

A Strange Democracy: The “Politics” of Jail Inmate Governance
Michael Lawrence Walker

A jail may be conceptualized as a bounded social system with a government charged with the primary task of presiding over the affairs of a largely unwanted and negatively labeled¹ population. Though jails are often across from city hall buildings or tucked away in city centers, they *feel* worlds away from free society. In fact, in the vernacular of inmates and detention employees, free society is often regarded as “the world,” signaling the extreme social distance of penal living from free society irrespective of the spatial distance to “the world.” As an example, during a conversation about the inmate political faction system, a deputy offered this justification: *the rules in jail wouldn't work in the world*, “but they work in here.” Once you have entered the inner space of a jail, there is a sense of having left the “world.” The deputy’s comment symbolized that feeling of other worldliness. It is a common sentiment. Many former inmates speak of “touching down” upon Earth as a metaphor for being released from penal society. Other worldliness is a shared feature of total institutions².

The mere fact that inmates are in a total institution intuitively precludes any notion of democracy in part, because by its character, a total institution is nearly devoid of choice (and by extension, voice), which is the hallmark of democratic activity. This is particularly true for penal institutions; however, in this study, the Millerton County Jail³ system, instituted an adulterated version of democracy in which jail administrators divided inmates into political factions that policed the body of inmates and bore the brunt of the responsibility of governing the day-to-day needs of the inmates. Jail administrators supported the creation and maintenance of inmate representatives who allowed the jail administration (the government, if you will) to become

¹ Labels like “criminal,” “thug,” “thief,” “liar,” and many others that are euphemisms for poor, guilty, people of color are applied widely to jail inmates irrespective of their guilt. The vast majority of jail inmates have not had their case(s) settled; however, county issued inmate uniforms nullify the notion of *innocent until proven guilty*.

² Erving Goffman (1961) defined the total institution as an all-encompassing institution wherein the barriers to sleep, work, and play are broken down. There is a central administrative body, batch living, a highly routinized schedule, and rules are rationally enforced towards some set of official goals.

³ Millerton is a pseudonym. All names of persons and places were changed for the sake of anonymity.

distant and unreachable to the average inmate who was required to funnel his requests through his faction representative.

The result of the explicit and implicit jail governance policies was the establishment and sustaining of race-based inmate political factions. The interaction of the political factions dictated jail living. Within the inner workings of the political factions arose an adulterated form of procedural democracy and substantive democracy that both benefitted and controlled inmates.

RESEARCH ON JAIL SOCIAL SYSTEMS

An examination of jail as a social system has not been produced for nearly thirty years; however, jails have not gone completely ignored. Researchers have covered topics that fall under the broad umbrellas of administrative management (overcrowding, jail design, surveillance, job satisfaction, etc.), inmate health (suicide rates, mental health resources, etc.), and inmate safety (rates of sexual assault, violence, rule infractions, etc.). Though valuable, such studies do not paint a picture of a jail social system anymore than an examination of a few planets constitutes a study of our solar system. In fact, if Rhodes’ (2001) review of ethnographic work in prisons is any indication, throughout the recent expansion of penal control, sociologists have been noticeably silent on prison as a social system as well, and the most telling expositions of penal living were produced by inmates or former inmates (Irwin 1985; Santos 2007). Thus, we know relatively little about the day-to-day management practices that inmates employ in order to negotiate penal living.

Below I highlight three explorations of American jails—two of which offer a necessary introduction to the study of jails, and the last one proffers an analysis of jail as a social system. Irwin’s (1985) research has received considerable attention, Goldfarb’s (1976) exposition is

rarely cited, and Ballesteros’ (1979) work is almost never cited. In my opinion, these three analyses represent the most comprehensive studies of jails to date.

Goldfarb’s Ultimate Ghetto

Perhaps because Goldfarb was not, strictly speaking, an academic, *Jails* has not earned its just due; however, the value of the study can hardly be understated. Arguably, Goldfarb’s (1976) work was the precursor to Irwin’s (1985) more famous study of jails. After having crisscrossed the nation visiting prisons and jails, Goldfarb (1976) reached the conclusion that is still so often obtained by those who have visited or experienced both institutions and that is that jails were far worse than prisons. His exploration was at once a necessarily shocking introduction to American jails as well as a passionate plea for reform. His research made several significant contributions to the study of jails and of penal institutions in general.

Jails as recreated ghettos behind bars. The grand theme of *Jails* was that jails had become America’s dumping grounds for a “disparate collection of social outcasts and underprivileged people in desperate need of unavailable social services” (1976:4). Congruent with images conjured in our collective minds when the phrase “ghetto community” is uttered, Goldfarb (1976) described jails as overcrowded, resource-deprived, filthy, hostile, environments in which the poor were literally trapped and isolated. He also noted that men would often be locked away in jails and literally forgotten for weeks and months beyond the date on which they could have been released. Jail administrators tended to manage jails with as little effort as possible, which translated to long hours of lockdown and few programs (poorly funded at that) meant to pass the time or improve the stock of the inmates. Indeed, jail inmates were powerless while in the “ultimate ghetto” of the criminal justice system (1976:9).

The bond system as a social sifter. Goldfarb (1976) attributed the recreation of the ghetto within jail coffers to the American bond system, which he described as a complex of bail bondsmen, attorneys, judges, prosecutors, hospitals, and social agencies that “combine to provide an alternative for the middle class and the affluent that is seldom available to the poor” (1976:29). Thus, “whatever the legal justification offered, [the poor] are jailed primarily because they are poor” (1976:29). In Goldfarb’s (1976) estimation, the bond system functioned as a social sifter where the desperate and poor fell through the sifter into the clutches of the criminal justice system while the shiny middle-class nuggets were saved for grander purposes.

