officials refused to allow any direction signs to be put up indicating how to drive to the establishment. They finally relented and agreed to have some when they realized that the lack of signs resulted in the families of inmates wandering the streets asking where it was, which only drew attention to its shameful presence in their town.

---

4. There are other examples in France of former town-centre prison buildings reassigned to more noble functions. Perhaps the most celebrated example is in Strasbourg, home of the European Parliament, where the buildings of the former jail now house the newly decentralized Ecole Nationale d'Administration (the elite school which trains the country's top civil servants and politicians).

## ***A President intervenes to (re)move a prison***

I observed up close the case of the prison of Joux-la-Ville even before it received its first inmates. The history of its location is almost a caricature. First, a reminder of the general context: in 1981, the French elected a leftwing president, François Mitterrand, a former lawyer. The abolition of the death penalty, one of the first measures voted through immediately after his election, was also one of the most emblematic of the new government. A few years later, in 1985, prisoners were granted the right to have a television set in their cells. At the same time, the cap ceased to be an obligatory part of the uniform of guards(5). In 1987, a broad-ranging programme of prison modernization was undertaken: the more dilapidated facilities were closed and new, medium-sized prisons were built (each housed 400 to 600 inmates, all of whom had individual cells). It is therefore not entirely wrong to say that the prison regime was becoming more humane(6). Yet, if one examines the arguments that arose and the various negotiations that took place over the choice of sites for the new prisons, one notes that several different logics converge and combine to produce the same single effect as for the three other prisons previously discussed: the relegation of establishments at a safe physical remove.

The most decrepit prisons which were closed in the 1990s were mainly located in town centres, as in Saint-Quentin in Picardie, where the new penitentiary of the *département* is now smack in the middle of the countryside. In addition to replacing the oldest facilities, another aim of these operations was to reduce overcrowding in the greater Paris area(7) by transferring a part of the capital region's carceral population into the provinces, often into rural areas, as the chief of staff of the Minister of Justice explained to me:

*The basic idea was to remove convicted prisoners who were in jails in the Paris area. They would be tried in the Paris courts, and as soon as they were sentenced, they would be sent to serve their sentence further away. So, you see, all the motorways in the Paris region have their detention centre, within a radius of 150 kilometres: for example, Joux-la-Ville, on the A6 motorway.... In two hours time, prisoners can be taken there from Paris.*

---

5. Guards who wished to continue to wear a cap had the right to do so, but fairly quickly they all forsook it. It should be noted that, in French prisons, security staff going about their normal duties do not carry guns (only those manning the outside watchtowers have firearms).

6. This assertion needs to be qualified, particularly in view of the significant lengthening of prison sentences during this period (see Faugeron, Chauvenet, Combessie (eds), 1996).

7. Especially at the prison of Fresnes, which may seem strange but, since the building of the facility, this once-bucolic commune has urbanized and become covered with low-rise housing. And the pestilential marshland mentioned earlier has been drained, making the area more attractive for residence.

Most of these new penal facilities were not only located away from Paris, but also far from any other urban centre, on the basis of a simple economic logic: to cut costs, the government decided it would not buy land; instead, land would be granted by the *communes* [local authorities]. But urban *communes* had a lot more to lose than to gain by having a prison built near the town centre, where real estate is expensive and private commercial investment more profitable. By contrast, rural areas with declining populations were sensitive to the prospect of new employment generated by the prison. Some towns which had an old penitentiary in their centre offered financial subsidies to surrounding villages to entice them to offer a field to the government, in the hope that this would enable them to demolish the town-centre prison and replace it with upscale commercial and residential developments that are aesthetically and financially more desirable. Thus the choices made as regards land-use led to locating the new prisons in outlying areas, in isolated and declining *communes* where land is worthless.

