



# Every Man for Himself and All for One: Crime, Prison Culture and Marginality in Lisbon, Portugal

Peter Anton Zoettl

Centro de Estudos Internacionais, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (CEI-Iscte), Portugal

## ABSTRACT

Doing time in prison is a common experience for many young people from Portugal's economically disadvantaged urban peripheries. Prison conditions are harsh and sentences are long, particularly for drug and property offences. This article discusses the simultaneously individual and collective nature of prison life, and how inmates cope with a hostile environment that threatens their emotional and physical integrity. Traditional models of prison culture are inadequate to describe Portuguese prison society: it is only to a limited extent the result of prisoners adapting to the deprivations experienced inside, and it has little to do with supposed criminal subcultures imported from the outside. Instead, prison in Portugal has become just another venue for the ongoing struggle of marginalised citizens who seek to maintain a modicum of personal agency under adverse circumstances. The article argues that inmate culture in Portugal converges with a generalised culture of marginality, spawned by the late-liberal segregation of undesirable identities in suburban socioscapescapes spurned by dominant society.


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## Introduction

Prisoner culture has attracted a great deal of attention from social scientists since the publication of Sykes' *The Society of Captives* in 1958. Sykes argued that inmate culture was largely a product of the pressures experienced by prisoners, and that the deprivations and frustrations of incarceration 'play a crucial part in shaping the inmate social system' (1958: 131). However, subsequent authors, most notably Irwin and Cressey (1962), emphasised the impact of external factors on prison culture, contending that a so-called 'criminal subculture' has a 'dramatic effect [...] on the conduct of inmates in any given prison' (1962: 142). Irwin and Cressey maintained that offenders exhibited consistent patterns of behaviour both inside and outside prison, allowing inmates to be divided into distinct categories according to their adherence to the codes and values of prison and the world of crime (1962: 145).

Naturally, the world of prisons has changed considerably since the 1950s/60s, both in the US and in Western Europe. Mass incarceration, the decline of the welfare state and the subsequent eclipse of the ideal of social reintegration have had a lasting impact on prison life and the ways in which prisoners come to terms with their incarceration. Pratt *et al.* (2013) argue that the increased punitiveness of US criminal law since the 1990s, coupled with a 'waste management' approach to the penal system, has effectively transformed prisons into a 'container for human goods now endlessly

**CONTACT** Peter Anton Zoettl  pazln@iscte.pt

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recycled’ (2013: 8–9). Similarly, Simon has identified mass incarceration as a procedural pseudo-solution to ‘the political dilemmas of governing through crime’ (Simon 2007: 159). Also with regard to the US, Wacquant attributes the ‘carceral hyperinflation’ to the ‘demise of rehabilitation as the operant correctional philosophy’, which he claims began to be discredited in the 1970s ‘by the unexpected convergence of critiques from the right and the left’ (2013a: 15).

According to the same author, the rise of prison ‘warehouses’ and the associated overcrowding, ethnic fragmentation and proliferation of drug use have weakened prisoner solidarity to such an extent that ‘inmate society’, as it was once studied, has effectively collapsed (Wacquant 2001: 109). Skarbek (2014) examines in detail how changes in inmate culture in the US are linked to the unprecedented growth of the country’s prison population, which, alongside other factors, has resulted in a dwindling of the norms that previously governed prison society. Skarbek argues that the ‘power vacuum’ created by the absence of an effective inmate code was filled by prison gangs, who violently enforced their rules to maintain prison order in a way that allowed them to pursue their economic activities – particularly in-prison drug dealing – unfettered (2014: 50).

As Skarbek (2014: 66) notes, in jurisdictions such as the UK, where prisons hold smaller inmate populations, prison gangs have not gained a foothold. In Portugal, the prison population has risen steadily since the country’s transition to democracy in 1974, but has remained more or less stable from the late 1990s onward. Lisbon Central Prison, the largest correctional institution, currently holds around a thousand inmates and is thus far from reaching the 4,000 inmates quoted by Skarbek for California’s prisons in 2012 (Skarbek 2014: 35). Although slight overcrowding has long been a problem in Portugal, exacerbating the difficulties of inmate coexistence, prison gangs are unheard of.

In what follows, I will examine the lives of prisoners in two Portuguese adult male prisons with a relatively young inmate population. I will argue that inmates in Portugal, despite frequent conflicts arising from their forced cohabitation under challenging conditions, continue to form a cohesive society of interdependent individuals. While they grapple with their sentences individually and seek, each for themselves, to make the best of their uneasy predicament, they also experience their incarceration collectively, as part of the challenges they face as a social group that shares similar trajectories and constraints, both inside and outside prison.

As imprisonment has become a not uncommon episode in the biographies of many underprivileged young people, it needs to be understood in the context of the generalised marginalisation and criminalisation of the Portuguese urban periphery (Raposo *et al.* 2019; Zoettl 2025a; 2025b). Prison culture is bound up with the need to develop strategies of adaptation and resistance to the forces that drive the social ostracism of those who dwell on the fringes of society and who are accustomed to attracting the attention of the criminal justice system. Consequently, prison culture is an expression of both personal and collective struggles of people from analogous socio-spatial backgrounds. Prison culture in Portugal does not manifest as the import or export of certain types of criminal behaviour or the assimilation of certain criminal role models. Rather, it constitutes a supra-individual mode of dealing with the parameters of a shared life situation, which extends from the ‘street’ to the prison yard.