A self-perpetuating institution. He also made the critical observation that jails created the problems for which the institution was, at least in part, meant to improve—a sentiment that has been echoed by many contemporary prison researchers. His investigation found that even when appropriate policies were in place to care for mentally ill inmates, regular procedures for handling those inmates were violated. Many jails had no medical staff at all, and many more had wholly inadequate resources. Inmates suffering from drug addictions or alcoholism found little support within jails, and in the final analysis, the mentally ill, alcoholics, and drug addicts cycled in and out of jails worsening with each iteration. Thus, jails trapped a population of consumers.

Irwin’s Rabble Thesis

As a caseworker for prisoner services for three San Francisco jails, and with the fortuitous support of the recently elected sheriff who had been his friend and coworker, Irwin (1985) conducted a study of jail inmate life. In many ways, Irwin’s (1985) analysis was the fulfillment of an introduction to jail that was started by Goldfarb (1976). From the outset, Irwin (1985) reminded the reader that there were at least four reasons to focus attention on jails: (1) jails cycled many more inmates on a yearly basis than prisons, (2) decisions made while in jail or

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while attached to jail through the bond system had far reaching effects for one’s future freedom, (3) experiences had in jail influenced one’s experiences in prison, and (4) “the jail, not the prison, imposes the cruelest form of punishment in the United States.” (p. xi).

A virtual tour. Quite usefully, Irwin (1985) provided a description and evaluation of the establishment of a person’s moral career in jail. Beginning with the arrest and ending with the official housing of the inmate, Irwin (1985) described a process by which men were separated from their social ties (*disintegration*), kept guessing as what was to happen next (*disorientation*), subjected to shaming rituals at every turn throughout the booking process (*degradation*), and upon receiving a housing assignment, they slowly took on the identity of the rabble around them (*preparation*).

Rabble acculturation. Irwin (1985) contended that *preparation*, the process of acculturation into the rabble, was inevitable with time because: (1) men were forced to share space with the rabble without relief while in jail and (2) jail space tended to be dominated by rabble inmates. The process began with *wariness*—a heightened level of vigilance and very little trust, which, according to Irwin (1985), was an artifact of rabble life on the street. Inmates also became *opportunistic*, using every chance available to exploit a situation to their favor. Inmates eventually learned the *spirit of making do*, which connoted their ability to endure the circumstances of jail. Next, *improvisation* became an important indication that an inmate was taking on the identity of the rabble. Few resources were provided to the inmates, and so they needed to be resourceful in their creation of past-times. Finally, Irwin (1985) characterized the rabble mentality as having a general disposition of *defiance* toward conventional society and especially toward law enforcement personnel. He maintained that the longer one remained jailed, the more similar to the rabble one became.

Managing the rabble. Irwin’s (1985) central argument was that jails were designed to manage what he called “the rabble,” which he described as a persons detached from conventional social organizations and who were, therefore, in a state of disrepute. He argued that jails were created to manage the rabble *because* we find them offensive. Rabble crimes tend to be annoying, petty, and highly visible, which is why they are so often arrested. In his report, many of the inmates had been arrested for little more than offending the sensibilities of the arresting officers. Thus, the police played an active role in managing the rabble as well, and by extension, judges and attorneys saw fit to sentence members of the rabble to jail time. Therefore, in Irwin’s (1985) analysis, the criminal justice system as a whole was implicated in managing the rabble.

This is, of course, precisely what Goldfarb (1976) argued. Certainly Irwin’s (1985) definition of “the rabble” is similar to Goldfarb’s (1976) description of “social outcasts” in search of needed “social services” (p. 4). Goldfarb (1976) argued that jails had become America’s dumping ground, and Irwin (1985) was effectively making the same argument using slightly different terminology.

Ballesteros Behind Bars

Ballesteros’ (1979), though not without its clumsy judgments and other issues, was the most comprehensive study of jail life from the point of inmates of the three studies reviewed here. Though, he was not a social scientist, he was very successful at painting a picture of inmate society in a jail and at capturing the everyday habits, struggles, rules, and rituals that inmates must negotiate in a jail environment. He gained access as the education director of a large city jail in the Southwest. During his eleven-month tenure, he observed, interviewed, and spoke with over 400 jail inmates. If the length of his bibliography is any indication, Ballesteros’ investigation was not clouded by previous studies of penal institutions, and in some ways, the

innocence with which he approached his work made for a more interesting and inclusive examination. The strength of his report was in the primacy of the inmates’ voices and the comprehensive description of life in jail.

An all-encompassing description. He approached his examination the way one might approach the discovery of a new island. He documented everything, and because he was afforded considerable liberty to go where he pleased, his descriptions were nearly comprehensive. He provided details about the facilities, about the inmates and their backgrounds, the staff, what the inmates wore, ate, how they felt about the jail, how they passed their time, and how they handled their addictions. Thus, Ballesteros (1979) afforded participants their humanity, and, in fact, he was openly sympathetic if not patriarchal. Most importantly, his work provides an overview of a jail social system. He included brief sketches of the interrelated roles of various jail personnel and inmates.