It is instructive to examine more closely the decision made over the site of the Joux-la-Ville prison. Initially, this new facility was to be built in the *commune* of Précycy-le-Sec, a village counting a mere 152 residents. Virulent opposition was voiced to the project and an 'Association of the Friends of Précycy' was formed with the aim of preventing the building of the prison on the territory of the village. Within a few months, the association unexpectedly grew to several thousand members. Several renowned intellectuals owning homes in the area joined in the campaign. Some, like the writer Jacques Lacarrière, lived very close to the planned site, and were determined to prevent it being built, 'for the preservation of our heritage', as he formulated it. Others dwelled considerably further away and put their case in symbolic terms. Jules Roy was another novelist and a figure of some notoriety: he had been a close friend of Nobel laureate Albert Camus and a pilot in the Royal Air Force during World War II. Until his death in 2000, he lived with his wife in Vézelay, a beautiful old village perched on the so-called 'eternal' hill on which stands the Romanesque basilica of St. Mary Magdalene, where, in 1146, St. Bernard, the first abbot of Clairvaux, preached the Second Crusade. The basilica is, all the same, over twenty kilometres from Précycy-le-Sec by road.

But the prison was not built at Précycy-le-Sec, owing to the support these intellectuals were able to mobilize, especially Jules Roy who boasted a personal friendship with François Mitterrand, who he reminded that the 'eternal hill' of Vézelay is a sacred site. Mitterrand used to stop there often when traveling through the region, and to lunch in a famous inn at the foot of the hill. After the meal he would invariably pay a call on Jules Roy then meditate alone for a good half-hour in the crypt of the basilica. In his will, Mitterrand asked that at the moment of his burial (in the family tomb) a single rose be laid in the crypt of the Vézelay basilica and his wish was duly

fulfilled. Several times he had come there with 'his friend Helmut', as Jules Roy liked to recall ('Helmut' being the then-Chancellor of the German Republic Helmut Kohl). Vézelay must not be desecrated! Indeed, from the eternal hill, on a very fine day, one can see the plot of land on which the prison was planned to be built: one needs a pair of high-quality binoculars but, undeniably, it can be seen. The cultural affairs advisor to the Mayor of Avallon (who was himself closely tied to François Mitterrand's wife) provided a further argument:

*And then, when you leave the motorway at Nitry and drive towards Vézelay, the road passes just in front of the Précý-le-Sec prison... What a bad impression that would make on tourists and pilgrims!*

In May 1987 these three men who personally knew the President made their opinions known to him. On 13 July, on the eve of the last great republican military display on the Champs Elysées of his first term of office, Mitterrand replied. Jules Roy still remembers it and, as a good storyteller, maintains the suspense. When he opened his letter, there was first disappointment:

*I realized at once that this letter was bad news: it was typed... When 'François' writes to me, it is handwritten... This one was not from 'François'; it was from the President of the Republic!*

But then Roy's eyes sparkle and he flourishes the precious document which is evidence of their victory. The author and sometime-RAF pilot during German occupation was perhaps disappointed not to have received a more ostentatious sign of his friendship with 'François', but in that letter, in the space of a few lines, the President of the Republic showed that he had taken the situation in hand:

*I have requested the Minister of Justice to provide me with all necessary information regarding the proposed construction of a prison near Précý-le-Sec, I should like to assist you in protecting Vézelay and its surroundings against the ravages of time, nature and men.*

The message was simple and direct. The letter was signed: 'François Mitterrand, President of the Republic'.

Later, I interviewed a senior civil servant who gave me more details on how the matter unfolded in the corridors of power in Paris:

*One evening, at a cocktail party at the Elysée Palace... the President, champagne glass in hand, accosted the Minister of Justice and said to him: 'What are you up to? You're building me a prison that will totally ruin the site*

*of Vézelay!' The Minister replied that he was not aware of this, and the President said: 'But I assure you, a friend of mine told me. He knows all about it, he lives there.'*

The Minister of Justice beseeched his chief of staff to deal with the situation as expeditiously and appropriately as possible. Within a few weeks, the site of Précycy-le-Sec was abandoned in favour of another one, located further down in a dell of the neighbouring *commune* of Joux-la-Ville — the decision was officially announced in September 1987, just two months after the President's personal intervention(8). The Prefect [senior representative of central government] for the Yonne *département* and the director of the correctional administration for the Dijon region were both sent to check in person whether the new site was acceptable.