The findings presented here are based on fieldwork carried out intermittently over three years in Caxias and Linhó prisons in the Lisbon metropolitan area, drawing on an ethnographic ‘participant observation’ methodology. I conducted in-depth, semi-structured and recorded interviews with around 30 inmates. Interviewees’ ages ranged from 20 to 39 years, with a median age of 27. Interviewees were thus significantly younger than the median age in Portugal’s general prison population, where 60 per cent of inmates are between 30 and 49 years old (compared to only 15 per cent between 21 and 29 years; see DGRSP 2024: Table 5). Nevertheless, they are representative of the inmate population of Caxias and Linhó prisons, which primarily house young inmates.

While most interviewees were still relatively young, they could already look back on a prolonged career of deviance and several years of prison experience. As other authors have noted, the age of inmates influences their behaviour, which also tends to shift over the course of their sentence

(Crewe *et al.* 2017; Johnson & Dobrzanska 2005). With regard to the findings presented here, while older and long-term inmates generally displayed a more reserved attitude and tended to socialise with only a small part of the inmate community, there was little difference in their views on the individual versus collective nature of imprisonment. In both Caxias and Linhó prisons, immigrant communities, particularly those from Africa, were grossly over-represented, a point to which I will return later in the article (see also Zoetl 2025b).

Interviewees were selected in an unsystematic fashion based on the level of trust and sympathy that had developed during the initial participant observation period. Their institutional biographies – criminal proceedings, sentences and resulting prison terms (often spent in multiple prisons) – were used as a guideline for the interviews. These explored inmates' pre-prison lives, their first and subsequent encounters with the police and the criminal justice system, and how they experienced the different correctional institutions in which they had been detained. The latter part of the interviews focused mainly on relationships between inmates and between inmates and staff, particularly with regard to social and economic exchange, violence and strategies for coping with the prison environment (see also Zoetl, *forthcoming*). To complement the narratives, the inmates' files were examined, which also helped to validate some of the statements made. In all but one case, the formal information that could be extracted from the files corresponded closely to the inmates' own accounts.

### Prison as an Individual and Collective Experience

What Barth (1969) noted in relation to ethnic groups – that they are constituted by means of 'categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves' (1969: 10) – can be applied in the same way to social groups such as those who live in the confined space of prisons: if they see themselves as a community and are seen as such by others, it makes sense to describe and analyse them accordingly. However, the extent to which prison inmates experience themselves as a community and how this has changed over the decades has been subject to debate. As early as 1975, Jacobs argued that, due to the proliferation of ethnically based prison gangs in the US, 'the old picture of the prison as an inclusive normative and moral community [...] is no longer accurate. The prison is now a conflict-ridden setting where the major battles are fought by intermediate level inmate groups rather than by staff and inmates' (1975: 478).

In line with this, Irwin, quoted by Wacquant (2001: 109), asserts in his 1990 preface to *The Felon* that there 'is no longer a single, overarching convict culture or social organization, as there tended to be twenty years ago', and observes that most prisoners now 'restrict their association to a few other prisoners and withdraw from prison public life'. Wacquant attributes this apparent collapse of inmate society, as depicted in classic prison research, to overcrowding, long sentences, and an increasing number of young prisoners and drug offenders, along with the 'spread of ethnically-based gangs' (2001: 109). Skarbek's more recent evaluation broadly concurs with these authors, adding the increased proportion of violent and first-time offenders as another reason for the demise of convict societies based on informal norms. Skarbek likewise highlights the emergence of gang-based prison governance, grounded in rules aimed at protecting gangs' illicit prison economies (2014: 35–40).

Most authors employ the term 'inmate society' to denote the presence or absence of a shared sense of identity among prisoners within a given penal institution. Such a shared sense of identity is considered to be the source of a so-called 'inmate culture' or 'convict identity'. Inmate culture and identity, in turn, are thought to be linked to adherence to a set of rules known as the inmate 'code', as suggested, for instance, by Trammell's assertion that the 'inmate code is important to maintain a convict identity' (2009: 767). Consistent with this, Terry (who himself spent 12 years in prison) observes that convicts are distinguished from 'normal' prisoners (that is, prisoners who do not adhere to the convict identity) by their more or less strict compliance with the inmate code (1997: 27).

Scholars agree that the advent of mass incarceration and gang-dominated prisons is reflected in a change in the inmate code: 'At one time, inmates used the code to defy the goals of the prison staff. Now, mostly due to underground economies, they want to keep peace in order to sell their

contraband' (Trammell 2009: 749). However, while some authors emphasise the fragmentation of today's prison societies, others point to the continuity of a 'prison culture with specific attitudes and values' (Winfree *et al.* 2002: 213–214). Crewe, for example, argues that the inmate community in the UK has become fragmented as a result of penal strategies of privilege, early release schemes and the 'individualizing impact of drug culture' (2007: 265). Conversely, Winfree *et al.*, in their study of US and New Zealand correctional facilities, acknowledge the persistence of inmate society, suggesting that 'differences in correctional philosophy and prison populations notwithstanding, the culture of the incarcerated remains relatively unaltered' (2002: 230).

Regardless of the level of fragmentation or persistence of an overarching inmate culture, its origins have also been the subject of a long-standing debate, with some researchers accentuating the importance of the prison experience itself and others focusing on the influence of street or criminal subcultures within prisons. However, despite their contrasting viewpoints, both the classical 'deprivation' and 'importation' models of prison culture sought to classify inmate behaviour by identifying certain prisoner types. Examples include Sykes' (1958) 'Gorillas and Merchants' or Irwin and Cressey's (1962) 'Thieves' and 'Do Rights'. In the deprivation models, these prototypes are the product of various forms of adaptation to the prison experience, whereas in the importation models they are pre-established by the codes of conduct of the criminal world.