Surviving jail. On the issue of surviving jail, Ballesteros (1979) labeled the temporary affectation that many inmates displayed a “jail personality.” Successful negotiation of the rigors of jail life required an inmate to be a model prisoner in the eyes of the jail administration while cooperating with other inmates, for as one of his participants noted, violating inmate codes (such as *no snitching*) could literally shorten one’s life. The jail personality operated as a buffer from having to deal directly with the strict environment of jail, but it was an affectation, and it was fleeting.

Summary of Jail Studies

To date, the aforementioned investigations represent the largest and most ardent efforts to understand life behind jail walls. Taken together, a picture of the experience of jail begins to develop; however, the most recent of these studies is nearly thirty years old. Certainly an update

is in order. Since then, the U.S. has undergone significant changes in public policy—not the least of which has led to the mass rounding up of poor Black and Brown bodies into jails and prisons at unprecedented numbers and rates. The criminalization of Black men has led some scholars to compare the mass imprisonment of Black men to a new form of Jim Crowism (Alexander 2010).

Goldfarb (1976), Ballesteros (1979), and Irwin (1985) were noticeably silent on the role of race within inmate society, and their analyses only hint at the social systems that develop within jails. Thus, we do not gain an understanding of how inmates manage the myriad challenges that come with batch living. In short, social structure is largely missing. Thus, the processes and procedures for developing rules for interacting are missing—whether they be democratic or otherwise.

METHODS

The results presented here are part of a larger study of a jail social system. Though I focus on the experience of closed⁴ dayrooms, politics in open⁵ dayrooms operated similarly. The bulk of the data for this project were collected from the fall of 2006 through the spring of 2008, which amounts to approximately 135 full days (including 120 consecutive days) or 3,240 hours of fieldwork in a Southern California county jail system. With each time in the field, I had been arrested, arraigned, and my case was concluded in due process of the courts.

I faced the same fears that other inmates faced. I was told the same empty stories by my public defender that other inmates were told. I hoped for a quick release like other inmates. In short, I was an inmate—not a student impersonating an inmate. The difference is important because when you know that you cannot go home because you feel that you have reached the

⁴ Dayrooms composed of two-man cells.

⁵ Open dayrooms consist of bunk beds stacked up to three high. There are no cells. The space is open.

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point of saturation or because you are ready to see your family or because you have other things to do, you are sure to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of the groups and settings you are examining. That was certainly the case for me.

This investigation was decidedly exploratory. I maintained a critical eye toward penal living, the processes involved in becoming an inmate from arrest to release, and the politics of jail life.

As with any research design, there were strengths and weaknesses to a study of this kind. I believe the strengths outweigh the weaknesses. A central concern was my insider status⁶. In this case, there simply was no other way to record the information that I collected. Moreover, because I was completely immersed within inmate society, I gained firsthand knowledge and experience as an inmate—not as a researcher performing the role of an inmate. I hope this provides a satisfying degree of legitimacy and authenticity to this research.

Another possible weakness that I tried to turn into a strength was my lack of research experience. At the time of the study, I only had a year of graduate training under my belt; however, that academic naiveté probably allowed me to conduct the study unfettered from academic polemics. I approached the jail the way one might approach any new environment. I took notes on everything because I did not know what would be relevant later.

The weakness that I found most difficult to overcome was my own race and hence, my membership in the black inmate political faction, which precluded membership in the other factions. Also the politics were often so strict that simple conversation between two inmates of different factions required CIA-like stealth. Thus much of the data on southsiders and woods is observational or secondhand; however, I did find ways to interact with inmates outside my

⁶ For an excellent discussion of the issues at the heart of an ethnographer’s racial status, the race of one’s participants, and the matters concerning the insider status as a researcher, see Randol Contreras’ (2013) *The Stickup Kids*.

faction. For example, I spoke with men while waiting in line for visitation, while waiting in line for nail clippers, while walking to see the mental health nurse, and while sitting in holding cells. In short, I used every available opportunity to interact with other jail inmates. Conversations became clandestine interviews.

FINDINGS

Beginning with the booking process, the jail administration developed and supported a social system based upon racial divisions. Inmates and jail administrators⁷ alike referred to the roles, status positions, and norms⁸ of that social system as the *politics* of jail living⁹. The governing of the inmate population was accomplished through the politics of jail living. The politics included inmate political factions with leadership that served a middle management position.

In some ways, jailhouse government was similar in general function to what we have in free society. The jail administration acted as the unreachable federal government. Inmate concerns and requests needed to be taken to faction representatives who decided whether a request could be sent on to an administrator (the government). Inmates who sought to sidestep their representatives were frequently referred to their respective representatives. In this way, the jail resembled a peculiar republic.

To be clear, jail is an anti-democratic institution by design, but the appointment of faction leadership was carried out in a semi-democratic manner, and a form of democracy existed among the inmates when decisions were made that potentially affected the entire dayroom or pod. In

⁷ For my purposes the “jail administration” and “jail administrators” includes deputies, who were simply the most visible extensions of the jailhouse government.

⁸ According to Jonathan Turner (1972) the “most basic parts of a social system are *status position, roles, and norms*” (p. 4).

⁹ There were pods and spaces in which the politics were not in play. In fact, in some spaces within the jail, the politics were vehemently resisted; however, the politics were widespread through the jail system, which is why I am focused upon them here.

terms of procedure and substance, inmate political factions simultaneously provided and denied inmates a voice. The factions quelled inter-factional conflict and increased intra-factional threats. Though adulterated and imperfect, inmates had carved out a sliver of democracy.