*I was contacted by the Ministry [of Justice]: 'You must go down straight away to the Vézelay basilica, and check whether or not the site can be seen from the lower terrace!' So off I went to Vézelay with the official maps that show the contours. Fortunately I was once an artillery officer [laughter]. I had summoned a professional surveyor, and together we made a point of recalculating the contours [...] A few days later, I went back with my wife and I took my binoculars just to make sure [...] And when we came out of the basilica, there was the Prefect, standing in front of it. 'Good morning, Mr. Prefect,' I said. 'Visiting the basilica?' And I remember he smiled and answered: 'Yes, I'm visiting the basilica... but, probably like you, I've come to look at some other things as well.' [laughter] Yes, he was there to check the sightlines, too.*

The wishes of the President were fulfilled and, with the new prison built outside the panorama of the basilica, Vézelay and its surroundings remained protected '*against the ravages of time, nature and men*'.

Intellectuals were not the only ones to mobilize against the siting of this prison: other local residents did so too, in ways that were both picturesque and involving great symbolic violence. One of the representatives for the area on the *département* council, an advisor to the Minister of Justice, was regarded as the instigator of the project(9). On Saturday 24 October 1987, at L'Isle-sur-Serein, the town that this councillor represented, his political '*fiefdom*', a life-size effigy, dressed and masked to

---

8. The first director of this establishment immediately pointed out to me that the siting of this prison in a dell was a 'security risk', since it made it more vulnerable to external attack.

9. It is noteworthy that the site initially proposed (at Précycy-le-Sec) is on the extreme edge of the *canton* [sub-division of a *département*]. The councillor wanted a prison in the *canton*, but as far away as possible from the town where he was elected.

resemble him, was carried into the square before the church and town hall by more than one hundred demonstrators (among them several municipal councillors from the neighbouring *communes*, young and elderly people, and children). The dummy had in its jacket pocket a copy of the local paper *L'Yonne Republicaine* (reputed to be in favour of the project). It was hoisted on top of a bonfire and, at 3.30 p.m., after a brief address from the steps of the church, one of the leaders of the anti-prison group (who would later become mayor of Précy-le-Sec) gave the signal: the bonfire was set alight. As the effigy burned, the demonstrators danced around the pyre. The representative watched the demonstration from the window of his town hall and summed up the event in a few short sentences:

*It was me all right, in my blue blazer and grey trousers, no doubt about it.  
And the paper too... They burned me there, it went on for an hour...*

The President's intervention reassured the closest local residents, and the prison was eventually built in another *commune*, that of Joux-la-Ville. As requested by central government, the local authority provided land located on the extreme edge of its territory, actually closer to the centre of the neighbouring *commune* than to its own centre. Joux-la-Ville also tried to prevent the prison from bearing the name of the *commune* but was less successful in this than the councillors of Bois d'Arcy.

This brief history has enabled us to retrace with some precision the successive adjustments of a policy of spatial and symbolic relegation. From the ordinary resident, through the local notables, right up to the President of the Republic, they all contributed to this social logic which seems inexorable: prisons must be kept at a distance, out of sight. The house of confinement was therefore eventually built in a hollow, away from the main road, beside a dirt track which had to be specially asphalted and which leads nowhere but to the prison. And it is invisible from atop the 'eternal hill' of Vézelay. From Clairvaux to Joux-la-Ville, the same logic of distancing is expressed at every level. Cascading sequences of relegation lead to the ejection and rejection of the prison: it is removed from Paris; it is kept far away from historical sites and touristy areas; the *département* councillor relocates it out of his regional seat, a mayor keeps it out of his town centre, another does all he can to disassociate it from his town (by confiscating its name and signposts).

