Sense Experience and Institutional Control:
Sensory Resistance and Agency in Old Prisons

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Abstract

Using the exemplary case of nineteenth-century American state penitentiaries, we explore penitentiary control from the perspective of sensing agents who navigate a controlled sensory ecology—the prison, as structured by institutional rules, differential power relations, and architectural plans. Moving beyond Foucault (1995) and Goffman (1961), we stress the active face of human sensing and inmates’ pragmatic creativity under constraints. Employing wardens’ disciplinary journals and other secondary reports, we emphasize three theoretical issues that explain why Panoptical prisons’ attempts to control sense experiences can sometimes fail: 1) architectural designs that inadequately negotiate the contradictory demands of visual and acoustic control; 2) inmates’ active mobilization of perceptible objects as means of resistance; and 3) power differences between prison authorities and inmates that prevent actors from sharing a common sensory field. Our overarching goal is to advance a sensory analysis of institutional control.
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Introduction

Sense experiences circumscribe our daily activities. It is by moving through different sensory environments that social actors participate in and interact with the social world (Classen, 1993; Howes, 2003; Howes and Classen, 2014). Navigating different social situations, our senses are constantly mobilized; seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting thus become meaningful social actions. It can also be said that we sense the world doubly, experiencing bodily sensations and at the same time giving social significance to those sensations. To comprehend the dynamics of social actions and their implications in social structures, sociologists and social theorists must consider sense experiences as integral parts of social and institutional formation (Howes, 2003). We can ask how sense experiences set social action into motion and how differential sense experiences register social life according to actors’ roles within a social structure or their access to power. We can also ask how institutional norms and rules limit sense experiences, generating social order or inciting resistance against control.

In this paper, we will focus on a seldom studied aspect of this larger area of research: the dynamics of institutional control over sense experiences. In everyday life we encounter numerous ways in which institutions shape, or even regulate, our ways of sensing (Howes and Classen, 2014: 110). In a lecture hall, for instance, students are situated (or compelled) to look forward, receive sound waves directly from the speaker, touch nothing but their chairs, pens, and paper, and become insensitive to smell or taste. These sense experiences also imply power

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1 The number of senses and their hierarchal order vary across cultures and historical times (Howes, 1991). The familiar western notion of ‘five senses’ can be attributed to Aristotle’s De Anima, but, for example, the Javanese idea of five senses would include seeing, hearing, talking, smelling and feeling (Dundes, 1980: 92; emphases original). As we will see, this paper similarly treats talking and sound-making as modalities of human senses.
relations structured by an educational institution. The distance between the audience and the podium, which affects both seeing and hearing, thus constitutes the social cleavage between the speaker (teacher) and listeners (students). Consequently, the sensory environment in the lecture hall affords not only information reception or knowledge transmission, but also the reproduction of scholastic authority (Bourdieu et al., 1994: 10-13).

Anthropologists and historians have begun to map the rich cultural meanings of sensory worlds since at least the 1980s (Stoller, 1989; Smith, 2007; Porcello et al., 2010; Jay, 2011). For these scholars, sense experiences are constitutive of cultural significance and become essential means through which social agents navigate and make sense of social environments (Stoller, 1984; Howes, 1991; Classen, 1993; Corbin, 1998; Dunes, 1980; Geurts, 2002; Thompson, 2004; Smith, 2007). Sociologists have lagged behind this analytical sensibility to human sensing, though they have indirectly framed an understanding of sense experiences through concerns with the body. Nobert Elias has linked the historical construction of bodily control to state formation, as well as to the rise of a modern sense of the self (1994: 109-135). Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (a system of dispositions) demonstrates the embodiment of social order as a mechanism of social reproduction—a process in which sense experiences (‘taste’) play a key role in stratifying class positions (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977). Wacquant (2004) further investigates the structuring of habitus through a ‘carnal ethnography’, showing how boxers’ sense experiences orient their participation in a social ecology (that of the ghettos). Most innovatively, Katz’s phenomenological account of emotion has uncovered the collective dimensions of sense experiences through emotive actions: ‘I must look to others to see myself, to know myself, literally to find myself. It is only through the responsive actions of others that I can, for example, see my seeing’ (1999: 315; emphases original).
In this paper, we intend to draw a more direct connection between sense experiences and social institutions, and between sensory control and social power. We are interested not only in how social institutions shape sense experiences, but also in the ways that social actors can possibly resist sensory control, carving out new spaces of autonomy in the face of a constraining sensory environment. How do institutional rules, routines, and disciplines construct a sensory ecology that organizes sense experiences? How do social actors navigate within their sensory ecology—however constraining it might seem—to circumvent or even subvert a system of institutional control?

We use a case of institutional history—nineteenth-century state penitentiaries in the United States—to explore and generate ideas for these issues. This time period particularly allows us to glimpse how sensory control had come to constitute the modern prison institution in the making. Our goal is exploratory, and we use materials from disciplinary records of a state penitentiary from the late 1890s, selected reports from prison planners and reformers, as well as secondary historical accounts. We first draw upon Foucault (1995) and Goffman (1961) to show how the prison institution enforces disciplinary strategies through sensory control. Foucault theorizes the prison as a new paradigm of social power, one which is exercised, among other strategies, ‘through its invisibility’ (1995: 187)—visual surveillance constitutes the main architecture of disciplinary control (Deleuze, 1988; Jay, 1993). For Goffman, the prison exemplifies a kind of total institution, a system in which the ‘self’ of the inmate is encompassed, if not also destroyed. But, at the same time Goffman shows that inmates are able to adapt themselves to a constraining environment through ‘secondary adjustment’, shielding violations of institutional rules from the ‘surveillance spaces’ and the sensory fields of staff (Goffman, 1961: 229).
Although our analysis does not contradict the core ideas of Foucault and Goffman, we draw attention to the diverse, often surprising ways social agency exerts itself in inmates’ resistance to and subversion of institutional rules within a sensory ecology. Rather than locating agency in the structure of power (as would Foucault) or in the essential capacity of the self (as would Goffman), we draw your attention to prison architectural designs and the ways in which perceived objects in the prison’s sensory ecology are rendered meaningful by both institutional rules and architectural features. We define a sensory ecology as a site of sensing and acting, both constructed by and emerged from the architectural features of prison buildings and from the sensory rules enforced inside a prison compound.

