# *A Closed Circle:*
# *An Ethnography of the Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto Prison, Messina*[1]

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Building upon in-depth interviews and fieldwork conducted from 2018 to 2020 in the difficult and extremely changeable urban setting of the Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto Prison (Sicily), this article discusses the operational and ethnographic limits and pitfalls that prison fieldwork entails. The discussion takes into account the difficulties and challenges in prison entry, staff resistance and the unexpected challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.
**Keywords**: Sicily, prison, asylum, ethnography, conflict.

This article builds on in-depth interviews and field research conducted from 2018 to 2020 in the Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto Prison (Sicily). I discuss the operational and ethnographic limits and pitfalls that prison works entails, drawing on my doctoral study of various relational dynamics linked to the phenomenon of education in prison (Forster and Forster 1996), as well as those related to health and the right to health, gender and emotion (Corazza Padovani 2018). I use the Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto Prison as a 'case study' to discuss the difficulties and challenges in prison entry, staff resistance and the unexpected challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic

## Research in Prison: American Studies

Case studies of institutions contribute to the holistic examination of a phenomenon, and they help to avoid the separation of components from the larger context of a situation. A case study may explore aspects of culture, society, community, subculture and group organization, or phenomena such as beliefs, practices, interaction, and any other aspect of human existence. Case studies conducted by way of participant observation attempt to describe a research problem comprehensively (Jorgensen 1989). Today, legions of new social researchers are engaged in searching for the so-called 'exotic at home' (Pardo and Prato 2010). They are aware of how it is possible to comprehend influential and influenced practices in a specific community or autobiographical setting and from a much wider context, including social, cultural and economic points of view. They engage in theoretical debate that highlights the complexity, feasibility and importance of ethnographic research in contemporary urban settings (Pardo and Prato 2012). They also propose an inductive interpretation free from general and a priori paradigms (Geertz 1973, 1988).

One of the urban areas that most refers to the idea of the exotic is, without a doubt, the prison context. Not surprisingly, during the second half of the 20th century, this limited field of investigation became a privileged destination for American sociologists, who investigated the population of these institutions in isolation, recognizing the uniqueness of real microcosms,

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societies within society (Sykes 1958, Jacobs 1977). The interest of these scholars was mainly aimed at institutional activities and the analysis of small subcultures that were influential in the prison context as well as outside. This brought some very particular mechanisms of the penitentiary world to the attention of academics and civil society. First, Clemmer (1940) was responsible for coining the term *prisonization* to describe a process of acculturation (Redfield et al. 1936) in which prisoners inevitably participate, especially if imprisoned for long periods.

This term describes the gradual process of adapting the offender to the code of honour of the prison. The degrees of adaptation are represented by the extent to which the inmate adheres to the models provided by the prison culture, it being understood that the prisonization process can increase and feed the inmate's antisociality. As an expression of the natural spirit of adaptation, this process risks favouring the self-representation of oneself as criminal, triggering the eternal mechanism of the revolving door. Furthermore, there is no lack of ethnographic studies, more specifically autobiographical. The founding father of this intellectual approach, known as Convict Criminology is John Irwin, author of in-depth studies based on participant observation in California prisons (Irwin 1970, 1980, 1985).

Convict Criminology is a new approach that aims at revealing the reality of prison life, starting from the interventions of prominent personalities considered to be political prisoners, such as Malcom X (1968) and Angela Davis (Nadelson 1972), and leading up to the development of a real methodology of investigation, applicable by anyone as long as it produces first-hand knowledge. To illustrate this point, one of the members of the Convict Criminology school attacked their predecessors with strong words: 'This is reality, and in hell — what the "experts" raised in college classrooms, degree collectors, scholarship grabbers, from their well-funded, air-conditioned offices say, far removed from the filthy reality of life of prisoners' (Rideau and Wilkberg 1992). These words justified social research based solely on observation, structured interviews and informal conversations; a formal ethnographic approach, that is, based on data from the prisons themselves and the truthfulness of the lived experience (Ross and Richards 2003) and not on the lists provided by the national institutions. It is a school of thought born of violence as a need and destined to find a solid place not only in the USA but also to be a model for the study of prison institutions all over the world. Convict Criminology is perfectly placed within the interpretative framework of today's anthropology. Prato and Pardo (2013) note that earlier social scientists were interested in studying the 'problems' of their own society and contributing to planning social intervention aimed at the solution of such problems. They point out that for these scholars, the Western metropolis was considered a breeding ground of social problems and the city was conceived as a mosaic, where each piece presented different problems (Prato and Pardo 2013).