The physical removal and hiding of the prison expresses a rejection of prisoners, of course, but translates also in the social removal of their families and friends, who are believed to lower the tone of the neighbourhood when they visit or are commonly rumored to deal drugs. But in many places one also observes different patterns of rejection of the prison staff, who are deeply stigmatized by the work they do. It is well established that penal convicts are branded by the judicial system. What

is often less noted is the tendency of that stigma to diffuse and enshroud all those who come in direct or indirect contact with inmates. As Erving Goffman observed:

Generally, this tendency of the stigma to spread explains in part why one often prefers to avoid having close relationships with stigmatized individuals or to suppress them when they already exist.

(Goffman, 1963: 44)

Prisons are a case when we see a public building enshrouded in stigma and devalued by its very function as container of the outcasts of society.

## **The bars of disassociation: how carceral division seeps out of the prison**

Having considered the relegation of carceral facilities at the planning and building stage, let us turn to the ordinary day-to-day interactions which take place in the immediate surroundings of prisons, in social spaces which might in principle seem to be neutral in relation to penal confinement and which are normally spaces of open sociability, namely, cafés and bars. We find here another, very different, example of the segregations and cleavages induced by the prison which extend well beyond its concrete boundaries to suffuse what I call its 'sensitive perimeter'.

The commercial establishments, bars, cafés, and convenience stores frequented by the families and friends of prisoners who visit on a regular basis cannot receive such patrons without being thereby stigmatized; and the concrete consequence of this stigma is the cloistering of these commercial relations outside the 'normal' market framework. The most symptomatic case, and the one found directly in the vicinity of most prisons, is that of bars. Because the bars concerned are closest to the establishment, they have the benefit of a dual clientele composed of two mutually exclusive elements: the guards and the inmates' visitors. This commercial pattern with its enforced compartmentalization has developed both in rural areas and in the urban region of Paris, as documented by extensive field observation in Clairvaux and Fresnes.

In these places, which are sites of social encounter, exchange and mixing par excellence, one observes an outward extension of the rigid division internal to the prison: contacts and intercourse between those whom the penal institution defines as separate and even antagonistic, inmates and guards, must at all costs be limited, even prevented. It is impossible to say if the barkeeper or the client is the source of

the ongoing reactivation of the cleavage operated by the prison. Each is perfectly aware of the practices to which they partake as consumer or service provider. Quite deliberately, the managers of these small businesses have adapted their trade to the avoidance strategies of clientele split along the carceral divide. On the one side there are the kin and close friends of prisoners, who come in regularly on visiting days (and sometimes newly-released convicts as well); on the other side stand the prison staff (mainly guards, sometimes administrative and other personnel).

### ***In Fresnes, for each clientele its bar***

In Fresnes, until major public works upgraded a national highway to a motorway running in front of the prison, several establishments offered hot and cold beverages and snacks right across from the gate of the complex. The best known was called '*Ici mieux qu'en face*' ['*Better here than over there*']; only ten yards away was '*Au bon accueil*' ['*Warm Welcome*']. I lived in Fresnes until I was 18 and I remember that in my teens '*Ici mieux qu'en face*' had a rather bad reputation, but I did not know why. In the course of my research on the interactions between prisons and their environment, I found out that the clientele of these cafés were not randomly distributed between them. In its very name '*Better here than over there*' made explicit and negative reference to the prison, and from the inmate's point of view.

And that was indeed where the partners and relatives of the prisoners coming to visit could be found. By contrast, the name of the other café, '*Au bon accueil*', seems to ignore the presence of the carceral facility, in line with the strategies of those who work there and do not want its image to cling to them once they are out of uniform: guards are the people who make up its main patrons.

The geographical origins of their respective proprietors served as a visible indicator of the cleavage between the customers of the two bars. '*Au bon accueil*' was run by a Corsican couple, and the overrepresentation of Corsicans in the French civil service in general and the prison service in particular<sup>(10)</sup> could not but foster their 'warm welcome' among this clientele. A high-ranking official in the correctional bureaucracy, himself of Corsican origin, who had worked at Fresnes for years, described the link between 'insularity' and careers in the prison service:

*Thirty years ago, it was a feature of the insular character that it secreted prison guards. There were a few colonies here and there, and there was*

---

10. In 1990, 0.4 percent of the total population of France were born in Corsica but this percentage is twice as high (0.8 percent) among employees of the national prison service.