To address the agentic potentials within a sensory ecology, we draw inspiration from the basic motifs of American Pragmatism: sensing is an active and creative process through which the perceiving agent, via anticipated actions, makes sense of an ongoing environment (Dewey, 1910, 1958; Joas, 1996). So even within a constraining sensory ecology, potentials to act otherwise are available, if not abound. Consequently, resistance becomes a kind of creative act by which inmates can reconstruct the social and sensory world they must navigate.

In particular, our pragmatist take on sensory control seeks to understand how ‘silence rules’ had shaped the model of incarceration for nineteenth-century U.S. state prisons. This emphasis on acoustic control must be understood as a tension with visual control, where architectural features designed to enforce visual surveillance often failed to prevent inmates from talking and making sounds—the sense experiences prohibited by the prisons. Examining detailed disciplinary records from an American state penitentiary (in Wyoming), we observe that inmates’ capacity to resist and subvert prison rules tends to arise from a fluid if not contradictory sensory ecology. As they interact with the prison’s sensory environment, inmates begin to
discover opportunities to break down the institution’s methods to control their sense experiences. On the other hand, situated in the opposite side of the power structure, prison planners and prison authorities often fail to ‘sense’ and anticipate acts of resistance. Our analysis highlights this unintended failure of disciplinary power and reveals the day-to-day struggles that emerge from a clash among sensory potentials, architectural constraints, and institutional rules.

Our theoretical effort is dialectical: we do not simply treat historical materials as examples, or exemplars, for theoretical illustrations; rather, we employ wardens’ disciplinary journals and other secondary reports to generate new theoretical ideas. With these efforts, we hope to push forward a sensory agenda of institutional analysis, particularly a sensory analysis of institutional control.

Prison as an Institution of Sensory Control

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault situates social power within a historic transformation set in motion by the social and political dynamics of the late 18th century. Under the discourse of rehabilitation and reform, social control had moved away from top-down coercion, particularly from a singular center, toward a ‘micro physics of power’. This latter form of power, diffusive and ostensibly humane compared to brute forces (Foucault, 1995: 139), is exercised through the regulation of bodily practices, techniques, and strategies. For Foucault, the prison provides a paradigm of a new modality of power (see Agamben, 2009: 17), revealing how punishment can appear less coercive, while simultaneously transforming a population into a governed body. Through surveillance and work routines—partly achieved by standardizing bodily practices across space and time—the prison both erases and particularizes the individual, molding convicts...
It is through the imagery of the Panopticon that sense experiences are theoretically linked to the emerging form of disciplinary power. With Bentham’s proposal of ‘the inspection-house’ (1995), Foucault shows how visibility, vision, supervision, and luminosity became sensory mechanisms of governmentality. In the proposed circular structure of the Panopticon, multiple tiers of prison cells are raised along the periphery, permitting prison guards to see and observe the inmates from a central tower at all times. Surveillance is both continuous and asymmetric. Since light is designed to come from the external cell windows, guards in the dim center can always supervise inmates without the inmates knowing if they are being watched (Johnston, 2000: 50). The inmate ‘is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication’ (Foucault, 1995: 200).

Although Foucault did not neglect other sensory experiences in the prison—like the bell that serializes time and the bodily experiences of pain and docility (see 1995: 150, 166, 316, fn. 13)—visual surveillance remains the main architecture of disciplinary control (see Jay, 1993). In Deleuze’s words, ‘Prison, for its part, is concerned with whatever is visible: not only does it wish to display the crime and the criminal but in itself it constitutes a visibility, it is a system of light before being a figure of stone’ (1988: 32). In this ‘omni-disciplinary’ machine (Foucault, 1995: 236), the projection of surveillance with asymmetric visions, not its actuality, is an exemplary form of power in the modern state.

So powerful is Panopticism that it is sometimes hard for us to see how inmates could possibly subvert the disciplinary structure and the sensory ecology of the prison. In other works, Foucault has argued that power always exerts an opposition immanent in the field of force:
‘Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power’ (1990: 95). Disciplinary power thus elicits reciprocal as well as active responses, within its own structure, in the form of resistance, refusals, rebuffs, and ‘counter-conducts’ (Foucault, 2007: 194-202). If we consider the structure of disciplinary power as a source of agency, and if the configuration of penitentiary power depends in part on sensory control, it follows that the sensory ecology of the prison may be a source, a wellspring through which inmates can resist prison authorities and their omnipresent surveillance.

It is in Goffman’s Asylums (1961) that the dynamics of inmates’ resistance are explicated in a manner complementary with but also distinct from Foucault. Parallel to Foucault, Goffman sees the ‘total institution’—of which the prison is a part—as a highly self-encompassing, character-engrossing establishment. The inmate displays a commitment to the total institution as a social performance as he ‘visibly establishes his attitude to the establishment and to its implied conception of himself’ (Goffman, 1961: 186; see also 1961: 173-7). But Goffman, in contrast to Foucault, has offered a clearer sense of a resisting subject. In their dramatic display of institutional commitment, inmates demonstratively mobilize interactional and sensory strategies to invert power relations and restore a sense of the self. To reconstruct a moral career, the inmate pursues what Goffman called ‘secondary adjustments’ through ‘unauthorized means, or unauthorized ends, or both, thus getting around the organization’s assumptions as to what [the inmate] should do and get and hence what he [or she] should be’ (Goffman, 1961: 189). Some forms of secondary adjustment directly manipulate the sensory perceptions of authorities: inmates ‘may smile derisively by half-turning away, chew on food without signs of jaw motion…, cup a lighted cigarette in the hand…, and use a hand to conceal cigarette chips during
a ward poker game’ (1961: 229, emphases added). Because these infractions mobilize visual and auditory cues, we shall call them a form of ‘sensory resistance’.