BOOKING

What is commonly regarded as the “booking” process is, in fact, the jail’s way of formally documenting an inmate’s date of incarceration, his release date (if he has one), his charges, his personal effects, and assigning him the appropriate classification status for his stay. During the intake process, inmates were asked a series of questions about their mental stability, fingerprinted, and they exchanged their street clothes for jail-issued orange tops and bottoms, a white T-shirt, boxers, a pair of socks, and a pair of slippers. Finally, men were stuffed into what I call a *pre-housing holding cell* awaiting the culmination of the formal classification process.

Pre-housing holding cells were the small (as most holding cells were) holding cells in which inmates awaited their housing designation. They were approximately six feet wide and eleven feet long. There was just one toilet, and it was at the front of the cell, near the door. There were wooden benches along the length of the cell, and inmates slept seated, laying atop the benches (if they got there first), some slept under the benches, and some slept in the middle of the floor when the space became too crowded, which was often. Along one wall were three phones with a corkboard full of numbers to bail bonds companies in the area.

The absolute lack of resources and extreme sameness¹⁰ of inmates allowed for a sharing and egalitarianism that existed in few other places within the jail. For example, when I opted to not drink the skim milk given to us for lunch, it was a Latino inmate who spoke up, exclaiming,

¹⁰ At this point, there are no material means for differentiating inmates, and categorical means of differentiation have not yet become significant. At this point, all that matters is the inmate status.

*Shoot it!*¹¹ Similarly, it was common for men of all racial groups to converse casually and to share food, which, as I will discuss shortly, was heresy in most housing units.

As the booking process progressed, a deputy called inmates from the cell one by one, and asked a battery of questions aimed at determining where each inmate was to be housed. Some of the questions included: *do you get along with all races, what is your sexual preference, are you in a gang, do you have any tattoos, and what (sic) race are you?* Whatever answers inmates provided, these questions appeared to be little more than bureaucratic procedures. Excluding the trustee¹² pod and the special case of Asian inmates, I never observed or heard of a two-man cell being occupied by men from different races. California corrections and detention institutions segregate inmates by race as a matter of de facto policy (AELE 2010). In a very common sense manner, the deputy conducting the interview looked at each inmate, and if he *looked* Asian, Black, White, or Latino, then that is the racial classification the inmate received.

The racial classification an inmate received and (in the case of Asian inmates) his response to the question *do you get along with all races* determined with whom an inmate could be matched. Upon completion of the classification interview and when space opened up¹³, inmates were transferred from the pre-housing holding cells to whichever pod and dayroom¹⁴ they were assigned. Though there were four racial classifications, there were only three inmate political factions to which an inmate could belong. The transfer to a housing assignment marked

¹¹ “Shoot it” was a common expression in inmate vernacular. It literally meant to pass something quickly. It was commonly used in terms of simple exchange without connoting the speed at which something was exchanged.

¹² The trustee pod housed inmates who had a release date and who held a job within the jail.

¹³ This literally meant that a vacant space had to be made available, but in the case of two-man cells, the race of the other occupant had to be considered.

¹⁴ Each jail was set up differently, but in the Millerton County Jail (a pseudonym), two-man cells were designed in accordance with Bentham’s panopticon. A small control room in the center ran the entire pod of inmates. The pod was divided into four sections called dayrooms. Thus, the designations were, for example, G-4, which was G-pod—dayroom 4.

end of the egalitarianism that characterized interaction in the pre-housing holding cell and the introduction into the politics of jail life.

INMATE POLITICAL FACTIONS

Aside from Asians, inmates did not choose which political faction to which they would belong. That decision was made by the jail administration—the government—and it was based upon an inmate’s race. Irrespective of an inmate’s racial or ethnic self-identification, he would be fitted into one of three inmate political factions: the *blacks*, the *southsiders*, or the *woods*.

I make it a point to use the term *inmate political factions*, which I think most accurately captures the meaning and significance of the inmate groups. They were decidedly political in that their primary charge was the management of their party’s interests specifically and the sustaining of the system of party politics in general. They were organized, hierarchical, and goal-oriented.

Southsiders

Latino and Native American inmates were united under the *southsider* banner. Southsiders included “homies,” paisans, Native Americans, and non-affiliates. Homies were inmates affiliated with various gangs. In free society, they might have been enemies, but in jail they were united. Within the southsiders faction, the leadership tended to come from the homies who were most respected. While in a court holding cell, I noticed a southsider who began his conversations with other southsiders by asking, “Are you a homie?” When they said yes, and invariably they did, he greeted them warmly and chatted casually¹⁵.

The paisans typically had the lowest status among the southsiders. “Paisan” is a Spanish word that, when translated to English means “countrymen.” Paisans typically spoke little to no

¹⁵ It is safe to assume that he knew or at least suspected which inmates were homies and which were not before he asked the question.

English, and they had not been assimilated in U.S. culture. Often they were awaiting deportation. Native Americans or *Indios*, as they were called in Spanish, typically (but not always) shared a similar position within the southsider hierarchy. Non-affiliates were Latino inmates who were not members of any gang and who were not paisans or Native Americans. In terms of the southsider hierarchy, they ranked higher than the Native Americans and paisans but lower than the homies.

The southsiders were the largest and most organized of the political factions. They held general meetings regarding policy and leadership changes. For instance, when Mobster, the southsider representative, was transferred to a different detention center, his lieutenant, Reaper, was left in charge. Reaper immediately called a general meeting of southsiders in G-4 regarding the change in leadership. He even had notes from which he read. Following the meeting, the rules governing the southsiders, such as “sounding off¹⁶” after mandatory exercises were adhered to with greater frequency.

