

THE ÎLE-DE-RÉ PRISON : A TEAM ENTERPRISE

Jean-Marie RENOARD, lecturer at the Victor Ségalen Bordeaux-II University and researcher at the CESDIP, has been studying deviant behaviour and safety for several years. This paper sums up his present work on the relationship between a prison and its environment.

The Saint-Martin-de-Ré correctional institution in the Charente-Maritime *département* is France's largest penitentiary, and with its staff of 285, it is the largest employer on the island. Here we have what is probably a unique instance, in France, and in Europe as well, of a prison located on an island, the Île-de-Ré, a famous vacation resort, right in the centre of the commune of Saint-Martin, the "capital" of the island, and compulsory gateway to the island for visitors and vacationers.

The local scene began to be marked by the simultaneous development of both the correctional facilities and the tourist industry immediately after World War II. In the pre-war period tourism was practically non-existent, and the island had only a small jail run by a staff of about twenty-five employees in charge of guarding convicts sentenced to hard labour and sent to the island, where they awaited a ship that would take them to the Guyane penal colony, for some twenty-odd days at most. Following the *Libération*, in application of the June 1938 statutory order abolishing transportation, the jail first became a correctional establishment, then a penitentiary. The concomitant birth and development of the two activities is particularly striking owing to the tremendous contrast between popular imagery relative to vacationing and to the prison world. Ré needed the prison, however, as much as it needed tourism. On the one hand, many inhabitants of that very poor island viewed the establishment of the penitentiary as a godsend, while many others were intent on developing the tourist industry. How could the two types of facilities – those for tourists, and those for prisoners, economically profitable for most of the inhabitants – be reconciled?

The answer was a strategy that involved making the prison invisible so that it would not hinder the development of tourism. To do so, several options were taken, two of which are briefly described here. One involved reclaiming the stigmatised location by camouflaging the buildings and flaunting prestigious symbols. Secondly, team work was implemented to ensure that prison life would remain inconspicuous. Other questions may be raised, such as : how did the prison contribute to the type of tourism – working-class oriented – that originally developed on the island? Which way does it throw its weight in the struggle that has been waging for the last fifteen-odd years between the "workers" and the "elite" for the take-over of the available space? They will not be discussed here. The present research is based on qualitative investigation methods including observation, interviews and the analysis of documents.

Reclaiming the location : disidentification factors and prestige symbols

Any tourists who set out to find the prison will be incapable of identifying it even if it is in front of them. A magic wand makes it invisible. What they do not realise however is that they themselves are the great magicians, and the magic wand is quite simply people's own imagery representing the opposition between tourist facilities and correctional institutions. People find it difficult to imagine that they may coexist, side by side, when

they are exact opposites in all respects. The imagery projected on islands in general also helps to make the trick work : can anyone imagine that so "marvellous" a place as an island may house the ugliest elements of humankind in its bosom? Further, the developers of this particular island have done another piece of sleight of hand, by concocting an image of it as the place where celebrities and families go for a vacation, a paradise for children and a haven of peace. The difficulty in imagining that tourism and imprisonment may go hand in hand, that they may live together on an island, and that very island is known as a fashionable vacation spot, does that magic trick by which the prison is conjured away.

Those tourists are given a lot of help, however. The dungeon could not be conjured away if the operation was openly aired. But nothing is communicated that might reveal its real identity. The only visible elements are some watchtowers with look-out only window panes and a few small signs reading *Ministry of Justice, Private property, or No entry*, but never *Prison Service*, scattered over a huge domain, semi-open, semi-closed, with a number of buildings of various sizes, some parking lots, fields, and moats. It is up to the tourist, then, to put together the ill-defined topographic elements of this landscape so that they will be compatible with some already familiar vision ; and even someone who knows what a prison looks like will hardly ever notice that this is precisely what he is beholding.

The ambiguity is further compounded by the signposting. Signs point out the way to the citadel built by Vauban. They do not direct you to the penitentiary behind the walls of the citadel. The visitor who strolls on foot or on bicycle from one sign to the next is led up to an esplanade on the top of the ramparts overlooking the sea, between the frontispiece of the citadel and the little fortified harbour. There is something so noble about the combination of the majestic citadel, with its monumental door topped by a pediment carved with the arms of the Sun King, on the one hand, and the vast panorama uncovering the straits of Brittany and the coast of Vendée on the other, that one would not guess the presence of such loathsome enterprise behind those impressive walls.

