

CONTEMPORARY FRENCH PHOTOGRAPHERS AND THEIR VISIONS OF DETENTION

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Prison is a world which is becoming increasingly hidden; buildings are constructed today out of town, out of the sight of residents. Photography can be an excellent vector for building greater knowledge.

What do we know about the prison? To be clear, very little is currently known about prison. It seems to be largely ignored by the public and the social representations are strong.

In order to assess that, we have conducted several surveys in the general population measuring knowledge and representations of the French population about prison.

The first section of this paper will examine the main results of these surveys. The second one will then go on to the image of the prison with photos and three photographers¹.

THE FRENCH POPULATION AND THE PRISON SYSTEM: IN THE SHADE OF KNOWLEDGE

Information concerning knowledge of the prison system and social representations of the French population is taken from a study started for the first time in France in 1995. This study was done by an association (groupement étudiant national d'enseignement aux personnes incarcérées – GENEPI - National Student Group for the Training of Prisoners and was supported by the office of research of the Prison Service. The survey has been replicated every 5 or 10 years. The last one was in 2009².

The aim of the survey was to inform and appropriately involve our fellow citizens, so that it is possible to determine generally what they know about prison or rather, what view they have of it.

Archaic, fearful, forgotten, ashamed, deserved, inhuman, five-star, unhealthy, overcrowded, necessary, school of crime, unknown, all these terms are commonly used when it comes to defining the French prison. Of all the institutions of the Republic, the prison world is certainly the one whose image arouses the most ambivalent feelings. Thus, while everyone agrees that society should be protected by isolating for a time individuals considered dangerous because they have committed crimes, it is not uncommon to see the creation of a committee of residents who oppose the construction of a prison in their neighborhood.

Prisons must exist far from the eyes of the society that created them. Among those who at all levels are indignant when a news item highlights the difficult conditions of detention, few can boast of regular action and constant interest on the issue.

Staffs who are confronted with extreme and therefore difficult situations in terms of care suffer from this image of which they feel a part. The mission that society has entrusted to them includes custody and reintegration. This means that they must ensure that beings in situations of rejection and failure suffer imprisonment and at the same time project themselves into projects for a sometimes distant future of freedom.

Beyond that, clichés conveyed by fiction, the media, militant organizations, are the French sufficiently informed and how do they view the prison? Let's see the main results of the survey³.

A RATHER GLOOMY VIEW OF THE MATERIAL LIVING CONDITIONS OF PRISONERS

Two thirds of the French consider the material living conditions of prisoners to be poor. This result is illustrated in particular by the replies concerning the hygiene or privacy of prisoners: 7 out of 10 think that toilets are not compartmentalized in cells occupied by several prisoners and 6 out of 10 think that prisoners are entitled to at most 3 showers per week, which is the minimum provided for by law.

The French have a more positive image of access to care in prison: more than half believe that prisoners receive satisfactory care in general medicine (65%), psychiatric care (58%), drug (55%) and alcohol (52%). On the other hand, slightly less than half think so regarding dental care (48%) and ophthalmological care (42%).

They have little knowledge of prisoners' living conditions: 80% think that prisoners are rarely or never alone in cells, whereas individual cells are the rule, even if they cannot always be applied. For most of the French, meals are taken in refectory (49%) while for only 39%, they are taken in cell, whereas it is the general practice.

HIGHLY CONTROLLED EXTERNAL RELATIONS

Beyond the material conditions, the French have a good idea of the supervision measures to which detainees are subject but do not have a precise knowledge of the conditions under which visits to detainees can be carried out.

Indeed, for 87% of the French, the mail received or sent by a prisoner is either constantly (50%) or frequently checked (37%). Moreover, 59% of them think that no physical contact is possible during visits to the visiting room (prisoners separated from their relatives by a glass, a gate or other partition), which is not the case.

ACTIVITIES IN PRISON

When the French are asked about the proportion of prisoners who work, slightly more than 40% think that this share is less than 20% and about the same number put this share at 40%. The reality is in between, with 31% of prisoners working. Only 15% of the French were far above giving a proportion of at least 60%. If they think massively that this job is paid (88%), nearly 70% are aware that the pay is much lower than the minimum wage, which is the case since in 2009, it hardly exceeded 500 €.

As for the activities to which prisoners have access, sport is the one most often cited (by 78% of the French). Next come socio-cultural activities (music, theatre, painting, writing workshops, etc.), which 59% of French people surveyed. Other activities score significantly lower, ranging from 17.5% for teaching to 2.6% for manual activities.

A STATISTICALLY POORLY KNOWN POPULATION

44% of the French have no idea of the number of prisoners in France. But among those who give an order of magnitude, only 29% (or 16% of all French people) are in the right range, between 50,000 and 100,000 (the number of people detained in France in May 2009 being close to 63,000 and in January 2018, 70,000) 18% are below while the majority (53%) estimates that the number of detainees is at least 100,000 people.

If only 1.6% of the French say they do not know the minimum age to be incarcerated, 83% are wrong in giving an age higher than 13 years. Only 12% are true, answering 13 years. The majority (41%) place it at 16 years of age. As for the maximum age, it does not exist for 83% of the French, which is actually the case. If there is one, it is over 70 years of age, most often over 80.

The French clearly overestimate the proportion of women in prison: 93% of French people think it is at least 10%, whereas in June 2009 it was only 3.5% (January 2018, 3.9%). Only 4% are in the right order of magnitude.