Subsequent scholars have concluded that 'prison culture is a combination of street culture and social deprivation' (Trammell 2009: 750). Wacquant even argues that the 'melting of street and carceral symbolism' resulting from the mass incarceration of lower-class Black and Latino people in the US renders 'moot' the academic dispute regarding the deprivation thesis and the importation thesis (2001: 116). While the 'carceral continuum' that Wacquant (2001; 2013b) identifies in the US can also be observed in Portugal, I will argue that Portugal's inmate society is far from having 'foundered', as Wacquant asserts for the US. Although Portugal does also have a high proportion of prisoners serving long sentences and a strong over-representation of ethnic minorities, inmates still perceive themselves – notwithstanding their differences and the frequent conflicts between them – as a cohesive group with a shared identity, even across ethno-racial boundaries.

As I will show, Portuguese inmate society, while naturally fragmented as a consequence of differing individual needs, difficulties and objectives, continues to persist as a consequence of prisoners' recognition of the impact of their shared socio-economic and socio-spatial backgrounds on their interactions with the authorities. Although the Portuguese *bairro* (neighbourhood), much like the US 'ghetto', clearly extends into prison, it would be misleading to understand prison culture as a fusion of conjectured convict and criminal cultures. Rather, it is an expression of a wider culture of marginality, acquired in response to the criminalisation of specific sections of society, and which manifests both inside and outside prison. While inmate culture inevitably results partly from an adaptation to prison life, it is primarily a way of dealing with marginalisation itself, a skill developed both in the *bairro* and the prison. Therefore, it is neither imported nor exported, but simply lived out in two different loci of marginality.

While Portugal's imprisonment rate is only slightly above the European median, prison sentences tend to be very long. In 2024, the majority of prisoners in Portugal (38%) were serving sentences of between five and ten years, compared to between one and three years across Europe as a whole. The average length of imprisonment in Portugal was more than four times higher than the European median.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the time spent in Portuguese prisons appears to be particularly attritional, with mortality and suicide rates 62% and 80% above the European median, respectively.<sup>2</sup> Condemnations by the European Court of Human Rights for subjecting prisoners to inhuman or degrading treatment have been recurrent, totalling 14 over the last five years.<sup>3</sup>

### Common Origins, Common Perceptions

Strikingly, the vast majority of inmates in many Portuguese prisons come from the same neighbourhoods (Cunha 2002; Zoetl 2025b). These are economically disadvantaged areas on the periphery of

urban centres, which are often home to migrant or other ethnic communities. Although statistical micro-data on inmates' previous place of residence is unavailable, first-time prisoners and prison researchers alike are struck by the seemingly familial atmosphere behind the walls. Yuri, an inmate from Cacém near Lisbon, for example, recalled that the day after his admission, 'I went to the prison yard in the morning ... Hey, I met a bunch of good friends of mine there!' In her research on a women's prison, Cunha found that 89% of inmates from the Lisbon metropolitan area 'come from the same neighbourhoods – shantytowns, shacks or prefabricated buildings, resettled neighbourhoods or suburban housing projects' (2002: 76).<sup>4</sup>

Cunha also noted that the majority of prisoners originated from the same socio-economic classes, particularly with regard to education and occupation, and that the proportion of underclass citizens had increased markedly throughout the 1990s (2002: 67–71). The male prisoners in Caxias and Linhó, too, were almost exclusively from the lowest strata of Portuguese society. A number of them admitted that they had never held a job, while those who had tended to be casual labourers, for example in the construction industry. The socio-economic homogeneity of the Portuguese prison population goes hand in hand with a similarity in their crimes: in 2023, half of the male prisoners were serving sentences for property or drug offences, driving without a licence, or offences typically associated with conflicts with the police, such as disobedience or resistance (DGRSP 2024: Table 9).

The uniform composition of the Portuguese prison population means that, even though inmates have to deal with their sentence individually, they also face prison as a social group or class and inevitably develop a certain awareness of their commonalities. Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus may help in appreciating the intertwined relationship between the individual and the collective prison experience. While Bourdieu warns against the reification of theoretical or 'fictitious' classes through academic discourse and reminds us that social classes only exist 'in a state of virtuality', he also points out that social groups do share, to a greater or lesser extent, a specific *habitus*, that is, a system of enduring dispositions or a certain 'way of being' (1977; 1998: 10, 214).

The narratives of the inmates in Caxias and Linhó testify to the common habitus of much of the Portuguese prison population. The 'enduring dispositions' that shape their 'way of being' and which are manifest in their stories can be understood as the habitus of the 'marginalised citizen in conflict with the law', which is to be differentiated from other forms of habitus associated with states of marginality that do not trigger responses from the authorities. As Bourdieu notes, a group's habitus tends unwittingly to homogenise as a result of its members' homogeneous conditions of existence, subsequently leading to shared practices that are 'objectively harmonised without any intentional calculation' (1977: 80). Applied to the prison population, this means that, despite their different responses to their marginalisation in their places of residence and their encounters with the criminal justice system, offenders' conceptualisations of these experiences tend to converge.