There is something terribly majestic, too, about the silence that reigns around the citadel. The tremendous mass of the military edifice stifles most of the noise coming from inside it. When entering, one must cross no fewer than four courtyards, enclosed by their gates, before reaching the detention quarters themselves. As a result, tourists arriving in front of the citadel find themselves in a solemn, silent place, a monument seeped in the prestigious history of Louis XIII and Louis XIV and their times, and in the heroic fight to defend the country against the English invaders. Were they to suspect the presence of the criminals sheltered by that majestic building they might not feel the same respect. There is nothing here that identifies the place as a prison, whereas everything serves to disidentify it, since its visible features are those of its past identity rather than of its present one. The historical theatrics highlight the acceptable part of the object, all the better to conceal its disgraceful side.

The dissimulation does not begin at the esplanade, however. Before arriving there, our tourists first notice the bucolic landscape composed by the penitentiary's agricultural domain, with its grazing goats and horses, and above all, its famous donkeys, a local curiosity often photographed against a backdrop of prison buildings... Then, as they follow the signs leading to the citadel, they have the feeling of being directed toward an out-of-the-way site full of historical significance, that is well worth the visit, rather than toward a place full of indignity, such as a penitentiary. In addition, they are encouraged to wander freely through a place whose vocation is precisely to deprive people of their freedom. Moreover, there is a beach so close to the prison that it is almost in the shadow of the walls of the citadel. Last, the largest penitentiary in France is only something like 300 meters from Saint-Martin's harbour, the most popular and lively place in all of the île-de-Ré. In fact, the things that tourists can do on the grounds of the penitentiary, including strolling, picnicking, taking pictures, ball-playing, kite-flying and going jogging, as well as the attractions such as travelling circuses, etc., set up there, do not incite people to see a prison. Perception of the local environment is all the less conducive to the perception of a penitentiary inasmuch as its objective camouflage and the subjective camouflage produced by the tourists themselves are mutually reinforcing and make it practically invisible. This explains why people were so upset in 1993, when the administration installed anti-escape nets that threatened to cancel all those painstaking efforts at camouflaging the place. At present the stage that is set, with prestige symbols emblematic of the history of France as well as of Saint-Martin's reputation as a vacation resort, along with disidentifiers that conceal the penitentiary, makes the scene quite disconcerting. But this was not always the case. The policy of reclaiming the of the stigmatised location followed two other periods : one known as the hard labour period, followed by the transformation of the jail for hard-labour convicts into a penitentiary, during which period not only was the prison not hidden by the scenery, but it was a conspicuous component of it.

Discretion and team work

The number of actors motivated by the success of the operation of making the prison invisible makes it all the more effective. These actors all belong to the same troupe, and give a play grounded in the staging of a single rule : discretion.

It is in the interest of the staff guarding the prison that it continue to go unnoticed, to avoid any threat to their jobs and to their activities connected with the tourist trade. If the prison were to be closed, an eventuality that is visualised at regular intervals since the 1960s, they would be obliged to take another assignment elsewhere, far from their various local investments. For this reason there is little social unrest among these prison workers. They are quite moderate in their demands, since they fear the effects of any closing, however partial, of the penitentiary, on their comfortable occupational situation. The fact is that they apparently have fewer reasons to express discontent, since their working conditions are relatively good.

The managerial staff also partakes in making the place invisible. First of all, and in contradistinction to the usual situation, no less than eight former prison governors now own or owned, in the past, one or several houses on the island. Were the prison to be visible in any way, this might well have a damaging effect on the value and productivity of their property. Secondly, the position of governor of the Saint-Martin prison is a springboard for a career in the regional administration or in the major urban

prisons. Governors have tended to be conciliatory in labour relations with their personnel, which are also peaceable, and in agreement with the latter, their policy towards inmates has also been lenient, with leaves granted generously and sentences reduced. For the time being, this policy has no doubt been instrumental in preventing riots and protest movements, escapes, hunger strikes and suicides among inmates. Recurrent incidents always end up being aired, in the long run, and that would unavoidably raise the issue of whether the penitentiary should be maintained.

Actually, if we are to judge by the small number of incidents, the inmates have participated, up to now, in the efforts to make the prison invisible, by respecting the discipline. They seem to have fewer grounds for dissatisfaction, since they are given more leaves and reduced sentences, and the prison offers diversified activities and possibilities for working, so that they may keep themselves busy and earn some money, which they apparently do, since Saint-Martin has the highest activity rate of all French correctional establishments. The fact that conditions of detention are better than elsewhere helps to keep the peace and avoid protest movements, since excessively agitated inmates or leaders of protest movements are threatened with transferral to a high-security facility, with fewer activities.