However, secondary adjustment draws its agency from the performative self without an oppositional audience (except a public of other inmates). Acts of secondary adjustment tend to take place in concealed spaces—the backstage—which belong to the ‘underlife’ and the ‘undergrowth’ of the total institution (Goffman, 1961: 201-02). To the extent that secondary adjustment restores the moral career of the inmate, the audience of secondary adjustment is primarily the inmate him or herself, rather than the authorities. Although other inmates may be an important part of this self-restoration, the backstage is largely ‘shielded from the eyes and ears of staff’ (Goffman, 1961: 229). Accordingly, Goffman refines his terminology, characterizing this ‘contained secondary adjustment’ as a relatively weak form of resistance unlikely to disrupt power relations in the total institution. Contained secondary adjustment does not introduce ‘pressure for radical change’, nor does it ‘abandon the organization or radically alter its structure’ (1961: 199). Although prison authorities may at times be complicit in prisoners’ concealed activities—as when ‘inmates could openly engage in a range of tabooed activities with some degree of security’ (Goffman, 1961: 230)—secondary adjustment is mostly limited to rule-violations that are removed from authorities’ sensory fields. Goffman’s concern with the self as an ‘inner’ process has consequently precluded a more active and disruptive view of sensory resistance.

It is therefore crucial to ask whether the sensory ecology of a total institution can afford more subversive forms of resistance, refusal, and counter-conducts envisioned by Foucault (2007: 194-200). How and to what extent can the institutional designs of the prison generate gaps for resistance, moments in which inmates can not only circumvent surveillance but rearticulate
their sense of self publicly? How might inmates exploit and appropriate their sensory environments to (potentially) invert power relations in the total institution? In other words, how do they mobilize a degree of ‘sensory agency’, so to speak? How do authorities respond to inmates’ subversive acts, and to what extent do such responses reshape the sensory ecology of the prison, if at all? In short, how can inmates possibly *discover* and *carve out* subversive potentials from their constraining sensory ecology?

**A Pragmatic Take on Sensory Agency**

The basic motifs of pragmatism provide useful points of departure for addressing the above questions. In overcoming the dichotomy of subjectivity and objectivity, the intellect and the corporeal, thought and action; the American pragmatist tradition suggests that sense perception is not simply a passive reaction to the environment. Rather, perceiving agents make sense of their sensory environments based on their anticipated actions: the meaning of a perceived object arises from the ways the perceiver hopes to use the object to bring to bear some *effects* on the world. For Dewey (1910, 1958), the meaning of a sensory (and social) world thus arises as the actor continuously contacts, adjusts, and adapts to the environment, navigating between sensory stimuli and pragmatic activities. Resistance and subversion against institutional constraints can therefore be thought of as *creative acts*. Joas (1996) argues that such creativity arises from a tension between habits and obstacles:

> …our habitual actions meet with resistance from the world and rebound back on us. This is the phase of real doubt. And the only way out of this phase is a reconstruction of the interrupted context. Our perception must come to terms with new or different aspects of

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2 We are aware of the diverse approaches of pragmatism, and will put aside other important aspects of the pragmatist tradition—namely, its views on scientific objectivity, the meaning of truth, and, not least, the joining of ontology and epistemology.
reality; action must be applied to different points of the world, or must restructure itself.

This reconstruction is a creative achievement on the part of the actor…. The pragmatists therefore maintain that all human action is caught between unreflected habitual action and acts of creativity. (Joas, 1996: 129)

In light of this comment, it is possible to re-imagine how agents can differently resist the institutional control of the Panopticon. Sensory resistance is no longer a passive reaction to disciplinary power, but an active reconstruction of the sensory world prison inmates must navigate. Accordingly, we explore three theoretical issues (not in any necessary order) to highlight the social dynamics in which sensory resistance expresses itself, and to explain why Panoptical strategies to control sense experiences in prisons can sometimes fail.

First, we can look at how different perceivable objects in the prison’s sensory ecology afford potentials for actions. According to Gibson (1966, 1986), as one perceives the surface of an object in the sensory environment, the object’s smoothness, hardness, shape, shininess, volume, and opaqueness can ‘inform’ the perceiver about the pragmatic and performative potentials of that surface (or that object)—‘affordance’ constitutes our perception as to whether a surface is stand-able, sit-able, punch-able, edible, and so on. Moreover, the pragmatic utility of an object might change as one moves about the sensory ecology, resulting in new lines of action (Good, 2007). As we will see, limestone walls that divide prison cells, or iron grating that serves as a physical obstacle, can all disclose new meanings to inmates, offering a potential to circumvent or even challenge institutional rules. How inmates use quotidian objects to resist

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3 Gibson’s ecological theory of visual perception has a clear affinity with pragmatism, though this perspective tends to downplay the fact that a sensory ecology is always imbued with social meanings and that the social positions of a perceiver can shape the ways objects are perceived (Good, 2007). Although this is not the place to review Gibson’s theory, it is important to take note at least on a social character of perception: a sensing agent often needs to observe and explore the socially pragmatic and cultural meanings of any perceptible objects within a sensory ecology.
prison authorities will be a question. To attempt an answer, we must consider the prison’s sensory ecology as a mobilizing structure, made concrete as inmates attempt to act upon it.

