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Book Review | Escape to Prison: Penal Tourism and the Pull of Punishment

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Michael Welch. *Escape to Prison: Penal Tourism and the Pull of Punishment*. University of California Press, 2015; 280 pp.; ISBN: 9780520286160.

Prisons and asylums are unique institutions of confinement that attract our gaze long after they are abandoned. In *Escape to Prison*, Michael Welch draws attention to ten prison museums across the world where the histories of punishment and control found in each respective culture are presented for our consumption. Welch analyzes prison museums as sites of power and authority. *Escape to Prison* is an invaluable contribution to cultural criminology because it studies each prison museum in the context of their respective cultures and provides connections between dark tourism and the history of punishment across the globe.

A number of things qualify Michael Welch to write a piece on penal tourism. One does not have to look far into his vitae to find extensive scholarship that focuses on punishment, prisons, the State, and media. His past work, guided by Durkheim and Foucault, on State power and prisons is published in several national and international journals and translated into several languages. *Escape to Prison* documents his recent visits to prison museums through manuscripts that are published in major criminology and criminal justice journals. Welch effectively connects each chapter with previous chapters, using a style that brings the readers from the historical to the present, as if they are experiencing the museum for themselves. Much like the tour itself, *Escape to Prison* ends with analysis of the gift shop at the exit. His extensive scholarship in this area and international appointments at universities (including the UK, Italy, Argentina and Australia) contribute his qualifications for publishing this piece on penal tourism.

Escape to Prison fuses literature at the intersections of cultural sociology of punishment, governance, and dark tourism. Neo-Durkheimian and Foucauldian theoretical frameworks are used to take the reader through the reconstruction of each prison's history, meanwhile comparing the power of politics and science that existed at each site. Over the course of a few years, Welch visited ten prison museums in Argentina, the United States, South Korea, South Africa, Australia, and more. He conducted case studies of each museum and published a series of articles that are brought together in this book. Fundamental to his analysis is the way the museum is organized and portrayed to enhance the effect of museum displays in storytelling—or as he calls it, “museum effects.” Welch argues that the symbolism found in each museum reiterates social values, punitive practices, and existing social order. For example, the powerful influence of religion found both presently and in the history of punishment is evident in the construction of the Argentine Penitentiary Museum. Comparatively, Hyde Park Barracks museum in New South Wales and Old Melbourne Gaol museum in Australia focus less on the role of religion and more on signs of struggle for human rights. Welch argues that the narrative found

in each museum is situated in the context of its culture where varied influences of the Church and State are found and is occasionally sanitized by the representations found in the museum.

Imagery and the reconstruction of the prison spaces, both internal and external to the prison, further narrate messages of governance and confinement. First, space is examined through insight into the architectural designs and the role of architects and city planners. *Architectural parlante*—the “speaking architecture” (p. 79)—and the significance found in physical structure to tell a story is analyzed at each prison. Welch discusses the ways the prison is situated in the community to send messages of the prison’s purpose, namely to “reinforce the prison museum’s actual sitedness from which it acquires its social authority” (p. 45). For example, Alcatraz (United States) and Robben Island (South Africa) are fixed structures; its surrounding communities are constantly in view of the prison and are reminded of its social authority. Welch says “they exude a strong phenomenological and cultural presence” (p. 46).

Welch’s study examines the role of religion and work as forms of discipline. First, Durkheimian socio-religious constructs provide insight into governing powers of religion found in the prison. Ideas of the sacred and pure reiterate the need for “society’s normative solidarity, group identification, and collective action” (p. 112). The prison itself, as well as its museum, serve to further produce thoughts concerning church and state and their place across time and place. In addition to the creation of moral purity through imprisonment (Ch. 5), economic productivity found in the history is analyzed (Ch. 6). Like religion, work has served as a way to punish and exploit the poor, such as in the Clink museum where stories are shared about inmates with unpaid debts. Work is also used as a reward for inmates—at Eastern State Penitentiary inmates were rewarded with work, both inside and outside of the prison, for good moral behavior. Work and religion are used as both concept and reality by the penitentiary to further correct the immoral, impure population within its walls.

The influence of positivism and science found in the history of prisons is also discussed. Human suffering, pain, and experimentation are found at each museum. From the instruments of torture on display at the Clink museum to the physics of hanging discussed at the Melbourne Gaol, the convicts’ suffering is rationalized through the quest for scientific knowledge (Ch. 7). Further, connections are drawn from dark tourism and cultural criminology to illustrate both entertainment and repulsion found in the histories of prisons that sanitize suffering by using the terms scientific knowledge (Ch. 7) and colonialism (Ch. 8), and excusing actions by calling them humane progression in an evolved world. Through the exhibits, tourists learn about the rise of colonial authority, forms of resistance, and alternative ideas of rehabilitation found in the prison. Welch describes the Hong Kong Correctional Services Museum’s dedication to humane treatment of offenders as a response to the historically brutal punishment of the British Empire. The cultural imagination is engaged to participate in

museum displays of science and suffering and is left with a sense of progressive reform in the prison system. Welch suggests this further legitimizes the criminal justice machine as a science.

A key weakness of Welch's book concerns race, class, and gender—scant anecdotal histories of punishment, immigration, and gender are provided. Although the inequalities of race, class, gender, and sexuality are briefly touched upon in various spots, the text would benefit from further consideration of the presence or absence of these found in prison museums today. Perhaps a future book of its own (or another edition) would provide further analysis into what is sanitized from the narratives found at each museum. Particularly, what is missing are narratives of women and children in relation to the prison system and how it relates to politics of their time. We often fail to see youth as part of this narrative, however youth have long been a part of the criminal justice system. The brief discussions spark important curiosity into specifically how curators relay narratives surrounding race, class, gender, sexuality, and age. Welch begins to intellectually contemplate this investigation as it relates to the social, political, and cultural histories found at the 10 sites, and beyond; however this would make an interesting point if further analyzed in future work.

A second weakness found in this study concerns the implications for future policy and work. During a number of the pages, Welch emphasizes the importance of history in understanding the present and future of prisons. He sees the museum as reiterating longstanding practices and beliefs that underpin the penal system; however, insight into why it matters for future policy and implication would be fascinating given his expansive study on this subject. Specifically how we see the current politics of the prison industry being relevant to the histories is examined.

Escape to Prison is an effective tool for examining the cultural power of punishment over time. Each prison tour provides an experience of power and authority that continues to govern the visitor as it once governed those it incarcerated. Prison tours from Alcatraz to the Argentine Penitentiary included in this book provide an invaluable critical contribution to the growth of cultural criminology and dark tourism literature that critiques forms of governance consumed today while examining their power to further produce legitimacy of incarceration.