*even a time when people said 'Afa-Les Baumettes' instead of 'Les Baumettes' [the jail of Marseilles], Afa being a little village in Corsica that shamelessly recruited people for the prisons... You don't see quite so many Corsican guards these days. But it's a fact that, with the owners of 'Au Bon Accueil', they are sure to feel right at home!*

Meanwhile, '*ici mieux qu'en face*' was run by North Africans. Now, while it is true that French citizens originating from the Maghrib are increasingly drawn towards civil service careers, this is not yet true of the prison service, especially at the level of guards(11). On the other hand, the families of inmates held at Fresnes are much more likely to be of North African than Corsican origin. The opposition is clear-cut: on the one side, the Corsicans, and on the other, the North Africans; on one side the 'honest civil servants'; on the other the relatives of 'convicted criminals'.

Whether out of ethnic affinity with the owners or the simple desire to relax among like-minded people without needing to stay on one's guard in particular, to mind one's tongue in a context in which people tend to speak freely - the prison staff gathered in '*Au bon accueil*' whereas the prisoners' families patronized '*ici mieux qu'en face*'. That was why, among the young people of Fresnes, most of them children of middle managers and clerical workers(12), that café was reputed to be a place of '*ill resort*'. Indeed, the guards almost never went there by virtue of custom – although they could not say why. When asked about it, they would first reply that '*ici mieux qu'en face*' did not sell cigarettes, but then they would concede it was a habit crystallized before their time: '*I can't tell you why. My colleagues all go to "Au bon accueil", so I do the same ... I go there because they do*', explained a young guard I queried on the matter.

In 1988, in the course of the urban redevelopment mentioned above, '*ici mieux qu'en face*' was razed. Some residents of Fresnes, who enjoyed meeting prisoners' families there, miss it.

---

11. An anecdote is revealing of the limited contact the prison staff have with Muslims outside the prison. The event occurred when a group of 22 young police cadets visited a penitentiary. They were to have lunch in the prison staff canteen. All went well until it was learned that they had asked that six of the 22 lunches be served without ham. This news spread rapidly among the guards; several of them made racist remarks while others simply expressed their astonishment. For some of these guards it was as if the mere fact of being Muslim (readily deduced from this refusal of pork) was equated with being 'criminal'. They saw an incompatibility between embracing the Muslim religion and belonging to the forces of law and order. There were no further repercussions during the meal except that on this occasion, by some 'oversight', this group of visitors was not invited to sign the guest book of the prison as was the custom in this establishment.

12. According to the 1990 census, the employed population of the town of Fresnes was 17 percent 'managerial' and 25 percent 'intermediate occupations'.

*Often, I would go there just to watch... I met people there who were more or less.... not exactly shady, but who were quite.... Anyway, it was really fascinating... It's a real pity that a place like that had to go... People like that don't go to 'Au bon accueil', no – because the prison staff go there. It has always been their café, I think. Someone ought to open another café, there's a real need.*

(Resident of Fresnes, age 32, head of a volunteer organization)

One may wonder whether the 'need' is not only for a café where prisoners' visitors could again go, but also for one where some Fresnes residents, like this one (who says he never goes to 'Au bon accueil') could go without having to encounter off-duty guards. It became clear from interviews with various denizens of Fresnes in their 30s and 40s with fairly high cultural capital that the possibility of meeting prisoners' relatives (as they did occasionally, in certain places such as that café) was somewhat exotic and appealing, whereas close contact with prison guards made them uneasy '*something rubs off on you*', a guitar teacher told me. Between these two cafés located on either side of the entrance to the prison complex, a kind of *modus vivendi* had been established and certain clues indicated to possible clients in which of these two places they would not meet with unwelcome company.