Intraracial violence was kept to a minimum among the southsiders. Grievances from gang alliances were not continued in jail. All gang affiliated Latinos inmates were homies, and non-sanctioned fighting among southsiders could lead to redlining¹⁷.

Blacks

Similar to the southsiders, the *blacks* were comprised of three groups: crips, bloods, and non-affiliates. However, unlike the southsiders, intraracial violence among the *blacks* was common. The black political faction was splintered along gang affiliations. It was common for

¹⁶ Southsiders were required to do complete a weekly exercise program and “sound off” or announce to the dayroom when they had completed each stage of the program. Men would announce their cell number, their names, which exercise set they had completed, and finish the sound off with “gracias” to which the southsiders would respond in unison “A ti,” which translates to English as “same to you.”

¹⁷ “Redlining” or “DPing” was essentially a beating doled out by an inmate’s faction members as a way of discipline. An inmate would be trapped in his cell while faction members (usually the lieutenant, representative, other high-ranking) members beat him.

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fights to break out between two black inmates. However, when faced with an outside threat, black inmates were united. For example, after witnessing a fight between a blood and a crip, I recorded the following exchange:

...I asked a blood about being required to jump in a fight to protect brothas who would just assume jump me, and he responded, “But those are your people. You wouldn’t help your people?” I nodded, but I was dumbfounded by the ironic duality of his Pan-African sentiments and gang banging mentality.

Irrespective of the in-group fighting, in the event of a doomsday scenario, the political faction was all that mattered. In this way, inmates were both put in harms way and protected. The black representative in a different jail site within the Millerton County Jail system shared that sentiment. After he noticed conflict building between the blacks and southsiders in a neighboring dayroom, he informed me, “Eh, if they get it crackin’ over there, we gotta it crackin’ over here.” I was to guard the black faction against all challengers. In fact, the threat did not need to address me directly. An attack on one black was an attack on all. Unfortunately, in our dayroom there were only four blacks and about twenty southsiders, an advantage that was typical throughout the Millerton County Jail system.

Nevertheless, it was in an inmate’s best interest to carry his faction’s flag. For instance, when an argument between Ty and Buff (two blacks) led to Ty kicking eggs in front of Reaper’s cell, LK (a high-ranking black) threatened, “You can’t be kickin’ shit all in front of their doors!” When Ty mumbled a response under his breath, LK continued, “Aight, if [the southsiders] fuck you up, we ain’t helpin’ you!”

When D2 got word of Ty’s actions, he castigated him through his cell door during lockdown saying, “No matter how angry you get, you can’t be doin’ this shit at all.” The statement was a promise for redlining or perhaps banishment from the faction, which meant that

if anything happened to Ty at the hands of the other factions, there would be no inter-factional conflict. The latter threat was far worse.

Woods

White inmates were aggregately known as *woods*¹⁸, but their leadership came from a smaller group of white supremacists known as *white power comrades* or just *comrades*. Comrades espoused white supremacist philosophies and often greeted one another with the symbolic “heil Hitler” salute. For instance, Henry, the G-4 representative had several tattoos of quintessentially white supremacist imagery. On the other hand, White inmates who were not gang affiliated and who did not espouse white supremacist philosophies were simply considered woods. I never counted more than ten woods in a dayroom at a time. Thus, their organization typically consisted of a representative, a lieutenant, and everyone else.

Asians

I never saw more than three Asian inmates in a dayroom at a time. No doubt as a result of their consistently small numbers, Asian inmates did not constitute a separate political faction. Instead, Asian inmates were made to pledge their allegiance to one of the other factions. The declaration of allegiance needed to be made during the classification interview so that the administration would not know with whom the inmate could be housed. Even still, Asian inmates’ allegiance was questioned upon arrival into the pod. For example, when a new Asian inmate passed G’s cell door, G asked, “You ride with the blacks?” When the Asian inmate nodded in the affirmative, D2 approached him to point out where all the black cells were.

During my time in the field, most Asian inmates were aligned with the blacks. Tank, the black lieutenant, had an Asian cellmate. D2, the black representative, had an Asian cellmate. One of the Ty’s cellmates was the Asian inmate mentioned above. In fact, I only heard of one

¹⁸ “Woods” is short for “peckerwoods” the genealogy of which, I never discovered.

story in which an Asian inmate was housed in a two-man cell with an inmate outside of the black faction. I recorded the following notes from a conversation in a holding cell¹⁹:

...Big Mike...told us that he had a Korean celly²⁰ for fourteen months (he keeps amazing track of time and events) until the [wood] rep’ complained to the deputies that the arrangement “wasn’t right.” There had been no incidents prior to that.

Big Mike’s Asian cellmate was removed from his cell at the request of the wood representative—a show of influence and power that was common for the representatives. What is important here, though, is that Asian inmates were typically aligned with the blacks, and their allegiance was strictly enforced as if they were in fact Black.

FACTION LEADERSHIP

The greater the size of the inmate faction, the greater the degree of specialization within the faction²¹. Thus, the southsiders (regularly the largest faction) had several defined roles used to govern the behavior of its members. On the other hand, the woods (regularly small in number) rarely required more than a single role in order to govern its members. Certainly, some roles were created for facilitatory purposes, but leadership roles (beyond managing the members of the inmate factions) enjoyed the support of the jail administration in a similar manner to how our representatives and senators enjoy the support of the state and federal governments.