The entrenched dynamics of state–sub/citizen relations in Portugal's urban periphery, particularly evident in the often confrontational policing of their neighbourhoods, make residents feel not only that they share their condition of marginality (in terms of overall living standard, housing, employment opportunities, etc.) but also that they are addressed by the state not as individuals but as a group (Raposo *et al.* 2019; Zoettl 2013; 2017; 2025b). Their group consciousness is thus 'de-virtualised' not through any process of political mobilisation whatsoever (as Bourdieu considers necessary in the case of 'class' consciousness 1998: 11), but as a consequence of their categorisation and ascription of a group identity by the dominant Other. This is particularly true for migrant communities of African descent and Portuguese Roma, but it also applies to those of Portuguese origin. The following quotation from Bruno, a 30-year-old Portuguese inmate from the Lisbon metropolitan area, is paradigmatic of the feeling, shared by many young residents of the periphery, that they are targeted by law enforcement not because of their actions, but by virtue of their appearance and place of residence:

You try to avoid them [the police], but they keep coming after you. Nowadays, all it takes is being young and standing outside a café with your friends, smoking a cigarette. [...] They turn up, identify you, search you. And they do everything in such a brutal way, which provokes the kind of reactions that lead to confrontation. (Bruno)

It is such experiences that lead them to classify the diverse agents and agencies of the state with which they are dealing as a ‘system’ (a frequently used term) that is designed to criminalise their way of being, in a pattern similar to that noted by Terry (1997) among Californian inmates. As Terry reports, the ‘entire criminal justice system, from laws on the books to police on the streets’, including courtrooms and ‘the very structure of the prisons themselves, is widely known as the system’, which, in the eyes of the inmates, ‘captures the sum of all the forces responsible for their condition of imprisonment’ (1997: 30).

Sharing similar experiences prior to their sentencing, Portuguese offenders carry into prison their early perceptions of the ‘system’ as part of the habitus they acquired through years of living in the *bairro*. However, once subjected to correctional confinement, the precarious and conflict-ridden environment in which they are placed forces them to assert themselves not only against prison staff and the prison administration but often also against their fellow inmates. What follows is an examination of how the power structures that tend to dominate inmate relations are mediated by the economic and social capital these individuals possess, and how such structures simultaneously individualise and collectivise the prison society and the prison experience.

### **Economic Capital, Social Capital and Involuntary Affinities**

Especially for those entering prison for the first time, the fact that most inmates are drawn from the same neighbourhoods helps ease the initial period of incarceration considerably. Nevertheless, it is imperative for all inmates to rapidly build up economic and social capital behind bars to help them cope with the physical and psychological hardships they will inescapably face during their stay. Economic capital is essential, for example, to purchase food and other amenities such as cigarettes and toiletries, but also drugs or mobile phones. Social capital, on the other hand, is vital for maintaining an undisturbed prison life and for obtaining psychological support in times of emotional turmoil. Economic capital tends to come from outside the prison, mainly through family support or from prisoners’ own resources – in which case outside assistance is still required to transfer funds inside. However, economic capital can also be generated on site through a range of tolerated or punishable activities of varying degrees of illicitness.

The importance of economic capital in prison must not be underestimated. Miguel, a then 25-year-old prisoner who had been sentenced for theft and robbery, noted that in prison ‘there are people who are better off and others who can’t afford anything’. Having a small amount of money or no money at all at one’s disposal makes a much bigger difference when confined than it does when at liberty: ‘A little here is a lot. [...] To have a cigarette to smoke at night ... There are people here who, if they don’t have one, bang their heads against the wall’ (Miguel). In both Caxias and Linhó, the prison meals were prepared by an external company, and having to eat them was unanimously considered to be one of the grossest ‘pains of imprisonment’:

I’ve never seen lettuce here. Since I came here ... Bananas, I’ve been here for a year and six months and have only had bananas twice. It’s things like this that put a bit of a strain on you. If you can’t buy food in the canteen, if you don’t have the money to go to the bar, then in practice you don’t eat. (Cristiano)

We’re allowed 1 kilo [of food] a week, on visiting days. As there are four of us in the cell, we sometimes coordinate. One [visitor] brings meat, another this, another that. That’s the only thing I eat. I was fat when I came here, I’ve already lost 58 kilos. I used to weigh 162, now I weigh 103. (Ulisses)

As Ulisses’ account shows, the poor quality of the food not only encourages the emergence of an internal economy in which better-off prisoners, subsisting on supplies brought in by visitors or bought from the prison shop, sell their official rations to those at the bottom of the income pyramid. It also endows those with financial resources with power over destitute prisoners, who are happy to trade their loyalty for a few crackers from their benefactor, thereby consolidating the social capital of those who are economically stronger. Behind bars, economic capital thus automatically confers a certain amount of social capital: ‘Here, if you have money, you have friends’

(Bruno). Conversely, those with no economic capital at all (which is often the case with drug addicts) need to be very prison-wise in order to offset their bleak financial situation.

As for social capital, a certain amount can be ‘imported’ into prison, stemming from the respect and authority that a prisoner enjoys in his neighbourhood or, in some cases, in the criminal world. As the following quote illustrates, social capital is as important to the daily experience of imprisonment as economic capital:

It was a bit complicated. The only strength you can have in this situation [first prison sentence] is to have friends. If you have friends ... But real friends. Who support you. [...] I’ve always been a sociable person. That made things very easy for me. Not quite so easy, actually, but if you have the support of other people, of friends, it makes things easier. Without support ... It’s completely different. In a place like this, if you don’t have support, it’s very complicated. (Cristiano)

Social capital in prison is, however, much more transient than economic capital and tends to dissipate apace unless it is constantly renewed. Nevertheless, prisoners who arrive without any external social capital (e.g. foreigners without a fixed abode in Portugal, such as drug mules) can still build it up during their stay if they demonstrate an ability to deal wisely with prison life and the inmate community. Either way, building and maintaining economic and social capital takes time and effort, which is why inmates are often reluctant to be transferred to another prison, even if it could benefit them, for example by bringing them closer to their families: ‘Going to another prison and starting from scratch makes everything more complicated’ (Yuri).