Creative acts thus lie in the discovery of opposite sensory interpretations—contrasting those of the authorities—with regard to found objects and perceivable structural features within the prison’s sensory ecology. What Bentham would consider as disciplinary constraints could be turned into opportunities for resistance; Goffman knew this, yet said little about how these creative acts are generated by sensory and pragmatic mechanisms.

Second, the differences and tensions between modalities of the senses—especially those between visual and acoustic control—also give rise to creative adaptations and resistance. The acts of seeing and hearing (or sound-making) encounter different types of physical constraints in the prison architecture and are limited by different prison rules. The emergence of subversive potentials thus depends on whether inmates can mobilize different modalities of the senses. Where inmates are prohibited to see, they can hear; where gazes are constructed asymmetrically, they can make sounds that resonate 360 degrees. In a footnote on Bentham’s later abandonment of the idea of acoustic surveillance, Foucault (1995) conjectures that acoustic control cannot sustain disciplinary power as effectively as visual surveillance. In contrast to the structure of asymmetric supervision (where inmates are watched but do not know who is watching), acoustic control does not conform to ‘the principle of dissymmetry and prevent[s] the prisoners from hearing the inspector as well as the inspector hearing them’ (Foucault, 1995: 317, fn. 3). Here Foucault still conceives of seeing and hearing only in terms of surveillance, not of potentials of subversion. Yet this is one step toward a more dynamic understanding of sensory resistance, allowing us to further explore certain contradictory outcomes when the prison’s sensory ecology affords inmates to mobilize multiple modalities of sensing.
Third, social actors located at different positions of power tend to mobilize their sense experiences differently in a sensory ecology. Prison guards and inmates do not ‘sense’ the same opportunities for actions despite their co-presence within a disciplinary space. For instance, ventilation pipes can afford prison authorities to isolate and discipline inmates, but, through the same medium, inmates can sense a subversive potential for hearing and communication. Accordingly, we must understand how power relations can color the ways in which perceivers experience subversive potentials, re-distributing social actors in a sensory field invested with power and authority. In the rest of this paper, we shall show that antagonistic relations between inmates and prison authorities not only explain their sensory differences, but also account for why apparatuses of sensory control could (and did) sometimes fail.

The Sensory Ecology of Old Penitentiaries

We use nineteenth-century state penitentiaries in the United States as a case to explore the pragmatic dynamics of disciplinary control. Our data come from diverse sources: writings of prison reformers, plans of prison builders, and first-hand historical archives, based on the warden’s disciplinary records, that document daily infractions and punishments at the Wyoming Territorial Prison (during the late 1890s and early 1900s; cited as WR; see also footnote 8)⁴. We focus on ‘old’ penitentiaries because sensory control was a primary concern of prison reformers during the formative years of the incarceration institution in the United States (contemporary

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⁴ In addition to the Wyoming prison, the first author has conducted archival research in a number of prisons in other states, including Idaho, Georgia, Mississippi, Virginia, Alabama, and Louisiana. Disciplinary records as detailed as the ones we are presenting in this paper are rare, primarily because state governments do not usually preserve daily ledgers by wardens after old prisons are retired. Triangulating different information collected in other prisons, we believe that the Wyoming records reflect typical ways punishments under the Auburn system (explained below) were applied in the state prisons of northern and western U.S. states. (Prisons in the South tended to follow a different style of punishment, especially emphasizing corporal punishment, which was seldom recorded in the Wyoming or Idaho records.) Furthermore, the Wyoming records are typical because the Wyoming Territorial Prison at Laramie (the predecessor of the Wyoming State Prison at Rawlins) had operated between 1872 and 1903, a period when the institution of the Auburn system had already been settled and routinized across many states.
prisons have, for example, abandoned the enforcement of sound control and the ‘rule of silence’ important to nineteenth-century prison reformers).

In the first half of the 1800s, state penitentiaries emerged as a public project that fostered transformative debates about the causes of social evil, as well as the roles punishment ought to play in maintaining social order (Rothman, 1971, 1995; Garland, 1990). Although different prison plans were proposed (see next), Jacksonian reformers mostly saw severe punishment as a remnant of monarchical suppression and crimes as incidents of ‘good boys gone bad’ rather than as products of the evil side of human nature (Rothman, 1995: 113). With this new attitude toward punishment, the institution of incarceration also emerged. In place of execution, banishment or public shaming, a period of imprisonment, discipline, and self-reflection was proposed to transform convicts into productive and law-abiding members of society (cf. Cressey, 1973: xiii).

Penal debates in the antebellum era focused on two plans, namely the New York and the Pennsylvania systems, both of which included some form of imprisonment with physical labor. The New York system—also known as the Auburn plan (named after the prison at Auburn)—proposed a congregate arrangement, allowing inmates to be present in front of each other while working, eating, and exercising, except at night when they would be isolated in individual cells. At all times, talking and exchanges of gazes were prohibited (Rothman, 1995: 106). Thus the Auburn plan was also known as the ‘silent system’, in which talking, singing, laughing, and making ‘unnecessary’ noises were punishable behaviors (see Powers, 1829).

A competitor to the Auburn plan was the Pennsylvania system, which insisted on complete isolation and absolute solitary confinement. Inmates at Philadelphia’s Eastern State Penitentiary (the emblematic prison of the Penn system) lived, ate, worked, and even exercised within individual cells (Johnston, 1994). Since communication was kept minimal—including that
between guards and inmates—the Penn system sought and engendered routines of silence as severe and absolute as Auburn’s silent system.\(^5\)

Despite differences concerning confinement and congregation, the general principles of U.S. state penitentiaries in the 1800s had more or less corresponded to Bentham’s Panopticon ideal (even though U.S. reformers had known Bentham’s work only vaguely [Rothman, 1995: 108]). Sensory control was an integral part of penal practices, to such an extent that a distinct sensory ecology began to take shape among American penitentiaries. In the New York system, for example, the production of *visual order* was crucial: inmates were required to line up single file to clean their morning buckets and take their meals; they were not allowed to turn their heads to gaze about in the mess hall; and they could not look directly at visitors or prison authorities. In the well-known lock-step formation, inmates had to march with downcast eyes, stepping in unison with their arms locking inside those of another and forming a visibly moving chain. For Goffman, such practices are displays of self-commitment to the total institution: [P]art of the individual’s obligation is to be *visibly* engaged at appropriate times in the activity of the organization, which entails a mobilization of attention and muscular effort, a *bending of oneself* to the activity at hand’ (1961: 176, emphases added). Consequently, breaking such visual order becomes a notable offense, and in disciplinary records one will find inmates punished for ‘not marching properly and throwing the line in confusion’ (WR: 117).