Representatives

The *representative* or “rep,” as inmates frequently shortened the term, enjoyed a tremendous set of privileges and bore a tremendous set of responsibilities²². Representatives

¹⁹ The term “mental health holding cell” is my own. They are simply the holding cells that were across from the mental health interview booths. Men waited in the mental health holding cells until it was their turn to speak with the psychiatrist or the nurse.

²⁰ In jail vernacular, a “celly” was one’s cellmate.

²¹ This hardly requires a footnote. By now this has become a sociological law. As a population size increases so does specialization within the population. See Jonathan Turner’s (2010) *Theoretical Principles of Sociology: Volume 2* for a review.

²² A full treatment of the privileges and responsibilities that come with being the *rep* are beyond the scope of this project; however, this effort is part of a larger project in which I interrogate the role of the rep with greater vigor.

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were essentially the middle managers of the jail—operating as the go-betweens for the inmates and the administration. Sometimes referred to “trustees,” representatives maintained order among the general population, and when word reached the administration of possible inter-factional conflict, the representatives were called to the sally port in a meeting with the administration to quell the conflict. I once half jokingly asked D2 what we would do without him, and responded, “Prawly get into a riot.” The truth of his words was proven repeatedly. Whenever the potential for inter-factional violence arose, the representatives would call a meeting or be called into a meeting by the administration²³. Decisions would be made, and actions would be taken intraracially in order to avoid interracial conflict. For example, when the southsider representative was transferring to another jail site, the representatives from G-4 were summoned to the sally port by the jail administration in order to discuss a peaceful transition of the leadership from Mobster, who was leaving, to Reaper, his lieutenant who was taking over as the new southsider representative

Representatives were the gatekeepers of information. Inmates were permitted to make minor requests of deputies, but any request that required a kite²⁴, needed to first go through one’s representative. Regarding the rules for submitting a kite, I recorded the following notation:

The paisan I frequently see [in the holding cells] was explaining how stressed he’s become since he’s been put in charge of the phone in dayroom 1. He said this causes problems and that there are lots of problems between the paisans and the sorenos²⁵. The doctor could offer no help. In fact, he had a very unrealistic view of how life is for the inmate. He told this man to put a kite in, but the paisan explained that he’s not permitted to put in a kite without the reps seeing it. To this the doctor said that he should choose the lesser of the two evils. Obviously, the paisan was concerned for his safety, and putting in a kite to classification does nothing.

²³ During my tenure as an inmate, I never experienced an inter-factional conflict.

²⁴ A “kite” is a formal request from an inmate to a deputy; however, a kite could also be a note between two inmates in different pods or dayrooms. In this case, I am referring to the former.

²⁵ “Sorenos” were Southern California Latinos. Usually they were second-generation Latinos who spoke English and were assimilated more than paisans.

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An inmate caught trying to circumvent his representative faced redlining. But he also risked the safety of inmates throughout the dayroom, which is why kites were taken so seriously. The wrong request by an inmate could bring an unwanted amount of surveillance to the pod, lead to inter-factional conflict, or result in twenty-three hour lockdown while the administration investigated the request or information on the kite. To avoid those situations, kites were scrutinized heavily. Thus, kites were shared between representatives prior to being handed in to the administration. This was necessary to keep the peace and to foster trust.

More importantly, the administration did not want to be inundated with kites from inmates, so the representatives actually cut down the amount of work the administration had to do. When Sisqo, a black inmate, tried to whisper a request to the runner²⁶, the deputy loudly responded, “Who is your rep” referring Sisqo to D2 for whatever request he was making. Cooperation between the representatives and the administration was built into the system of government. I recorded an outstanding example of the cooperation between jail administration and faction leadership one night when a threatened inmate refused to return to his cell for fear of violence:

...we saw three male deputies walking a southsider back in here...One of the female deputies, Bear, began to talk to the man through the intercom. He wasn't answering her questions, so he was called into the sally port and questioned by Boy (a female deputy). She wasn't getting the answers she wanted either, and he went back in the dayroom and sat down. Then Reaper was called out, questioned, and sent back to his cell. He walked by the southsider without acknowledging him at all. Then Mobster was called out, questioned, and sent back to his cell. He also didn't acknowledge the man—not that the guy looked up at either one of them. Then the three female deputies all came to talk to the man, threatening that if he didn't go to his cell...they would put him in there. Shockingly, he just turned his back to them. Apparently, he didn't get along with [his celly], and the rep was called out to assure the man's safety...The man was nonresponsive and openly defiant in front of everyone...Boy demanded, “Then who's your rep? Who do I have to talk to?” The man said nothing, and he wouldn't budge.

²⁶ The “runner” was the name given to the deputy whose job it was to periodically leave the pod, enter the dayrooms, and count the inmates in their cells. The runner also delivered mail and periodically walked the dayroom as a show of presence.

Even though the inmate was clearly afraid to go back in his assigned cell, the deputies were inclined to work within the system of politics to resolve the inmate’s issue.

As I mentioned above, maintaining trust and avoiding inter-factional violence were among the primary responsibilities of the representatives. Sometimes the rules needed to be reinforced through violence:

Tonight, just as dayroom ended...as I headed up the steps by Henry’s cell, his celly was standing right outside the cell facing the pod, and I heard the sounds of fists on flesh...[As] I passed the cell, I saw shadows moving in the cell, and I realized that Henry was DPing someone...his celly was looking out for the deputies...A few more steps and I looked back in time to see one of the newer woods, Staplehead, get shoved out of the cell holding his hands up in a cowering manner...The rule for the woods is that they must come out [of their cell’s] for dayroom. This is so they’ll have numbers in a race riot. Apparently, Staplehead and his celly didn’t want to come out for dayroom...and a lesson needed to be taught.