### ***In Clairvaux, an inn with two doors***

The same strategies produce the same effects in Clairvaux(13), except that one of the two café owners there tries to set up two separate areas within his premises which enables him to entertain both types of clients simultaneously. In the immediate vicinity of the Clairvaux penitentiary there are again two cafés. '*Le Relais des Amis*' ['The Friends' Relay'] has for many years been run by a retired guard; the brunt of its clients are members of the prison staff and prisoners' visitors are a rare sight. The wives and girlfriends of inmates who come to Clairvaux for the first time sometimes go there, but they leave with an unpleasant impression. When they subsequently go to the hostel that houses the poorest families of prisoners, they often talk about the atmosphere of that café with the nuns who run the hostel:

*They don't like going to Le Relais des Amis, because there are almost always guards there... They feel they are being "eyeballed", as they put it.*

(Sister F., in charge of the hostel)

---

13. Clairvaux is a hamlet attached to the village of Ville-sous-La-Ferté, a rural commune of 1509 souls with a working population that is 9 percent 'farmers' and 32 percent 'employees (clerks)'.

An inmate's wife told me about the speed with which her husband had learned from some guard that she had gone for a coffee in that bar after visiting him one day. The inmate had reacted very violently:

*I forbid you to enter that café! Don't bother to come see me if you're going in there, you got no business being there!* (14)

'L'Auberge du Pays' [The Country Inn] is a larger establishment. It functions also as an inn, with a few rooms on the upper floor which are very often occupied by prisoners' wives or girlfriends when they come for visitation. The less well-off visitors go to the nuns' hostel, the better-off go to '*a good hotel, in town*', while those in-between come here. A doctor who had lived in Clairvaux for several decades described this clientele which had long given the establishment a dubious reputation:

*At 'L'Auberge du Pays', you find all the marginal and street people, who inspire sympathy too, but who, all the same, are very well integrated into the criminal milieu. It's pretty obvious: money that you shouldn't ask too many questions about ... Some are quite outspoken about it. I remember one [woman], she had called me out to see her little daughter, she explained to me that this daughter and her other one were always in Catholic schools; she wanted them to be well brought up... Nothing wrong with that... And she supported them in whatever ways she could: she sold her favours... She made no secret of it, hum, in front of the doctor.*

Naturally, as at Fresnes, this clientele kept another potential clientele, the prison staff, away from the establishment and could also deter passing tourists. The business later changed hands and the new owner, who wanted to expand and diversify his customer base, considered his room for manoeuvre:

*I must say that I 'suffer' for it, in quotes: I have no or almost no clients from among the prison staff. Due to the fact that I host the families of inmates, so the prison staff won't come Mme P., my predecessor, basically worked only with prisoners' visitors So then it was a bit special. But everyone has their own way of doing things. In the evenings, there were girls clinking glasses, climbing on the table to sing. It was what you call lively ... It was the prisoners' visitors' club!*

---

14. This prohibition no doubt concerned the fact of going into cafés alone, but in the view of the woman herself this was considerably reinforced by the fact that this was the guards' café.

When I asked him if he had tried to attract guards, he replied:

*No, it's not possible. My door is open to all comers, but when people are embarrassed... It's the guards who won't come to me... When you have two or three guards, bachelors as some of them are now, are in a party mood, in the evening, and they want to celebrate I-don't-know-what, I can easily imagine that they don't want to do it in front of an inmate's family... because next day, everyone inside would know about it...*

By 1990, a favourable conjuncture leading to a redistribution of the clientele passing through Clairvaux enabled the new owner of the inn to set up an internal border, allowing two different 'markets' to coexist on the same premises. First, in 1989, there was the creation of a volunteer group set up to help with the reception and accommodation of inmates' families in need in the hostel run by nuns, which relieved the inn of its most impecunious clients. The proprietor of the *Auberge du Pays* expressed his appreciation to the nuns. As one sister put it:

*He told us several times, "What you're doing is taking a real burden off my business, because the people you take in are the ones who didn't pay their bills!" It's true, that's what we are here for: the ones who can't pay their bills.*