Another layer of disciplinary control is built upon the prison’s *auditory* landscape. The bell (or sometimes the gong) established a day’s routine rhythm, signaling the beginning and end of daily activities. Hearing the institutional bell, inmates would emerge from their cells to be

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\(^5\) Supporters of the two rival camps would argue the effects of absolute solitariness on inmates’ mental conditions. Supporters of the New York system charged the Penn system of increasing frequencies of insanity among inmates due to the latter’s insistence on both absolute isolation and absolute silence. In this paper, we will not evaluate this debate, but will show how inmates tried to break down the rule of silence through subversive action.
counted, to line up, to eat, and to commence work. Rhythmic signals such as ‘clicking’ also served to synchronize inmates’ physical motions, thereby complementing the visual order in inmates’ marches and line-formation. After spending one week voluntarily in Auburn, a prison reformer recounted his auditory experiences:  

Every time we march to meals the clicking begins around the corner to my left and we marched to the right; every time we go to the shop the clicking begins on my right and we marched to the left. I am beginning to catch on to these various complications. (Osborne, 1915: 74)

As I have dressed leisurely there is not very long to wait before I hear the clicking, which marks the unlocking of the levers [that would open all cell doors on side of the cell house at once], far around the corner to my left. Already, however, I have heard the tread of shuffling feet in the corridor below; and know that the first company has already started down the yard. (Osborne, 1915: 190)

Note that organizational sounds like the clicking and the bell stood out all the more distinctly against the backdrop of enforced silence, when talking among inmates and other rebellious sound-making were prohibited. The strictness of acoustic control in U.S. penitentiaries had made such an impression on Tocqueville and Beaumont that, after their 1831 trip from France to Auburn, they wrote: ‘Everything passes in the most profound silence, and nothing is heard in the whole prison but the steps of those who march, or sounds proceeding form the workshops’ (quoted in Rothman, 1995: 109; Beaumont and Tocqueville, 1833).

6 The author of this diary was Thomas Mott Osborne, a prison reformer who in 1913 spent one week in Auburn, an American prison whose institutional routines became the model for many prisons during late nineteenth and early twentieth century.
Although other modalities of human sensing played a role in constructing disciplinary order, it was hearing, talking, sound-making, and acoustic control that had preoccupied the energy of prison planners and reformers. The authorities were concerned, of course, not so much with sense experiences as with communication and interaction among inmates. Yet, as authorities considered talking as a form of moral contamination (Garland, 1990; Smith, 2008), a unique sensory ecology was able to emerge within U.S. penitentiaries, connecting hearing and sound-making to disciplinary power. Acoustic control was especially the problem among prisons that had adopted the Auburn plan, where congregated inmates had plenty of opportunities to interact with and talk to one another in the daytime.

So far we have shown that the prison’s sensory ecology, especially the visual and auditory landscape, was tightly intertwined with prison disciplinary routines. In the next two sections we shall focus on two implications of the sensory rules. First, we explore how prison reformers translated the institutional rules concerning the senses into architectural designs, pointing out the limits and contradictions of sensory control through building structures. Second, we explore incidents of everyday resistance within the prison house to show how inmates could discover, within the prison’s sensory ecology, the potential to resist institutional rules.

Contradicitions in Sensory Control

The social imagination of penal institutions in the nineteenth century was inextricably linked to architectural designs of state penitentiaries (Markus, 1993: 118-130; Johnston, 2000). Prison

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7 The sensation of bodily pain remained important in the nineteenth-century prisons. Whipping, for example, was used commonly in state prisons of the U.S. South. Penitentiaries of northern states might occasionally use whipping as a form of punishment, but these states were reluctant to record systematic whipping on their disciplinary records. In any case, whipping seemed to have faded out in the late nineteenth century and was replaced, for instance, by the ‘shower’, in which the prisoner would be physically restrained and doused forcefully with ice-cold water (Packard, 1842: 5). Linking other bodily sensations was also crucial in certain forms of punishment. For instance, the hunger that resulted from a bread-and-water diet was often accompanied by the darkness of a dungeon and solitary confinement (see also Ticket-of-Leave Man, 1880).
reformers viewed architecture as ‘one of the most important of the moral sciences’ (Rothman, 1995: 106). Prison planners were preoccupied with the size of individual cells, designs of cell doors (whether recessed or not, so as to prevent conversations between cell neighbors), positions of windows (for light, air and preventing inmates from looking out), and connections among ventilation and sewage pipes (see e.g., Clark, 1850).

Control-through-architecture did encounter challenges, not only because inmates could often mobilize their senses to circumvent their physical constraints, but because different modalities of human senses (e.g., seeing vs. hearing/sound-making/talking) tend to amplify different tensions in disciplinary power. For instance, cell walls and doors might have prevented inmates from seeing one another, but inmates could still talk through grated doors or thin walls. To the extent that inmates could communicate despite physical blockage, their auditory capacity is relatively ‘freer’ of spatial constraints than is their visual capacity. But what really furnished inmates’ sensory agency was a certain contradiction inherent in the Panopitcon structure, a tension that could not be resolved by architectural designs given available technology. As cell doors needed to open enough to allow ‘continuous visibility’ (in Foucault’s sense), the use of iron grating to construct cell doors could not prevent sounds from flowing between cell units (soundproof glass units would not be imagined until many decades later).