The policing of the faction members in this way was a primary duty of the representatives. For this reason, representatives were often among the most hardened and skilled fighters in the dayrooms—they needed to be. While the core²⁷ membership of a political faction tended to be stable, the body of the membership could change quite often, as jails have high turnover rates. Often men spent just a day or two in jail. Thus, the representatives never knew who would be housed in their dayroom, so they needed to be prepared to handle whomever they faced.

Another less exciting but no less important set of duties included the tending to the daily needs of the inmates during lockdown. Typically during hours of lockdown, the representatives were free to roam the dayroom. They changed the channel of the television²⁸ according to request of inmates. The only available hot water was outside of the cells, and so the

²⁷ The core membership tended to include men facing serious charges such as murder or attempted murder or assault. Trials for such charges could drag on for many months, and, in fact, I met many men who had been in jail for years awaiting trial. Some had expressed that they were tired of waiting for trial—that they could not wait for their trial to begin.

²⁸ There was only one television, and it was centrally located within the dayroom so that most inmates could view it from the windows in their cell doors at an angle.

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representatives would fill a cup of hot water and pass hot water through the cell door jam using an old potato chip bag as a funnel. The chessboard was outside of the cells, and so the representatives would place the chessboard and pieces outside of the cell of the inmates who were next to play chess when dayroom time was given. The same goes for books.

Representatives became factotums so that the deputies did not have to tend to the needs of 170 inmates. In other words, representatives were effectively local government agents managing to the essentials the masses.

The procedure for selecting the representative depended upon several factors. Representatives needed to well versed in jail vernacular, jail sign language²⁹, jail politics, they needed to have a willingness to act, and a temperament to lead hardened individuals who were not always good at taking orders. Also, representatives tended to have more money on their books than other inmates, and they were minimally expected to support their newest arrivals. Moreover, the position required stability; therefore, he needed to be fighting a case serious enough to keep him in jail for months.

There was a dayroom with only one wood, which by default made him the representative. As noted above with the southsiders, the position was often decided democratically within the faction (although the lieutenant often won the position). Men who were interested made it known that they felt they had the qualifications to run the dayroom, and they made their case. A discussion ensued, and a decision was made.

The blacks handled their selection process similarly although less formally. For example, after I had a conversation with Tank, the black lieutenant, in which he revealed that he was likely to be the next representative when D2 left, I asked D2 who he thought would be the

²⁹ Jailhouse sign language was an adulterated version of standard American sign language in which each letter of each word needed to be spelled out using the an adapted version of the sign language alphabet.

representative when he left. He shrugged his shoulders and said, “I don’t know. Somebody smart,” and he pointed at me. I said that I did not know enough about jail culture, and I asked about Tank. He nodded and said, “But he probably don’t want it.” D2’s half-hearted nomination in my favor was more about a concern that Tank would not want the position than it was a vote of confidence in me. Through a series of informal conversations with various blacks, it was determined that Tank would be the likely choice when D2 left³⁰.

Sometimes the representative was simply appointed. Mobster had been appointed the representative by his former cellmate, Carnero, who had been the representative. During Carnero’s tenure, there were relatively few inmates who were “’bout that life³¹” as inmates said. Thus, he appointed Mobster, one of the few hardened inmates under his purview, as the next southsider representative, and he simply made an announcement during dayroom time.

Lieutenants

The *lieutenants* were responsible for enforcing the rules and policies when the representative was away at court or when the representative wanted to sleep. Lieutenants were effectively second in command. In the absence of the representative, the lieutenants were in control.

Lieutenants were not democratically selected—although representative did have the power to influence who the lieutenant would be by having a particular inmate moved into his cell. Generally, the lieutenant was an inmate who possessed the attributes of the representative but for one reason or another (he was not the first one there, for example) he was not the representative.

³⁰ When I left, D2 was still the representative.

³¹ This phrase “’bout that life” has many meanings depending upon the context. Here, it refers to men who were street soldiers and were prepared to fight for a code of respect and honor the jailhouse politics. Men described by this phrase tended to be gang-affiliated or street hustlers.

Helpers

Helpers served in a support function not unlike an administrative assistant. At times, the helper and the lieutenant were the same person, but not always. It was rare for a helper to not be the representative’s cellmate, and it was common for helpers to be freed from their cell along with the representative when it was time to clean the dayroom. Additionally, helpers performed administrative functions like counting food trays and carrying inmate kites to the representatives.

Timekeepers

The *timekeeper* was the inmate charged with the unenviable task of ensuring that inmates used only a specified amount of time on the phones. Unless no one else needed to use the phone, inmates were only permitted fifteen minutes of continuous phone time before they had to allow the next man his phone time. Each faction had access to only one phone³², and so there needed to be an organized way for monitoring who used the phone and for how long.

Because the woods were relatively small in number, the representative served as the timekeeper. The southsiders rotated the position among the membership. The blacks did not have a timekeeper. Men needed to announce that they intended to use the phone during the next dayroom period while at lunch or breakfast or dinner. Priority was given to inmates who had court the following day; however, a man needed to time his announcement. Make the announcement too early, and others would disqualify his request. Make the announcement too late, and he would be the last one to use the phone and risk not getting any phone time at all. Because there was no third party keeping inmates honest about their time on the phone, phone time was often stressful. For instance, after Bones disrespectfully hung the phone up while B+ was talking to his mother a fight ensued in which Bones got the worse end. Subsequently, D2

³² This was not strictly true. The southsiders and the woods formed a provisional alliance and often shared resources.

had the administration move Bones to a different pod but not before LK punched him in the face for starting unnecessary conflict in the dayroom. Conflict surrounding phone use was kept to a minimum when the timekeeper position was rotated, as with the southsiders; however, aggression was often directed toward the timekeeper.