Then, from the following year, an outdoor spectacle evoking the life of Saint Bernard started attracting new visitors to Clairvaux. The innkeeper, freed from his poorest clients (who now patronized the nuns' hostel), made an effort to receive these new tourists, who were less aware of the stigma attached to the establishment, without driving away his usual clientele, consisting mostly of prisoners' visitors who were too well-off to go to the nuns' hostel but who could have gone to the hotel 'in town' if they had felt uncomfortable at the inn. He guaranteed anonymity to the inmates' partners:

*You need a bit of psychology in this business. In my inn, I've given my staff instructions: I never want to hear any names mentioned! You refer to clients only by their room number. So that my staff, in my establishment, never say 'Mrs. M.'<sup>(15)</sup>, it's always: 'Room number so' in conversations among the staff... The families of inmates who come stay with us are clients who have the right to be left in peace... You have to avoid clashes... We had some at the beginning, I had to tell them off... But it's all working smoothly now.*

Above all, the inn keeper modified the physical structure of his premises.

---

<sup>15</sup> The wife of a fundamentalist activist sentenced for acts of terrorism, whose name was much in the news after several bloody attacks.

There are now two distinct entrances so that the inmates' families can go to and from their rooms by a side door while the bar has a separate access. This arrangement even allows some guards to drop in for a quick drink on their way to work. This second clientele is all the more welcome now that the landlord is a candidate in the elections for the town council.

*I remodeled the hotel part to make it easier to accommodate prisoners' families... So that now, sometimes it happens, if a guard drops in for a quick coffee, the girl who's on her way to the visiting room can slip out of here and their paths don't cross... Because I've noticed, already when they meet on the streets in the morning, the guards coming off night duty, and then the girl is on her way to the visiting room, dressed to kill, all decked out, you can see the sparks flying... you've got looks that crack... So I keep them apart.*

The structure and texture of ordinary relations in these two cafés in Clairvaux reveals, as in Fresnes, that the dichotomous cleavage internal to the penal institution, with prisoners on one side and guards on the other, has seeped through the prison walls, as it were. Separation operates from both sides, with each working to keep its appointed place: the inmate's wife has no business to be in the bar used by the prison staff and a guard who wants a drink or two must not consume them in sight of the inmates' families. The partitioning of these two zones of intercourse is, more than any other, specific to the environment of the prison. The cleavage imposed by the penal institution between staff and inmates is moreover specified by the French penal code of procedure:

**Article D. 221: Members of staff shall not entertain relations not justified by the requirements of their professional duties with the persons or relatives and friends of the persons placed under the authority or supervision of the establishment or service to which they belong.**

## **Conclusion**

If I chose not to cite this clause from the French penal code until this point, it is because I believe that it is not the origin but rather a symptom of the practices of relegation and ostracization analyzed in the previous two sections. It endorses, in the official rule book, various practices which reinforce the segregation of prisoners and, more generally, the spatial, social and symbolic distancing of the prison, practices which the social body as a whole finds broadly acceptable and in which most agents

in contact with the carceral world generally participate. Typically, the persons and institutions concerned partake in the making and marking of penal cleavages not in a deliberate and fully conscious way but through 'surface adjustments' which might seem to be accessory phenomena that cancel each other out because they are governed by different logics, whereas empirical analysis shows that they combine to reinforce one another because they are propelled by one and the same logic.

As the instrument that enforces and materializes the judicial sanction, the prison organizes the scission of the social body. It is not surprising therefore that anyone who is involved in it, by choice or by chance, whether inmate or guard, administrator or elected official, volunteer worker or neighbor, is almost irresistibly led to reproduce this social division at his own level, in his own practices, however remote they may be from carceral life in the strict sense. This was the case in the cascading processes of relegation whereby prisons are kept away from the most urbanized, the most sacred and the most noble sites of the national territory, which have to be 'preserved', as President François Mitterrand wrote. Prisons are kept at a distance so as to protect and preserve free citizens from the penal taint they radiate. Coming even closer to, but still remaining outside of, the prison walls, we have seen that the various agents connected with the bars and inns which neighbor them helped to reproduce, outside the prison, the divisions that the institution sets up.