Despite the changes in the composition of the prison population and sentencing practices in Portugal over the last few decades, inmates still perceive themselves as a community, perhaps even more so than before. Inmate culture as a lived experience encompasses more than just a system of prison argot, convict codes and prisoner types. Rather, it reflects the behavioural dynamics of people who often, and increasingly, share a common background and similar conditions, both inside and outside prison. Those who make up Portuguese prison society are well aware of their commonalities and their differences, and respond to prison both as individuals and collectively. They coexist on the basis of what could be termed an ‘involuntary affinity’, forming a community of marginalised citizens who, for a period of their lives, take on the role of marginalised prisoners. While each of them has to cope with this common situation in their own way, none of them can withdraw from the collective unity of prison society. The following two quotes illustrate this awareness of the simultaneously individual and communal nature of the prison experience:

I already knew some people. And it was these people who got me some magazines and books. [...] I didn’t have to ask for anything because they already knew how it worked. Whenever one friend or another arrives, you already know what they need. [...] I’ve seen a lot of people ... Of the little I had, which they had given to me, I had to share it with the others who were there with me. Because they didn’t know anyone. They had nothing. (Lucas)

That was very ... It was a very sad time. You also build up affinities here. You build bonds. When you see ... Even if it’s someone from another country, when you see that they’re respectful, that they’re fun, you build a bond with them. It may not seem like that, but you start to feel ... You also tell yourself: what happened to him could happen to me too. (Cristiano)

The first quote is from an inmate who spent two weeks in the ‘observation’ wing of Lisbon Central Prison after arriving, as is standard practice. He was locked in a solitary cell for 23 hours a day: ‘It’s a shock. [...] It’s a lot of hours alone, with nothing to distract you. [...] There’s nothing in your cell, just your clothes.’ Reading material was passed on to him by prisoners in the wing above him, people he already knew from the outside. However, he also shared it with inmates who were unknown to him and with the wider prison community. The second quote reflects the sense of togetherness created by long periods of forced cohabitation. It refers to a foreign prisoner in his mid-forties who I met during my research and who later died in the prison hospital. According to my interlocutor, there were unconfirmed rumours that he had been hospitalised after being beaten by prison guards for banging on his cell door.

## Respect and React

Relations between inmates are, of course, not without their complications. Prisons that are known for their poor conditions, such as Lisbon Central Prison, are also the places where clashes between inmates occur most frequently: ‘There’s a lot of trouble. Something happens almost every day. Either phone theft, or theft of this, theft of that. Fights over this, fights over that’ (Nuno). ‘When the lights went out, you got stabbed and you didn’t even know who it was’ (Tomás). The precarious nature of prison life itself fosters conflict, often over seemingly trivial matters: Tomás, for example, threw a cellmate to the floor in the lower wing for having eaten his chicken steaks. He said that he was beaten up by the guards for this and then transferred to Leiria Prison. As some authors have noted, long-term prisoners tend to isolate themselves from the community precisely to avoid conflict with contentious inmates (e.g. Johnson & Dobrzanska 2005: 9). However, as the following quotes illustrate, withdrawal from the community can only ever be partial and does not eliminate the need to constantly react to fellow prisoners:

Because people here test you. Every day that goes by, they test you. You might think that’s not the case, that you’re fine, that nobody cares about you. But you’re wrong. Here, they are always studying you. To see your weaknesses. (Henrique)

In the EPL [Lisbon Central Prison] it’s like this: people get up in the morning and look for someone to test, to make trouble. I know how to deal with that. There are a lot of other people here who can’t deal with it ... who don’t get up in the morning. I get up every day. It’s in the morning that you realise when somebody’s mad at you, or somebody wants to provoke you, that’s in the morning. In the morning, someone who hasn’t had his cigarette, someone who hasn’t smoked his drugs, someone who’s frustrated, who’s fucked up, who’s pissed off ... He’s looking for ... Imagine, I haven’t liked your face for a long time. I walk around in the morning. If you look into my eyes [I say]: ‘What’s wrong? What’s going on?’ And right away, the fight starts. (Nuno)

To be ‘tested’ was a recurrent thread in the narratives from Caxias and Linhó. Looking back on nine years of imprisonment, Afonso recalled: ‘They tested me, many times. You have to be determined. Thank God I was never stabbed.’ The stories of Afonso and his peers are reminiscent of Sykes’ accounts of the *Society of Captives*: ‘The inmate is acutely aware that sooner or later he will be “tested” – that someone will “push” him to see how far they can go and that he must be prepared to fight for the safety of his person and his possessions’ (1958: 77). Life in the midst of the society of inmates is subject to an ongoing negotiation of power: while it is possible to keep a low profile and stay out of most conflicts, it is not possible to withdraw from the community and live one’s own private prison life. Even in the more organised and less violent prison institutions, power has to be brokered and constantly reaffirmed as part of one’s social prison capital:

There aren’t many [conflicts in this wing of Caxias Prison]. But sometimes there are ... People are imprisoned here. There are some who like to exercise authority, who like to abuse this or that other weaker person. There are people here who are weaker, who don’t want trouble, and who give in to this power. (Cristiano).