This line of studies was soon destined to come to a halt (Prato and Pardo 2013, Pardo and Prato 2018); in fact, it has imploded, a victim of what has been called hyperincarceration (Wacquant 2009).[2] So, just when prison ethnography could have found increasingly fertile

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[2] Hyperincarceration is a term coined by the sociologist and social anthropologist Löic Wacquant to define how, since the mid-1970s, the United States has experienced a gradual replacement of the regulation of poverty through a prison-welfare continuum that has intertwined and connected the

ground, it suffered a halting blow. This was perhaps due to the privatization of prison facilities that made meeting with prisoners even more complex, creating a strong deterrent for social researchers.

### Research in Prison: European Studies

In the rest of the world, this example has been followed to some extent. Some have taken a path similar to current urban research, which, as Pardo and Prato (2012: 10) observe, follows 'the interactions between economic, political and cultural aspects' and 'contextualizes local dynamics and change in national and global historical processes (Prato 1993, 2000, 2009)' (ibid.: 10). Others have adopted an approach that examines 'the relationships between local and national processes and policies of global restructuring that fundamentally influence the local environment and people's everyday life (Spyridakis 2006, 2010)' (Pardo and Prato 2012: 10). At the turn of the 20th century, prison research entered a new phase in Europe: it was the English and French scholars who gained the most experience. They began investigating institutional activity (Combiesse 2001, Genders and Player 1995, Sparks et al. 199, Liebling 1999, King and McDermott 1990, King 2008, Foucault 1975), as well as specific symbolic and relational dynamics (Mathieu and Rostaing 1998, Rostaing 2014, La Caisne 2000) and the link to violence (Liebling 1992, Chauvenet et al. 2008, Dingley and Mollica 2007).

The Italian scene has touched on these issues. The very first approach to prison ethnography appeared at the end of the 1990s, when Emilio Santoro gained the attention of the academic committee with his work of re-editing, translating and analysing the main American texts published up to that time (1997). This first step was not sufficient to bypass the fears and difficulties of conducting research in total institutions (Goffman 1961), particularly in Italy.

These difficulties risk giving rise to prison studies whose authors have never actually confronted the prison reality, drawing instead on second-hand knowledge drawn from the official reports and documents of the Justice Ministry, national and European Observatories and varied journalistic reports. Great merit goes to the non-profit organization, *Antigone*, an association for rights and guarantees in the criminal system engaged in the collection and dissemination of information on prisons. Also noteworthy is the activity of *RistrettiOrizzonti*, a newspaper engaged in the narration of the Italian prison context which is closely linked to the national news.

Today the representation of the prison world is developing, including major voices and perspectives on the study of total institutions: their functioning, the methodological aspects of research and the storytelling of direct experiences of prison life. Proof of this is, for instance, that, in my own university department, I am not the only one dealing with prisons (Bitto 2020, 2021). Recent contributions focus on current and former prisoners (Chiappini and Baglio 2019,

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discourse, practices and categories of welfare with those of a hypertrophic and hyperactive criminal apparatus. This passage, however, did not concern all Americans; it manifested itself above all towards the poor, those who showed themselves recalcitrant to the new economic and ethno-racial order that was taking shape on the ashes of the defunct Fordist-Keynesian system and the crumbling urban ghetto.

Beccegato and Marinaro 2018), thus following at least one of the dictates of the Convict Criminology approach.