The same is true for the foreign population, since 43% of the French estimate that this share is at least 50% or even 70% (for 9.4% of them); only 38% of the French have an exact idea of the share of foreigners (20%), while 15% underestimate it by placing it at 10%.

People's representation of an institution, in this case prison, can be shaped by films, television series and the imaginary that persists in this universe. Photography brings us a faithful look with a sometimes uncompromising staging. Here we present the original work of three photographers.

THREE PHOTOGRAPHERS: MICHEL SÉMÉNIAKO, JACQUELINE SALMON AND CATHERINE RÉCHARD

Michel Séméniako proposes a work of negotiated images. The photographic work he has done with prisoners is more generally part of an exploration of confinement as a dimension of the human condition (see *Espaces de detention*, Forthcoming proceedings of the 2016 symposium in Paris).

At the start the project was to create works on and in psychiatric institutions and then on the world of confinement in general.

He had noticed the symbolic place occupied by objects, whether personal or belonging to the place, often they were the only link with the «outside».

The human is precisely a being whose characteristic is to make a world of warm relationships with cold objects.

It had to be said that what he wanted to show could not be achieved without close collaboration with the prisoners and that his role would be to bring out this imagination by proposing a device that would allow the prisoner to have control over the image, while ensuring the management of the technical part: this is what he called «negotiated portrait».

«The objective is to realize a photograph by involving a protagonist in the production of his self-portrait according to a procedure previously defined» writes Michel Séméniako. «This approach was not born from an aesthetic reflection on the author's position, although it converges with other contemporary art research described as participatory or contextual art or intervention».

WORKSHOP IN THE REMAND PRISON PARIS-LA SANTE

This workshop was born in 2009 from the exhibition project at the Musée Carnavalet «L'impossible photographie, prisons parisiennes, 1851-2010» which Catherine Tambrun was the Commissioner.

FACELESS PORTRAITS

Michel Séméniako proposed to carry out a work of self-portraits to about ten prisoners.

A five-day photography initiation course preceded these shots. He wanted, beyond the prohibition of representation made by the administration, to demonstrate that it is possible to produce a portrait without necessarily seeing the «features» of a person and thus go beyond conventions and appearances.

NEGOTIATED PORTRAITS

The photographer proposed to twelve voluntary prisoners to make, in their cells, a symbolic self-portrait in which each could project his identity without being physically represented. In the form of an installation, using the daily objects available in his cell, the inmate builds a representation of himself. He puts his imagination into play through this principle of equivalence.

He added a second image, as a counterpoint to this identity affirmation: the representation of the cell seen from the step of the door. This «silent» documentary image is juxtaposed with the negotiated «talking» image; its primary purpose is to inform the viewer about the real conditions of incarceration but also to place the objects in their context.

Ahmed, the good quarantine, is originally from the Comoros. The jacket symbolizes his dignity. The status of worker that he obtained allows him to circulate more easily (meal service, cleaning...).

J. L. C. is considered by all as an «aristo» of organised crime. At 60, he has many years of detention behind him. Its composition includes its «exotic» attractions. His Chinese friend sends him letters in Chinese characters that he cannot read, but his Chinese neighbour who does not speak French translates him into English, in exchange, JLC serves him as an interpreter (English-French) with the administration (hence the note posted). In addition, he settled his mother in Morocco, hence the Tagine sardines and the photo of the local girlfriend.

WORKSHOP IN THE PENITENTIARY CENTRE CHATEAU-THIERRY

During the summer of 2010, the Château-Thierry penitentiary centre wanted an introductory photography course to be held for five long-term prisoners in psychiatric care.

The detainees photographed the places of detention in an attempt to express, in pictures, their feelings about the prison. The photographer also invited them to create their symbolic self-portrait by staging objects of their choice.

Malick presents the comfort of religion and the emotional bond to his mother who made the prayer mat.

François tells of a case of emigration from Haiti that went wrong in French Guiana, and an image of France dreamed of, which is no more than a tomb.

The detainees gave themselves up in the form of a secret account of the intimate, like an enigma to be deciphered offered to the spectator, an affirmation that the sensitive and the human are always present, even behind the walls according to Michel Séméniako's own terms.

Let's move on to Catherine Rechard's work in six prisons: prisons or detention centres in Paris and in the provinces.

Available materials and objects are diverted from their original function to replace those that are lacking.

In this hostile environment everything is recovered, each package deboned, shelled and optimized. The objects and materials available are diverted from their original function to replace those that are lacking.

Catherine Rechard wrote that «the ambition of this work is to project new representations of the prison world and of prisoners towards the outside world». These objects are the relay between those who made them and those who look at the image. The human qualities used in their realization make it possible to consider their perpetrators not as prisoners but simply as individuals.

Jacqueline Salmon made a series of photographs at the prison de la santé in Paris in 2009.

She wrote: «the succession of the discovery of the spaces in the daily life of the prisoner since his arrival, with the possibility of illness, the request for an adjustment of sentence, the need to meditate and pray, the participation in a cultural event; all this succession of places seen and memorized, would be the common thread that I will follow to realize a series of memory photography of the lived places».

The lived places are where they work, where they look at TV, eat and sleep.

Prison is above all a place to live. The images that photographers and inmates present to us are not static and are not devoid of prints of their lives inside and outside.

It is through photography that these stolen moments of humanity can be returned to the detainees.

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¹ Catherine Réchard, Jacqueline Salmon, Michel Semeniako – see their sites in the bibliography.

² BELMOKHTAR and al., 2011.

³ BELMOKHTAR and al., 2011.

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