In fact, technological ‘improvements’ sometimes intensified, rather than erased, such tensions. Philadelphia’s Eastern State Penitentiary (opened in 1829) offers an example. Here prison planners kept inmates confined all day long in isolated cells, with a then modern sewage system built for the prison house. Private commodes, installed for all cells, would link through an underground water pipe two prison cells separated by a central hallway; this pipe was further connected to a larger central sewage system (Johnston, 1994). This design entailed an interesting
unintended consequence. Even when isolated behind thick limestone walls, inmates could still tap their privy devices using special codes to ‘talk’, especially when water was low, which was often the case for an early modern system (Johnston, 2000: 73). Whereas prison authorities had supposed individual sewage ducts would facilitate isolation and (by extension) silence, those same ducts were talk-able and tap-able in the inmates’ sensory ecology. A new potential to act was discovered from one’s private commode!

Inmates’ creative tactics often drove prison planners to invent with more elaborate architectural designs, thus modifying the disciplinary system to some extent. In the case of Pentoville—the model prison of mid-nineteenth century London—the intense attention paid to acoustic control almost reached a point of absurdity. With his obsession with sound transmission, Joshua Jebb, the key architect of Pentoville, proposed in 1844 that ‘the individual separation of one prisoner from another is the only basis on which any sound system of prison discipline can be formed’ (Jebb, 1844: 6; emphases added). Knowing that windows or ordinary ventilation pipes would allow inmates to communicate, Jebb came up with a complicated network of pipe lines to disconnect prison cells. Fresh air was introduced from the basement through flues that would enter into individual cells from a grated opening on the top of a cell wall. Foul air, meanwhile, would be extracted into another flue at floor level of the wall opposite to the one where fresh air entered (Johnston, 2000: 92). No two cells were therefore directly linked, since fresh air and stale air would flow in separate pipes and shaft systems. Jebb’s system appeared so complex and bizarre—and entailed such an extravagant cost—that few other prisons could or would follow suit.

Such institutional contradictions between nineteenth-century penal philosophy and architectural designs were never quite resolved in the debates between the Auburn and
Pennsylvania plan, or in the struggle between a congregate and a solitary system. As prison populations rose, many state governments sought out more cost-effective plans. From the 1830s on, newly built prisons in the United States would mostly adopt the Auburn model rather than the expensive Pennsylvania system (which invested more energy in architectural design). Because inmates under the Auburn plan had more opportunities to ‘see’ each other in the congregate system, the enforcement of the silence rules through prohibitions of talking and sound-making had become ever more urgent and crucial (Powers, 1829). Nevertheless, inmates’ resistance had paradoxically become more open under a silent but congregate arrangement.

**Sensory Resistance in Action**

The Auburn plan did not maintain absolute isolation but sought to construct an ecology of aural isolation. As talking was prohibited among inmates (unless they were addressed by the authority), it was expected that silence would separate inmates virtually all of the time. The Auburn plan, moreover, imposed a visual separation: Inmates could see one another’s presence on work floors, in the mess hall, the exercise yard, or the chapel, but were prohibited from exchanging gazes. Even casually looking at visitors was prohibited, and this is also what sensory asymmetry means: prisoners could be seen but not ‘see’. Sense experiences under the Auburn model, whether seeing, hearing, or sound-making, were thus bereft of the social and communicative meanings usually associated with looking and talking.

However, it was also in this extremely mute environment that a paradoxical urge for talking emerged. Thomas Osborne, quoted earlier, recalled that he felt ‘an almost insane desire to talk, to pour forth words’, after spending just one week in Auburn (Osborne, 1915: 60-61). The sensation was social: a desire to reestablish one’s social being and to reconnect to a world of
sounds and voices. According to our reading of the detailed disciplinary records from the Wyoming Territorial Prison\(^8\), inmates often used sound-making as a means of breaking down their sensory isolation; as a result they were punished for ‘talking’, ‘talking loudly’, ‘making unnecessary noises’, ‘laughing’, ‘singing’, and, not least, ‘whistling’. In fact, such auditory and sonic activities constituted the most salient form of prison infractions in Wyoming, composing one-third of all violations (32%) recorded from 1891 to 1901.\(^9\)

The auditory ecology, put simply, helped prisoners orient their communication toward different social ends. Some ‘noises’, for instance, were tools of communication and interaction, targeting particular interlocutors or opponents. In one incident during the summer of 1897, an inmate was locked in his cell and fed a bread-and-water diet for ‘talking to [another] convict while exercising in [the] yard’ (WR: 74). A different inmate was punished in June 1898 for ‘loud talking and abusing [the] prison physician’ (WR: 70), and still another was reprimanded for ‘conversing in a loud tone of voice with his cell mate after being notified not to do so’ (WR: 44). These subversive acts had a particular target or intent, sometimes forming dyadic interactions with a partner. Here punishment was often meted out not only because inmates made sounds or conversed but because their attitudes toward prison authorities were, as guards put it, ‘insolent’.

In one incident during February 1893, for example, a prison guard cashiered an inmate ‘for

\(^8\) Two volumes of disciplinary records preserved in the office of the Wyoming State Archives are used in this paper. The records are cited here as ‘WR’ (with the page number of the original ledger indicated). These are large ledgers in which prison wardens recorded, on a daily basis, prisoners’ infractions that took place inside the prison compounds. The logs identify the violators, the types of behaviors calling for punishment (e.g., fighting, talking, refusing to work, noisemaking, etc.), and the types of punishment (e.g., confinement in the dungeon, a bread and water diet, being chained to a cell door, the removal of hair and mustache, etc.). These records served an important administrative function, for prisoners who violated prison rules would have their ‘good time’ discounted, essentially prolonging their release time. The Wyoming prison cannot be said to represent the entire American prison system because of its relatively small population—fewer than 200 inmates. Nonetheless, the attention Wyoming prison authorities paid to sensory control was quite typical among prisons that implemented the Auburn plan.