THE POLITICS

The politics were so engrained in jail living that they seemed to be literally built into the physical structure of the jail. There were three phones, three showers, and the tables in the dayroom were rather “naturally” divided into three sections. Generally, each faction was given access to jail facilities and resources commensurate with its numbers. Thus, the southsiders were given many more food trays than blacks and woods, but they had many more members. The extras (and there were always extras) were divided evenly among the factions. During clothing exchange, the southsiders were given the largest area for which to exchange their clothing, but there were never any conflicts based upon these differences. It was understood that the size of the faction mattered.

For resources like the television, nail clippers, and hair clippers that needed to be shared among the entire dayroom, an egalitarian system had been devised to ensure that no single faction controlled these resources regardless of the size of the faction. For the television, a calendar had been drawn up, and days were marked off as “wood,” “black,” or “southsider” days. On those days, only that faction controlled the television. For nail clippers, members of a given faction lined up at the sally port at a given time to get their nails clipped. Other factions had to wait for the last member of that faction before they could begin lining up. Inmates scheduled haircuts by faction as well. That had to be scheduled with the administration, however, and priority was given to inmates who had impending court appearances.

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The politics had a more constricting side as well. Upon entry into the dayroom, an inmate’ cellmate or representative ran down the list formal rules governing faction interaction which included: (1) no sharing food with other factions, (2) no using the shower, phone, or tables of other factions, (3) no working out or playing games with other factions, and (4) you must walk around the tables of other factions—not through them. Though I never came across a single inmate who favored the politics, always mindful of the watchful eye of others, inmates followed the politics. For example, during recreation time, I recorded the following exchange:

During recreation, we played four on four, but there were two southsiders who also like basketball. One lamented, “Well, I’m ready to play another game [of basketball], but we can’t play with you.” I commented about how stupid the politics are and a few agreed. Ty asked LK if we could pick the two southsiders up, and LK said they wouldn’t be allowed to. Sure enough, as we were about to start another game, Ty asked Reaper if the two southsiders could play, and Reaper shook his “no” head and walked away.

The environment was unnatural.

Two individuals, who, in “the world,” would have no issue with one another, were forced to into tense silence around another. Men from different factions passed by each other as if the other did not exist. Stress and mistrust was built into the politics, so when I wanted a southsider who was an outstanding artist to draw something for me in exchange for a couple of “soups³³,” our interaction required bravery and imagination:

This one paisan...draws really well, and he has an amiable disposition....and I’ve been mentioning a drawing I’d like for him to do for me. He and I were near the showers, and I took out my rudimentary sketch to give him an idea of what I want. He looked nervously past me, and I followed him...beyond the sight of most southsiders. He took the picture with some trepidation and said he’d try to do it tonight...He looked around and said he didn’t mind doing the drawing but that some guys “think they’re politicians.”

³³ “Soups” were ramen noodles; however, all inmates called them soups. I never heard a single inmate (even newer inmates) call them ramen noodles. Soups were the basic food group to all meals that could be created in an inmate’s cell.

He later kicked the drawing under my cell door, and I later dropped two soups in front of his cell door as payment.

CONCLUSION

Jails continue to be overshadowed as sites worthy of investigation. Part of the issue that a vast web of bureaucratic agencies, including college and university institutional review boards protect penal institutions from investigative scrutiny, and so prisons and jails remain among the most difficult sites for researchers to penetrate (Trulson, Marquart, & Mullings, 2006; Sutton, 2011; Wacquant 2002; Waldram, 2009). Thus, Wacquant’s (2002) call to action has, regrettably, resulted in very little qualitative research that would provide an analysis of jail social systems and inmate governance.

This study has sought to address that gap in the literature in terms of methodology and analysis. Here I conceptualized a county jail system as a pseudo democratic federation wherein race-based inmate political factions have a degree of self-governability. With the support of the jail administration functioning in the role of a federal government, the inmate factions helped to provide a democratic voice and deny one to the inmates.

This examination, however, was preliminary. Further investigations of other jail systems are required to compare with what was found here. Are factional demarcations as strictly racial in prison, fire camps, and other penal institutions? There were spaces within each jail site in which the inmates did not permit politics. In fact, the jail administration regularly housed inmates in the trustee pod in cells irrespective of race. Even in pods with pods, there were moments during which politics were relaxed. For instance, “church” service was held irregularly, but when it was, inmates from all factions congregated in a room and shared personal stories, nightmares they had been having, fears regarding their cases, issues with their families in

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“the world,” and they prayed together hand-in-hand. Once, church ended, these same men walked ten yards back to their dayroom where the strict politics were in play. Spaces and moments of egalitarian democratic action challenge the anti-democratic nature of penal institutions, but they also challenge the logic of classification policies that create the political factions in the first place.

Subsequent research is needed to examine the complexity of these institutions that have been entrusted with the governance of a large population of people that most of society has forgotten or would like to forget. However, we must remember that inmates are still human. Researchers have a tendency to sensationalize penal studies, but while jails are extreme, the responses of inmates to jail environments are wholly human. The juxtaposition of spaces of extreme politics with spaces of no politics at all beg further analysis. An interesting next step might be to investigate inmate political factions from the point of view of the jail administration.

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