For example, if they see that you are better off and adopt a certain posture, they will study you in order to gain power over you. Or to demonstrate that they are the ones in charge. You have to have the ability to judge these things. Because if you don’t, they’ll rally more people against you. To dominate you. To show that in the end, they are the ones in charge. That you are not the one in charge. (Henrique)

Both Cristiano and Henrique were first-time prisoners who had been sentenced to lengthy terms for robbery and homicide, respectively. Cristiano was still in the first year of his sentence, whereas Henrique had already been imprisoned for eight years. In keeping with their different personalities, they employed different tactics in dealing with the prison community: Cristiano, who described himself as a ‘sociable person’, enjoyed cultivating bonds with the majority of fellow inmates. Henrique, who in his own words was ‘a bit reserved’, preferred to keep his distance from most of the others and only to build ties with a section of the Eastern European immigrant community to which he belonged.

Yet they were both conscious of the importance of maintaining good relations with prison society as a whole, and of acting wisely when dealing with friends and foes alike. Cristiano stressed that one must be careful to ‘maintain a bit of authority’ when dealing with fellow prisoners, as ‘otherwise things will get out of hand’. Henrique, on the other hand, emphasised the need to show respect even to those inmates with whom he had little contact. As an example, he cited his practice of not meddling in other inmates’ lives:

They have never bothered me because we [the immigrant group he belonged to] are very respectful people. We are not disrespectful towards others. We don’t pry into other people’s lives. We don’t want to know about anyone’s life. It’s important that you know how to find your feet in prison. [...] You don’t need to know what someone else eats, what someone else drinks, what someone else does. That’s the best way you can get on in prison. To be able to handle any kind of situation. As far as fights are concerned. As far as problems are concerned. (Henrique)

Prisoners know that on the wings, when conflicts flare up, they can only rely on themselves and a few sympathetic fellow inmates. As elsewhere, Portuguese prisons are securely sealed off from the outside world, but they only offer limited safety for those locked inside. As Sykes put it, ‘the prison inmate can never feel safe’ (1958: 78). When things get out of control, the guards usually stand down, calling in special forces if necessary: ‘The prison guards can’t do anything’, Nuno explained. ‘If there’s a riot, a fight over food, or whatever [...] the guards have to close the [wing] gate [...]. When the gate is closed, they go behind it. They talk into the microphone until we calm down.’ Avoiding unnecessary conflicts is thus one of the first commandments of being prison-wise. Not only can simmering quarrels turn daily life in prison into a nightmare, but they can also lead to institutional sanctions and the withdrawal of privileges, such as access to television or furlough and conditional release.

Yet, as the above quotes also show, conflicts in prison cannot be avoided simply by avoiding social contact with other prisoners. Just as it is impossible to physically isolate oneself in prison, there is equally no way to exclude oneself from the incessant process of negotiating and renegotiating power relations between inmates. Indeed, what constitutes the art of living behind walls is precisely a prisoner’s ability to walk the tightrope of relating to the prison society as a whole without becoming embroiled in the squabbles arising from the precarious conditions of incarceration. The overcrowding of the Portuguese prison system mentioned earlier makes it even more difficult for inmates to withdraw. Lisbon Central and Caxias prisons, for example, were operating at 104% and 110% of their nominal capacity in 2024 (DGRSP 2024: Table 3), with the Council of Europe (CE) considering 90% to be ‘an indicator of imminent prison overcrowding’ (CE 2016: 7). In Caxias, four prisoners at a time were crammed into narrow cells equipped with bunk beds that took up almost the entire space, leaving no room for retreat and making it difficult for inmates to even walk past each other.

In such circumstances, respect, as mentioned by Henrique, is key to managing delicate inmate relations, as it is to managing relationships with prison staff (see Zoetl *forthcoming*). Respecting others and being respected are the two sides of the same coin that mediate the interactions between the involuntary cohabitants of the prison. As part of an inmate’s social capital, respect from the prison community may, as mentioned, stem from their pre-prison biography. Conversely, it can be gained by adopting attitudes and behaviours that demonstrate respect for the inmate society and its explicit or implicit norms. However, respect can also be attained through the violent subjugation of other inmates by brute physical force, in disregard of any norms or inmate ‘code’ (as in the case of Ivo, to which I will return later).

Normally, however, it is the inmate’s ability to skilfully navigate through the intricacies of the web of prison relationships that is crucial to building and maintaining respect over long years of incarceration. Ultimately, it is not by exercising force but by embracing the community’s rules that a prisoner can gain the kind of lasting respect that will allow him to emerge physically and emotionally unscathed from the prison experience. As Benjamin, who was sentenced to ten years

for robbery, recalled of his own case: ‘They saw that I’m a quiet, respectful guy. So I ended up being respected here. I got a lot of respect because I also respect the others and their problems.’

### Prison Society and the Culture of Marginality

The quest for respect is a leitmotif that resonates as strongly in prison as it does in the neighbourhoods from which the bulk of Portuguese prisoners are drawn. In many ways, it is akin to the ‘culturally defined rules of mutual respect’ identified by Bourgois as a central concern in his well-known study of a marginalised community in East Harlem (2003: 81). The striving for respect among Portuguese convicts is neither imported from the world of crime into the world of prison nor born out of the deprivations of the prison experience. Rather, it represents one of the core values of the life-world of those who grew up next door to each other in Portugal’s urban periphery and who, when they step through the prison gate, shed their tracksuits and baseball caps, but not their past or the ‘local knowledge’ (Geertz 1983) they acquired over the years by interacting with their peers and the agents of the state in the *bairro* itself.