**Limitations of Prison Ethnography in Italy**

It is not easy to investigate effectively an environment closed to the public. As there are many problems to be faced, prison social research is struggling to take off. There are operational limits relating to penetrating the closed circle of total institutions, as well as intrinsic constraints to ethnographic activity, which risks to be inefficient due to restrictions and resistance by the operators and by the prisoners. Awareness of these constraints and limitations cannot completely prepare an inexperienced researcher, but is an excellent starting point for those who want to undertake this kind of study and want to circumvent these problems. Certainly, the work of Francesca Vianello, leading voice and author of important contributions on the prison environment (Vianello 2019; Vianello and Sbraccia 2010, 2016; Vianello and Degenhardt 2010) is a point of reference.

The first aspect to be analysed is the actual possibility for the researcher to enter the prison. For sociologists or anthropologists, this is hard, because their function is not recognized. So, it is more difficult for them to insert themselves into the prison environment. They often resort to using tricks based on a mutual exchange of values or engage in reciprocity, treating field alliances as a system of indebtedness (Lavanchy 2014). Thus. they end up proposing themselves as interns or volunteers, in order to collect the research material in a well-defined role. Even if it were possible to structure a shared project, the bureaucratic delays associated with accreditation would still need to be addressed. Every activity carried out in the Italian prisons must be approved not only by the prison management but must go through the national authorization process managed by the Ministry of Justice. This double authorization procedure risks extending the timing considerably.

Patience is a fundamental tool for anyone who wants to deal with prison field research; a tool necessary not only while waiting for ministerial authorization but throughout the research process. The second element of operational difficulty is the prison administration's mistrust of social research, often seen as an undue intrusion in the field rather than as a resource. In fact, the researcher is often considered as a stranger aiming to observe the activities and thereafter judge them. Naturally, for the operators in question who feel to be under scrutiny it is easier to dismiss the observer rather than understand the reasons for the research. This opens up a sort of defence of the working context of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 1997), a more or less conscious mechanism which can inhibit, slow down or block the researcher's entire activity.

The dynamics that I have just described are without a doubt the most difficult to manage. It is important to create acceptance, which is more easily accomplished with a pleasant personality than with authoritative professionalism. Once the authorizations have been obtained and the right relationship — inevitably based on compromise — is established with all the operational teams, it is time to start working, collecting data and information and engaging in observation. Even this phase, however, will be inevitably punctuated by a series of difficulties endogenous to ethnography in prison.

As Casale (2019) states, the intention to use the ethnographic method in the study of the prison is not always feasible, due to the complex variables. Ethnography presupposes immersion in the social world that one intends to study, demanding knowledge from within and measuring oneself with little obvious aspects.  It is necessary to take into account the interpretative difference within the full expression of the activity of the researcher who probably will develop difficulties in empathic identification with the object of study and a subsequent inability to remain objective. The ethnographic description therefore appears as a long process which begins before going in the field, and which should continue afterwards, to provide description of the prison reality. It is also the product of a limited interpretative practice, which attempts to reconstruct the complex network of non-explicit communication and the often contradictory meanings that affect individual prison institutions and national penitentiary contexts.

A further problem concerns the different levels of importance given to the declarations of the subjects within the penitentiary, which are strictly connected to the hierarchical role covered and socially recognized as more or less credible. These dynamics contribute to a mystification of reality, to which it is easy to succumb when one is extraneous to the analysed context and instinctively seeks interpretative support and considerations on or representations of reality from those who manage the institution. This interpretative framework can be as much the result of the naivety of a bewildered researcher faced with a plurality of dynamics to be analysed as a process conveyed from above, whereby the content of the research is manipulated by the ideas of those who have more power and decide what should be researched and what is off limits; this is a convenient hypocrisy that the researcher runs the risk of being completely unaware of. An additional form of manipulation, or rather deprivation, which the researcher is often a victim of concerns the possibility of investigating life in the penitentiary at times of greater dynamism. This is in reference to all kinds of critical situations. Except for the fortuitous presence of the researcher when a critical event takes place, the resolution of the problems and the bureaucracy underlying these events will prevent the scholar from coming into contact, at least for a short time, with those directly involved, as well as with the entire penitentiary reality. The kind request to leave the research site for a few days or the more common 'barred door' are the mechanisms usually put in place by the penitentiary institution to protect themselves from prying eyes and be able to manage the event according to their own rules. Once again, this implies a non-acceptance of the researcher's work, in this case considered in the same way as the journalist — to be kept at bay until the conflict responsible for the crisis can again be swept under the carpet. Obviously, these are just some generalizations. In fact, it is necessary to take into account the specific rules in each individual prison.

