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Transnational States of Punishment: Gender and Incarceration in the East and West

Topic of Research and Countries Visited

This research examines the policies and practices of the U.S. and Hungarian penal systems and their implications for women's lives. During the IREX grant period, I conducted ethnographic research in the largest Hungarian women's prison, located in the city of Kalocsa. My goal was to understand how the Hungarian prison system is organized and how its programs relay messages to female inmates about appropriate gender roles and behaviors.

Relevance and Contribution to Field

Despite the fact that incarceration rates have shot up across East/Central Europe, very few social scientists are conducting research on the post-socialist penal system. On the one hand, those scholars who do examine contemporary shifts in state punishment focus exclusively on the United States and Western Europe. On the other hand, those who study shifts in the post-socialist state tend to restrict themselves to economic or social policy. My work bridges these scholarly divides by comparing punishment regimes across different states and regions. It also adds gender to an analysis of state punishment by exploring how female criminality is interpreted and addressed by prison officials in two very different contexts.

Approach and Research Methodology

Because this project includes case studies of the policies and practices of punishment in the U.S. and Hungary, it requires a multi-layered research design. To chart the development of penal policy, I collected data on imprisonment trends, sentencing laws, and penal programs. To understand the nature of prison practices, I conducted ethnographic research in U.S. and Hungarian women's prisons. The former work was carried out from 2002-2004. The latter research began in the summer of 2004 and was completed in the summer of 2005, with the support of an IREX STG.

More specifically, in June and July of 2005, I immersed myself in the everyday life of Hungary's only maximum-security prison for women. Working through Rácsok Alapítvány (the Bars Foundation), which is the only non-profit group for incarcerated women, I attended group meetings and observed staff/inmate interactions in the prison. I also added a unique dimension to the fieldwork by holding English and creative writing classes for the inmates. These classes were a great success—particularly the creative writing classes. They allowed me to form unmediated relationships with inmates and to help them tap their imaginations. In fact, the texts the inmates produced were so impressive that I have decided to put many of them in a volume I am publishing on the stories written by U.S. female inmates. The book will be an original collection of women's narratives from prison in the East and West.

Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions
Although I am still in the process of analyzing my research, I did uncover a number of unexpected findings—some of which are specific to the Hungarian prison system and some that are more comparative in nature.

Perhaps my most surprising finding was the extent to which the Hungarian prison system has been resistant to reform. While most post-socialist state institutions have undergone massive reforms, penal institutions operate in an almost unchanged way. In fact, when walking into the prison, I frequently felt like I was traveling back in time. The prison seemed like a relic of the state socialist past: Like many socialist leaders, the warden of the prison claimed complete control over the facility, but was entirely absent from (and even clueless about) its day-to-day workings; like much of the socialist bureaucracy, the prison administration was encased in formal rules and regulations, but few administrators could keep track of, much less follow, all the official mandates; like many socialist institutions, the prison promised to provide everyone with basic necessities, but its infrastructure was plagued with chronic shortages of resources and space; and like many socialist officials, the prison staff operated under a veil of formality and discipline, but then undercut such discipline in their daily interactions of camaraderie and even friendship. It was as if the prison functioned as a microcosm of the state socialist system.

These parallels with the past also extended to the prison's orientation toward its female inmates. There were three key aspects of this orientation. First, the prison emphasized the importance of wage labor—over 85% of the inmates worked; work assignments structured the inmates' lives and formed the basis of the prison hierarchy. Second, the prison's programs targeted and treated women's social relationships—the staff continuously stressed the need for inmates to become socially integrated and took it as their job to prepare them for this. Third, the prison staff worked with a strong sense of gender difference: they insisted that women had "special" needs and problems that required "special" treatment. Among other things, this notion of women's difference led the staff to infantilize female inmates and refuse to hold them accountable for their criminality. In short, the prison's rehabilitative ideal included social integration through wage labor, social(ist) education, and gender difference.

Overall, these penal practices could not have been more different from those of the U.S. women's prison I studied. Instead of viewing rehabilitation as a way to integrate women socially, the U.S. prison was oriented toward the therapeutic construction of the "self." By positioning female inmates as "addicts" in need of a change in their individual desires, the U.S. staff effectively psychologized women's social problems. And they did so in a way that de-emphasized gender difference and stressed the need for equal treatment. In this way, both the interpretations of women's problems and the programs designed to address them differed dramatically in these two penal systems.

Future Research Agendas
Now that the comparative research complete, I have a considerable amount of analytical work to do—as I systematize my Hungarian findings and compare them to my U.S. research. To do this, I will work on at least three publications: First, to gain a better sense of why the Hungarian penal system has been so resistant to reform, I will write an article comparing its development to that of the post-socialist welfare system. This article will draw on research I conducted throughout the 1990s on the Hungarian welfare state. Second, I will write an article that compares the gender regime of U.S. and Hungarian prisons in an attempt to flesh out the factors shaping their approaches to female criminality. Finally, I will collaborate with a Hungarian writer to edit a collection of stories written by U.S. and Hungarian female inmates.

In addition to structuring my own research agenda, my findings will hopefully have implications for others working in this field. Most generally, my findings suggest that far more research needs to be done on post-socialist punishment: How do contemporary penal practices compare to those of the past? Do they really mimic the structure and focus of socialist punishment? If so, why has the penal system been able to shield itself from reform? Connected to this, to what extent are female and male inmates treated differently? Does the prison's staff discourse of difference translate into divergent penal programs and practices? Finally, much more work needs to be done to open up the U.S. prison system to international comparison: How anomalous are U.S. penal discourses and practices? Are they being transported to other national contexts? If so, how are they being received and interpreted?

Recommendations for the US Policy Community

In conducting my research, I was frequently asked to reflect on what Hungarian policymakers could learn from the U.S. case. This was always quite easy to do: the U.S. case offers stark warnings about the social costs of mass imprisonment, the dangers of using incarceration to respond to social insecurity, and the political effects of felon disenfranchisement, while also indicating how prison systems can benefit from NGO and non-profit involvement.

At the same time, there is much for U.S. policymakers to learn from the Hungarian penal system. Although the Hungarian focus on social rehabilitation may seem outdated, it encompasses key ideas for the reform of U.S. prisons. It reminds us that policymakers must strike a delicate balance between societal protection and inmate re-integration—and that, instead of allowing the former to trump the latter (as U.S. criminal justice officials often do), inmate rehabilitation should be seen as a critical form of societal protection. The approach of Hungarian prison officers also suggests that creating programs designed to improve inmates' social relationships and connections to existing institutions are crucial aspects of their reintegration. If the U.S. policymaking community opens itself up to such lessons, it may begin to see their own penal models in a new light—and perhaps even to arrive at promising alternatives to them.