\(^9\) We may compare sound-making/talking to other offenses. Out of 579 cases of prison violations reported in the Wyoming Records from 1891 to 1901, 20 percent was attributed to insolence and disobedience; another 20 percent to fighting; 13 percent to refusing to work; 11 percent to disruptive behaviors; and 16 percent to all other infractions. The total adds up more than 100 percent because violations are not mutually exclusive.
making unnecessary noise in [the] cell, and when reprimanded by [the guard] for so doing, he positively refused to line up to any of the prison rules’ (WR: 5). It was the demonstrative willingness to break institutional rules that turned noise-making into a subversive and punishable offense.

As guards and wardens, not inmates, were in the position to report and document perceived noise-making, disciplinary records necessarily register the power relations as experienced in the prison house. Almost all adjectives used to describe sounds in the warden’s journal were normative and judgmental. Thus, talking became ‘loud talking’ and ‘using abusing language’, while mere noise becomes ‘unnecessary noise’ and ‘loud noise’. Tonality and volume also indicated a rebellious attitude to the guards’ ears, as in one case when an inmate was punished for ‘talking not only in a low tone, but very loud so that he could be heard all over the end of the shop, seemingly defying all rules and order’ (WR: 140). Note that subversive intentions out of sensory acts must be interpreted through the eyes of prison rules and order.

Although concealed private and hidden conversations are often found in the Wyoming disciplinary records, other incidents of resistance were public, loud, and far-reaching. These latter sounds of resistance were openly broadcasted. Counter to Goffman’s conception of covert secondary adjustment, these broadcasted sounds of resistance created a scene—audible, highly voluble, and always drawing attention. An inmate was punished, for example, in March 1901 for ‘loud talking, whistling, and making a singing and humming noise, trying to attract attention of other convicts’ (WR: 245). Another was castigated for ‘lying on his back in the cell and throwing a tin can lid up to the top of his cell and letting it fall on the floor just to see how much noise it would make’ (WR: 45). This last case was a clear demonstration of pushing the envelope of institutional limitations, as the inmate explored how far—in both sensory and institutional
distance—his sensory resistance could go. As a tool of subversion, a tin suddenly becomes not an empty container but a transmitter of disruptive meaning, altering the social relation between an inmate and prison authorities. It also becomes a means of expressing self-autonomy in face of prison rules and inject one’s social self into the entire sensory ecology of the prison.

Similarly, many other heavy, hard objects and surfaces serve to transform the prison’s sensory ecology into spaces of resistance. Accordingly, one inmate was punished for ‘slamming the bread plates on the table [in the mess hall]’ (WR: 159); another reprimanded for ‘hammering [a] cell bucket to pieces on the cell door’ (WR: 231); still another doubly punished during time spent in solitary confinement ‘for kicking his bucket around the cell and making a general disturbance in the dungeon’ (WR: 238). One can imagine the noises that resonated in the entire prison building by the hammering, pounding, dropping, smashing of those metal objects. Unlike architectural features such as ventilation pipes, which led inmates to use concealment tactics, everyday utilitarian objects such as buckets, bread plates, and tin cans facilitate the restoration of an inmate’s social self beyond the inmate’s private space. These things are move-able, drop-able, and break-able, affording the inmates to broadcast their sounds of resistance and engage in collective communication. They also voice the intention to subvert the rules of a total institution.

Guards and wardens no doubt heard the social significance of sound-making, inasmuch as it entered the disciplinary records as a rule-breaking activity. In their positions of authority, guards and wardens must constantly make distinctions between sounds of resistance and other ‘white noises’. Even within a silent system, there were sounds inevitably generated by (normal) physical actions, such as shuffling, walking, moving objects, coughing, sneezing, sighing, and groaning (see Osborne, 1915: 67). There were also the acoustic effects of foot-dragging, the sounds of food-chewing in the mess hall, snoring at night, turning and tossing on the bed, and so
forth. But for sounds to enter the disciplinary records, prison authorities likely heard something else—namely, inmates’ intention, their will to violate prison rules. The authorities would ‘sense’ the auditory motivations not only by means of prison regulations but also through their organizational roles and power relations vis-à-vis the inmates. Guards look to certain sounds as forms of resistance or rebellion, and by virtue of their authorized position, they selectively act upon a sound over another indifferent voice and call the former ‘unnecessary noise’.

But how loud did loud talking need to be in order to be seen as rebellious? How unnecessary was unnecessary noise? At what point did a tone of voice become offensive to the authority? Despite the wealth of data in the Wyoming disciplinary records, we are unable at this point to explicate the full social logic of sensory infractions. These limitations aside, there is enough evidence to suggest that prison inmates did not only engage in concealed secondary adjustments but discovered the potential for publicized forms of resistance. Moreover, we have seen that social meanings of perceived objects tended to emerge from pragmatic actions of social agents, as prison inmates navigated a constraining sensory ecology of the prison.

Conclusion

Our exposition has yet to touch upon the full spectrum of the human senses subjected to disciplinary power in total institutions. Besides seeing and hearing, the senses of smell, touch, and taste are variously shaped and sometimes sharpened by prison rules, architectural features, and organizational routines. An olfactory ecology emerges, for example, when kerosene lamps are burnt in the dark or when inmates keep human waste in their cells overnight. During the summer months, bodily odor is sharpened by the poor ventilation that traps hot, fetid air in the
A sensory ecology of touch arises when daily labor requires contact with raw materials, metal tools, and the messiness of nature. In Wyoming, prisoners labored in ice-cutting, forestry, and broom-making (using straws). Inmates’ sense of touch was also routinized by the roughly woven stripes they were required to wear, by the equally rough bedding on which they slept, by the cold bath in the winter they had to endure, and by the lock-step marches that pressed bodies close to one another. Disciplinary records also reveal cases in which the sense of taste becomes imbued with rebellious meanings, as when inmates throw their hardened, cold bread on the mess hall’s floor or refuse to finish dishes of rancid prison cuisine. Of course, prison authorities read these acts as mere demonstrations of wastefulness, not as responses that both signify an offense to the taste buds and express the inmates’ frustrated desire to free their senses from institutional confines.