In the following pages, I will explain how I faced some of the aforementioned difficulties, how I was the victim of some operational dynamics and how I managed to circumvent some limits imposed by the prison reality.

**The Case of the Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto Prison**
This section will be dedicated to the in-depth study of the methods, mechanisms, tricks and restrictions which I had to juggle in order to comply with the obligations of my PhD research

(2018-2020). This was an ethnographic experience to be carried out in my own city, not an exotic setting; but, according to Lavanchy (2014), while the location where we work is not always geographically distant, it remains an unfamiliar setting even when we have been 'there' before. In my case, it is a place in a different context, with its own rules and provisions; it is a context where to observe how the 'machine' of the prison administration works and discover unique work and relational dynamics.

The case of the Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto Prison makes a peculiar and interesting case study for various reasons. For contemporary anthropologists, urban phenomena must be contextualized in the global system, taking into account that, as Pardo and Prato (2018: 3) observe, 'what constitutes a city and what is meant by urban are differently understood in different parts of the world'. However, they also point out that, 'While the definition of the city is varied and culturally and politically specific, urban settings are widely identified as hubs of cultural and ethnic interaction' (Pardo and Prato 2018: 3). Indeed, if cities, like districts, are elements of a complex macrocosm, such a macrocosm must be accounted for when trying to unravel what is going on at the local level (Leeds 1972, 1973, 1980). The jail is a real neighbourhood located in the heart of the city of Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto (henceforth Barcellona P. G.). The Barcellona P. G. prison has an almost secular history. It was built in 1925 under the name of 'Judicial Asylum'. It became a Psychiatric Judgement Hospital in 1976, and only in 2017 obtained the current name. Each of the listed classifications evolved over time according to institutional mandates and specific population. The Judicial Asylum was developed in Italy in the 1920s as a social need. It aimed at relieving pressure from a penal system that was at its limit, managing the system's surplus and paying attention to the health needs of offenders who had become insane during imprisonment and of those who should have been declared insane before standing trial for their crimes. It was an environment that guaranteed them medical support, but above all was intended to remove the unmanageable individuals both from prisons and from cities, to safeguard civil society. For these characteristics alone, the institute would have been of great historical interest, in the sense of Richard Fox (1977), who emphasized the relevance of including historical analysis in the locally significant global dimension.

As we have seen, my research would not have produced a real prison ethnography since the focus of my work is centred on the analysis of the historical archive. However, in spite of my interest in documents, I could not have exempted myself from interacting with those who worked in the institute, which brought out how onerous it is, in terms of commitment and patience, to operate within a closed environment.

**The first meeting — Give up!**

In the preceding section, I discussed in generic terms the difficulties which one is likely to encounter. In retrospect, I can say that during my experience at the penitentiary of Barcelona P. G. I have come across many of these difficulties.

Usually, the acceptance of a research proposal depends upon the perceived importance of the topic, and on a trade-off between possible benefits and the possible demands of having a researcher around. Broadly speaking, we may think of research which links to self-contained,