Benjamin, though one of the very few middle-class inmates at Linhó, had grown up in a neighbourhood north of Lisbon which, as he said, was home to ‘all kinds of social classes’. Being ‘a kid with no brains’, as he put it, he teamed up with other ‘boys around me [who] were starting to do a lot of rubbish’, namely a series of robberies. At the age of 26, he committed the two violent robberies that earned him a ten-year prison sentence. Despite his coming from a different economic background, he managed to gain the respect of his fellow inmates: ‘I never had any problems with anyone here because I respect them.’ What helped him navigate the prison environment was not what he might have learnt in the world of crime, but the social skills he had acquired in his neighbourhood long before he came into conflict with the criminal justice system: ‘Maybe [it is] also because I come from a very problematic neighbourhood and I know how to deal with that mentality.’

Studies of the prison community, in their desire to make prison culture tangible by analytically categorising its inmates, tend to exoticise inmates and their behaviour. This is not to say that there are no prisoner ‘types’ such as those mentioned by Sykes, or that prison is not a place where offenders meet, network and share their experiences of the world or ‘subculture’ of crime, as Irwin and Cressey (1962) would have it. Ivo, an inmate at Linhó, for example, echoes Sykes’ description of the ‘gorilla’, that is, an ‘individual who takes what he wants from others by force’ in order to ‘soften the hurt of his material deprivation’ (Sykes 1958: 91). Sentenced to a long prison term for murder, Ivo had no family backing (his father had himself been imprisoned for attempted murder and later died; his mother had moved to southern Portugal). However, he was adept at squeezing unwilling support from fellow inmates:

I know how to help myself. Even without support [from the outside]. I see what you have. I walk over to you. Give it to me! You take your share, I’ll take mine! (Ivo)

While there is nothing wrong with categorising predatory behaviour such as that exhibited by Ivo, and grouping together what Sykes calls the ‘variety of roles played by criminals in prison’ (1958: xviii), this may add little to our understanding of how inmates engage with prison society. Thrown on his own resources in a precarious and sealed-off environment, Ivo had to make the best of what he brought with him into prison. Lacking economic capital, he had to rely on other assets: on the one hand, his physical strength and, on the other, the skills he had picked up over the course of a life that had taken him through different neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Lisbon. The street smarts he acquired there were complemented by what he learnt in children’s homes and a juvenile detention centre to which he was successively committed. All of this culminated in the prison-smartness that he skilfully applied to his advantage in Linhó.

Ivo was certainly deeply entrenched in the world of crime, having committed numerous thefts, muggings and business robberies, sometimes with the use of firearms. Even so, there was very little

he could quote in terms of the possible existence of a ‘widespread criminal code’ (Irwin & Cressey 1962: 148). In fact, the only rule he mentioned in relation to the ethics of crime was one that he had broken, which resulted in a two-year referral to a reformatory after he was identified as part of a group of youths who had robbed a female tourist: ‘[O]ne of the rules was not to touch women. [...] No stealing or anything [from them]. Never. I have a mum, I have sisters, I know how it is. You have to show some awareness: A man can defend himself, a woman can’t.’

Imprisoned in Linhó, he quickly realised that his aggressive attitude, which had been just as effective in the *bairro* as it was now with his fellow inmates (‘I never needed to be violent because I was always very aggressive’), did not pay off when it came to dealing with the guards. He therefore began to apply the rules of mutual respect that he had also learnt in the *bairro* to those who endeavoured to rule over the inmate society: ‘If someone behaves properly towards me, I can’t shout at them. I can’t turn my back on them. Today, I don’t [do that any more].’

Ivo’s versatile behavioural tactics are paradigmatic of the wide range of inmates’ responses to prison life and their situational variability. Reflecting the way in which inmates reconcile their individual qualities with the parameters they encounter in confinement, these responses are as diverse as inmates’ personalities and the social and economic capital they possess. Other scholars, such as Trammell (2009), have observed that even in the highly regulated environment of gang-dominated prisons, prison codes may be superseded by inmates’ immediate interests. California prisoners, Trammell notes, ‘value gangs and prison friends but they will not sacrifice illegal businesses [...]’. They may value racial segregation [...] but they will sell their drugs to anyone of any race’ (2009: 768).

In Portugal, presumably due to the relatively small size of correctional institutions and the absence of organised street gangs, prison gangs do not yet exist. Power in Portuguese prisons is still very much an individual affair, resulting from a combination of economic and physical force, as well as an inmate’s ‘prison smarts’, which, in turn, are related to their pre-prison experiences and their institutional careers. While there is no shortage of illegal prison economies (mainly drug dealing and a thriving mobile phone market), there are hardly any organisational structures of inmate self-governance comparable to those set up by prison gangs. Each inmate has to find their own way through the maze of the prison experience, yet inevitably interacts, in one way or another, with inmate society and staff. Though there are, of course, dos and don’ts, these are far from representing a detailed prison code ruling on matters such as ‘who uses the shower first and who sits with who’, as cited by Trammell (2009: 756).

The absence of formalised rules, however, does not mean that prisoners can do as they please. On the contrary, finding the right stance towards one’s fellow inmates is vital for surviving years and years of confinement, and is what makes prison, apart from the loss of liberty itself, an arduous ordeal that many fail to endure. It typically involves applying tactics learnt in previous situations of marginality, whether in the *bairro* or other prison-like institutional settings. As Crewe puts it, the prison’s ‘inner world is best seen as a distorted and adapted version of social life and culture outside’ (2016: 83). Perhaps more an adaptation than a distortion, street and prison cultures are interdependent and naturally interact, all the more so as the society of inmates and that of marginalised citizens living in marginalised city spaces have become increasingly indistinguishable.