Despite its necessary incompleteness, this paper has tackled the problem of penitentiary control from the perspective of a sensing agent and from the ways in which the agent navigates a sensory ecology. Expanding upon and varying themes pioneered by Foucault and Goffman, we depict sensory agency as a pragmatic and social process, through which sensory experiences arise in doing, acting, and relating. At the same time, sensing also furnishes new potentials for doing, acting, and relating. These pragmatic dynamics are never completely fluid or free, but are bounded by institutional rules as well as architectural features that inscribe power relations between inmates and prison authorities. In exploring prison inmates’ manifest subversions, we have therefore located the source of sensory agency not only in the structure of disciplinary power (as in Foucault) or in the essential character of the social self (as in Goffman). Rather, we emphasize the sensory ecology itself as an institutional wellspring of resistance and subversion.

Feces were sometimes used as tools of resistance in other ways. One inmate was punished ‘for putting a can of human M--- in the guard’s bed, thereby destroying the bed’ (WR: 60). Note the courtesy of omitting the word ‘manure’ in the warden’s record.
Agency actualizes itself in the prison’s sensory ecology, becoming not only salient to inmates’ senses but also ‘real’ in its institutional effect. It is significant that the sensory ecology of the prison is not a passive apparatus either; instead, it involves a constant process of making and re-making, as prison inmates explore and discover new potentials to act and subvert institutional power.

In light of this pragmatic understanding of human sensing, we draw attention to three theoretical issues that explain why institutional control of sense experiences can sometimes fail. First, prison plans and architectures tend to amplify the institutional contradictions of sensory control, not simply because sensing agents are creative in looking for gaps to break, but also because different modalities of human sensing can furnish different pragmatic actions. In this paper we have especially emphasized the contrast between seeing and hearing/sound-making. Unlike seeing, aural activities thrive on non-linearity and omni-directionality relatively (though not absolutely) unrestrained by physical obstacles. In the words of Michel Serres, ‘The ear knows this distance all too well. I can put it out the window, project it far away, hold it distant from the body’ (Serres, 2008: 94). Aural activities thus engender special social meanings in the prison (at least to hearing persons). To draw the attention of everyone, inmates make ‘unnecessary noises’, talk ‘loud’, and slam hard objects on the floor, pushing the limits of prison rules. Through sound-making, resistance reaches out widely, taking not only the form of concealed communications but also of broadcasted and publicized rebellions. Mobilizing different modalities of the senses is a key to enabling sensory agency.

Second, in a sensory ecology suffused with agentic potentials, perceived objects become props that can mediate sensory agency and institutional constraints. Prison walls are now useable, pound-able objects for venting anger, concealing secret messages, or even sharpening
tools and making keys for a future escape. Likewise, ventilation and water pipes are no longer tools for sustaining absolute solitary confinement, but become means of covert communication and private talking. Inmates discover new action-potentials in objects for daily use: buckets are now droppable, food plates are breakable, and beds become pound-able sounding boards. In each instance, inmates manipulate presumably quiet objects to produce voices of resistance that attract the attention of the whole prison house. To discover the capability of resistance and subversion in a quotidian object, inmates no longer ‘sense’ the object as a thing-in-nature. Rather, the object encodes the institutional meaning of incarceration and disciplinary power that shapes organizational activities. Resistance and subversion thus depend on discovering alternative meanings in those objects, meanings demonstratively antithetical to those prescribed by prison authorities.

Third, it is not incidental that prison authorities and inmates differ in what (and how) they see, hear, touch, or smell. A sensory ecology is also a social field in which actors establish and test out their power relations (Martin, 2011: 221). Although authorities might have anticipated potential resistance and rebellion, the prison’s sensory ecology offers an environment so rich in sensory explorations that inmates can constantly find new meanings in their environment and redefine their social reality to some extent. Hence, by broadcasting their ‘loud talking’ and ‘unnecessary sounds’, inmates force prison guards and wardens into their own sensory field. Loud talking is an act that compels authorities to hear what inmates’ subversions might mean in a sort of a tug-of-war. A truly total institution would mean that one side has already lost; it would complete, as Goffman would say, the engrossment of individuality and the autonomous self. This will occur when both the authorities and inmates are living and sensing in a shared sensory field structured and dominated by prison rules. Yet we have found no such
unification in this paper. Insofar as human senses are palpable and variable enough, it seems that an institutional gap has a perennial presence in prison life. Inmates can sometimes escape disciplinary control, if not also subvert institutional rules.

A pragmatic understanding of sensory control must therefore begin from the vantage point of active perceivers, whether the oppressors or the subjects of control. Social agents detect sensory stimuli not as qualities inherent in the things of the world, but as opportunities for actions shaped by their positions in the field of social power (Martin, 2011). Conversely, in the struggles between institutional control and the human acts of sensing, actors become social agents, able to participate actively in a stimulating sensory ecology and act upon it. But to push this sensory agenda for further analyzing institutional control, sociologists and social theorists must try to understand how different modalities of sensory control are interconnected. How can institutional rules governing seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling be combined to strengthen or weaken control, in prisons or in other apparatuses of power? The play of multiple modalities among human senses, we conjecture, should lead us to a more refined theory of sensory resistance than the one we have barely sketched here.
References


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