It is therefore in the best interests of all three main actors within the penitentiary that the order inside the prison not be disturbed by incidents that would attract attention to it and put an end to the silence inside and staging of prestige symbols outside that make it so discreet. To some extent, the fact that these three actors all manage to avoid having too many motives of dissatisfaction makes them function as a team in which all participants, be they the management, the guards or the inmates, work together to provide the public – composed of the island's inhabitants and vacationers – with a spectacle aimed essentially at making the prison invisible. It is as if the actors all stay behind the scene, that is, behind the walls of the prison, and never go on stage to mutiny or escape, to make demands or protest, and reveal the incidents that occur in the wings to an uninformed public. In other words, they do their best not to attract attention to the prison. When inmates leave the grounds, for instance, they do not provide information that would give any hint to the public of local people and vacationers that behind the jogger, stroller, customer or *pétanque* player there lurks a prisoner.

Whereas the literature and research on prisons generally stress the prison personnel's negative image of inmates, and their strategies for maintaining a distance that prevents them from being contaminated by the stigmatisation that affects criminals, in the case of the île-de-Ré it definitely seems that the shared interests of the different members of the team are strong enough to induce practices that contradict the representations and self-representation strategies usually observed in correctional institutions. This means that the actors form a team, in the sporting sense of the term, when a former governor plays hooker in a scrum formed by inmates, or when sports instructors and prisoners run the twenty-kilometre Saint-Martin race or the La Rochelle marathon, when a football team including inmates and guards meets other companies in competitions, or a volleyball team with the same mixed membership plays against other, non-prison teams. They also form a team when a group of customers, part prisoners and part educators, are in a bar, a restaurant or a *crêperie*, or when a group composed of prison staff members, volunteer workers and inmates forms a welcoming committee for visitors to the annual exhibit of the prison's painting workshop, in town.

The island's inhabitants have a peculiar attitude toward the prison. Like the tourists, they are spectators to the play delivered by the members of the prison team (governors, guards, educators, volunteers and inmates). At the same time, they are actors in staging the play for the public of tourists, and as such they are just as motivated as the latter to provide a spectacle in which discretion is the rule. Many of these people derive considerable benefits from the tourist trade, which, they believe, would suffer from the excessive visibility of the prison. For this reason, the inhabitants of Ré are in exactly the same position as the members of the prison team, and they are part of the same team.

It is a fact that despite its geographically central position, the prison creates, its large population, its impact on the local political scene and the investment of the penitentiary's active and retired personnel in a number of community groups, local people never – or at least never spontaneously – speak of the prison in the presence of outsiders. When questioned, they put an end to the conversation on the pretext that they have nothing to say about that *separate world*, that *foreign body*, that *closed, parallel universe*. Their negation is particularly strong, in direct proportion to the general awareness of the necessity of coexisting in close spatial and social contact with an institution that is centrally located within a small territory. Since they participate in the collective silence surrounding the prison, and in its concealment and disappearance from the scene, from the spectator's position, they judge their own performance as actors convincing to the point where they believe that the spectacle they stage for their own benefit while playing it for the tourists, is the only reality. Since they respect the rule of discretion in the presence of their peers, members of the team all end up respecting it with respect to themselves, thus becoming spectators of the spectacle in which they are actors as well. Consequently, when local people claim that they ignore the prison, do

not see it, forget it or never think about it, they are not trying to avoid the issue and to lead the public astray, but rather, they are speaking sincerely as sincere spectators, convinced by the convincing actors that they themselves are, that the local situation cannot be defined by the presence of the penitentiary. Theirs is the discourse of spectators convinced by self-persuasion.

Since the islanders have removed the prison from their landscape and from their discourse, they are no longer spontaneously in a position to speak of its presence and to remind themselves that it does perhaps define the situation. Consequently, when asked to talk about it they are obliged to reintroduce an object that they are making every effort to exclude. The question of their feelings about it solicits their judgement on how good an actor they are, and encourages them to break with a definition of the situation in which the penitentiary is absent. Whereas they had succeeded in constructing that definition and believing in it, they realise that there is always the possibility of another definition.

E. GOFFMAN uses the term *team* to designate a group of actors co-operating to maintain a specific definition of a situation in front of a public¹. This definition serves the material or symbolic interests of the members of the team. In the case of the île-de-Ré, there are a great many team members whose interest it is to maintain a definition of the situation in which the prison is discreet to the point of non-existence. Both the local people and the staff of the penitentiary fear that it may be an obstacle to the development of the tourist industry. In addition, the latter are afraid that if it is too obtrusive it will be closed. Both parties, as well as owners of second homes on the island, are afraid that it may tarnish the carefully constructed image of their vacation spot as a particularly good one.

Jean-Marie RENOUIARD

¹ GOFFMAN (E.), *La mise en scène de la vie quotidienne. 1. La présentation de soi*, Paris, Minuit, 1973, pp. 79-103 and *passim*.