*'Would you rather be prison guard at Clairvaux or UN peace keeper in Sarajevo?'*

Figure 1. This cartoon appeared on the front page of *Le Monde*, on 9 December 1992. It illustrates three of the themes developed in this article: the intrinsic violence of the prison; the warlike character of this institution, with inmates being considered as 'enemies of the interior'; the stigma that, beyond inmates, spreads to the penitentiary staff, and to the vicinity.

The casting-out of prisons far from urbanized and prestigious environments is not comparable to that of industrial factories, airports, water retreatment plants and other types of noxious facilities subject to what planners call the NIMBY syndrome(16) because it is not based on physical nuisance (involving noise, smell, or some other sensory disruption or chemical pollution) but on a logic of scission of the social body which performs a radical cleavage between 'good' and 'evil' people. The same is true of the divisive practices observed in bars and hotels near the prison. They cannot be assimilated to those found, for example, in cafés close to high schools or universities, where some are frequented by students, others by professors, yet others by administrative staff. Affinity groupings are a habitual feature of any society. The partitions produced by judicial decisions and materialized in the very bodies of prisoners by their penal confinement are much more forcible and consequential breaks. They are more radical and more destructive even than those arising during war times. Only a few decades after World War II, the Americans and the Japanese were cooperating in industrial development; the French, the British and the Germans were joining in a fully integrated European Union. Prisoners are treated as the 'enemy of the interior' and, as such, they are much more difficult to reintegrate into society (see Combessie, 2001(2009)).

## Acknowledgments

Support from the French Ministry of Research and from the French Ministry of Justice are gratefully acknowledged. Special thanks are due to Richard Nice and Loïc Wacquant for the translation of the version published in *Ethnography*, and to Jean Plantu, who allowed me to reproduce his cartoon published in *Le Monde*.

---

16. NIMBY stands for 'Not In My Back Yard'. This term refers to the reaction of residents hostile to building plans that threaten or devalue their immediate surroundings, sometimes inspired by environmentalist views. The most extreme form of 'nimbyism' is known as BANANA (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anybody).

## References

Combessie, Philippe (1996) *Prisons des villes et des campagnes. Etude d'écologie sociale*. Paris: Editions Ouvrières - Editions de l'Atelier.

Combessie, Philippe (1998) "The "Sensitive Perimeter" of the Prison: A Key to Understanding the Durability of the Penal Institution", in Vincenzo Ruggiero, Ian Taylor and Nigel South (eds) *The New European Criminology*, pp. 125-135. London and New York: Routledge.

Combessie Philippe (2000), "Need for and requirements of national monitoring for prisons and jails within a sovereign State". communication at the X<sup>th</sup> United Nation's Congress on the Prevention of Crime, Wien (Austria)  
[http://classiques.ugac.ca/contemporains/combessie\\_philippe/need\\_for\\_requirements/need\\_for\\_requirements.html](http://classiques.ugac.ca/contemporains/combessie_philippe/need_for_requirements/need_for_requirements.html)

Combessie, Philippe (2001) *Sociologie de la prison*. Paris: La Découverte, Repères  
[http://www.numilog.com/fiche\\_livre.asp?PID=14038](http://www.numilog.com/fiche_livre.asp?PID=14038)  
(edition renewed, completed and reprinted in 2009).

Combessie, Philippe (2001) "Prisons in France: Stalemate or Evolution? The Question is still Topical", in Dirk van Zyl Smit and Frieder Dünkel (eds), *Imprisonment Today and Tomorrow. International Perspectives on Prisoners' Rights and Prison Conditions*, pp. 253-287, London & Boston: Kluwer Law International.

Elias, Norbert (1976[1939]) *State Formation and Civilization*. Cambridge: Blackwell.

Faugeron, Claude, Chauvenet Antoinette and Combessie Philippe (eds) (1996) *Approches de la prison*. Brussels: DeBoeck Université.

Goffman, Erving (1963) *Stigma. Notes on the Social Management of Spoiled Identity*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Préfecture du Département de la Seine (1895) *Projet de construction à Fresnes-les-Rungis (Seine) d'un groupe de prisons départementales*. Paris: Imprimerie centrale des Chemins de fer.