In this sense, prison culture is not only an adjustment to the challenges of incarceration, but part of the wider defence mechanisms of specific segments of society against the ongoing assault on their economic and physico-emotional resilience. What is taken over from the world of offenders into the world of prisons is not a code of criminality of any kind, but tactics for dealing with marginality within and beyond the confines of legality. These tactics – though applied individually and in individually different ways – are the fruit of a collective situation that extends beyond the walls of the prison cell.

The prisoners at Caxias and Linhó clearly expressed their awareness of the simultaneously individual and collective nature of their struggle. Contrasting with, but also complementing, the testimonies of Lucas and Cristiano (who spoke of the help they had received from other inmates and the

emotional bonds they had formed during their sentence), other inmates stressed the bleakness of the ‘involuntary affinity’ they were compelled to maintain with the prison community. These inmates portrayed prison as a space of forced togetherness devoid of true amity: ‘Nobody has friends here. We are acquaintances. We have to deal [with each other] every single day. We have to look each other in the face every single day’ (Eduardo). Or, as Afonso put it, ‘Nobody here is anybody’s friend. It’s all about cigarettes, drugs and mobile phones. That’s not friendship.’

Though in Portugal, too, modern prison power works ‘to individualize prisoners’ (Crewe 2007: 273), the Portuguese inmate community is too homogeneous to be unaware of the collectivising nature of the workings of the power that has landed them behind bars. At the time of writing, inmates at Linhó had reportedly endured almost a week of water cuts, receiving a total of one and a half litres of water a day for drinking and personal hygiene.<sup>5</sup> Pacing the cell corridor with plastic bags filled with the faeces that they were not able to flush down the waterless toilets, they could hardly escape a feeling of commonality, regardless of their different characters and personal situations. Each of them struggling individually (and often against each other) with their sentence, they were nonetheless bound to experience the hardships of prison as a continuation of the hardships of the *bairro*.

While there is a continuous to-and-fro movement of young urban males from the precariat between certain neighbourhoods and prisons in Portugal as in the US, the interweaving of socio-economic and ethno-racial factors appears to be more complex. On the one hand, ethnic segregation is far more pronounced in the Portuguese *bairro* than in Portuguese prisons, as most suburban housing projects (often originating from ‘resettled’, that is, demolished, ethnic neighbourhoods) have historically been inhabited by people with similar migratory backgrounds. On the other hand, there is undoubtedly a strong ethno-racial bias in the criminal justice system as a whole, resulting in a gross over-representation of African migrants in prisons (Zoetl 2025a). There is also growing evidence of racial discrimination by the Portuguese police (Raposo *et al.* 2019).

The intricacies of the spatial and ethno-racial focus of Portuguese law enforcement require a detailed examination that goes beyond the scope of this article. Within the walls of Caxias and Linhó, ethnic tensions among prisoners were uncommon. In the absence of ethnic gangs who could demand ethnic segregation, the Portuguese prison experience seems to remind prisoners of the communal, class-based nature of their fortunes, rather than exacerbating their ethnic differences. Although group conflicts between inmates based on neighbourhood origin did exist, they usually involved inmates from *bairros* with a comparable ethnic composition. Inmates often formed cliques along ethnic lines because they already knew each other from their neighbourhoods. Prisoners belonging to small immigrant communities (such as Henrique) also tended to stick together. Generally, however, there was little hostility based on ethnicity or nationality.

What Portugal does have in common with other jurisdictions, such as the UK (Pratt *et al.* 2013: 8–9) and the US (Wacquant 2013a: 15), is the demise of the idea of reform in exchange for plain retribution. While the 1980s saw a rising interest in favouring the educational aspects of offender resocialisation, by the turn of the century Portuguese prisons witnessed the spread of a security-based approach ‘following widespread disillusionment with social reintegration’ (Roseira 2018: 110; 119). As in other countries, and increasingly so in recent decades, containment has consistently taken precedence over ideas of reintegration (Cunha 2002: 33–34). At the same time, the notion of the ‘responsible prisoner’, as mentioned by Garland (1997: 192), has never gained traction in Portugal.

Instead, punishment has essentially become an end in itself, with prison sentences being conceived as the treatment of choice for all forms of criminal intent. As a result, the main outcome of the Portuguese prison experience is simply that prisoners become accustomed to life in prison, just as they have become accustomed to living under the precarious conditions prevalent in suburban housing estates. Over time in prison, they accumulate another layer of social capital that enables them to manage their status of marginality and prepare for future sojourns in

confinement: ‘It’s been many years now’, Afonso, imprisoned since he was 17 and now 26, remarked. ‘You just have to know your way around here.’

## Notes

1. See Aebi and Cocco (2025: 37; 54; 115). Average length of imprisonment based on the total number of days spent in penal institutions.
2. The calculation is based on the arithmetic mean of the values reported in the Council of Europe’s Annual Penal Statistics for the years 2019–2023 (see <https://www.coe.int/en/web/prison/space>, accessed 12 February 2026).
3. See [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{"respondent":\["PRT"\],"violation":\["3"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{), accessed 3 September 2024.
4. All quotes originally in Portuguese have been translated by the author, and all names of interlocutors have been changed.
5. A peaceful protest by inmates against the lack of food, water and electricity was apparently suppressed by the Special Operations Response Team (GISS), according to the Portuguese Prisoner Support Association (APAR) quoted by the press. See <https://www.publico.pt/2024/12/20/sociedade/noticia/quase-500-reclusos-linho-estao-agua-desde-domingo-2116429> and <https://duaslinhas.pt/2025/01/repressao-na-cadeia-do-linho/> (accessed 26 December 2024).

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