emerging areas of policy where policy divisions have not yet been able to find a place in the larger official research programme, and of narrowly defined pure research which offers further exploration of promising leads which have emerged from earlier research (King and Liebling 2008). But in the Italian context the relationship between prison institution and researcher is more complex and my access to the institute was a lucky concession that I was able to pull off only by virtue of an agreement stipulated in the previous year (2017) between the former director of the institute and my university department.[3] In the UK or the US, decision-makers want to consult policy divisions to see whether the research could have some useful pay-off, and getting access to registry offices can be surprisingly easy (Lavanchy 2014); but in Italy external operators are viewed as intruders. I experienced a long wait just to obtain a preliminary appointment; demonstrating how research is often considered as the last thing to pay attention to in the face of a new and complex settlement. In fact, in those years, the institute had not only changed direction but had also changed its entire organization. In spite of the delays and with the full support of my contacts, I managed to get that preliminary meeting about six months after starting my work. Fortunately (or unfortunately?), it was my first time in a prison, and although I only visited the spaces dedicated to staff, everything seemed excessive and extravagant. There are strange elements in all forms of ethnography because, by definition, when we are engaged in ethnographic research we are working within social and political contexts with which we are not familiar, therefore we are vulnerable (Sugden 1996). In my case, I found that there was a procedure to be followed just to access those spaces, including small waits, doors that open only after others close, questions, phone calls, and so on. It is a process that is quite easy to get used to, but the first time is terrifying; especially when passing through closed doors in a metal corridor.

During that first meeting, I was able to speak about my research goals expressing my enthusiasm for being able to begin browsing the archives; an enthusiasm that was welcomed positively but also immediately downsized by a multitude of codes and regulations. I had to wait a little longer for a ministerial authorization, to verify that the Prison had never had insurance charges towards me, and to organize my 'chaperoning'. This third element would become the worry of my entire experience at the penitentiary, a simple action through which I would experience all the resistance that the penitentiary reserves for researchers.

The historical archive was located in a detached area from the administrative offices and to reach it I had to leave the institute to re-enter it from a secondary access, then retrieve the material of interest and bring it back to the administration, where I could consult it. A rather cumbersome process but the only one really possible, considering a series of issues that the Director did not fail to bring to my attention. I was never allowed to go there alone, even just quickly to retrieve some material, a restriction that was presented to me as necessary for my own safety and that of the documentary material, which was rich in sensitive data and liable to theft. Despite these convincing reasons, over time I came to understand that the real interest of the management was to have everything under control at a time of difficult transition and management. My business could have created confusion and misunderstandings, which,

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[3] That is, the Department of Ancient and Modern Civilizations (DICAM) of the University of Messina.

according to the Director, only a strict protocol would make it possible to avoid. Furthermore, the Director requested a possible reorganization of the archival complex that I could take part in. The impression I had was that I would be giving something in return for the concession to enter that mysterious world which was kindly granted to me. On that occasion I decided to comply with every request of the Director, showing my willingness to help as long as I could start my work; after all, I had no choice.

You can do research in prison, but you really get the space and time you want only if you promote a mutual exchange of value in terms of good publicity for the institution or, as in my case, carrying out tasks beyond the competence of the employees; that is, if one does not accept the primary, instinctive invitation offered by the penitentiary institution — i.e., the invitation to desist.

**Staff Resistance — Inside Clashes**

I began my field research in May 2019. I arrived armed with my diary and the telephone number of the legal-pedagogical officer to whom I was entrusted — my contact person, my 'chaperone'. These tools were insufficient to allow me free access to the institute; every day, the process in that metal corridor took several minutes and often no one answered the phones. In fact, one of the major problems that I encountered concerned the first approach with the Penitentiary Police; at least during the early days, every time I went there, I would have to present myself, explain the reasons of my entry and wait for confirmation from the upper floors. Initially, I did not see this state of affairs as a form of obstruction; rather, I understood the motivations of those who were doing their job. After some time, the staff became less rigid, as I endeavoured to make myself more familiar to them, at least making it easier for them to recognize my face. I tried to converse with those who welcomed me, spending time at the internal bar so that I could introduce myself and chat with anyone. I tried to convey a pleasant personality and build up a sort of conviviality that I hoped would help me to attain my goal. I soon had to face the futility of this strategy, which turned out to be ineffective in overcoming my difficulties.

After a couple of months, during which my patience and acceptance were severely tested by long waits that ended only thanks to the intervention of an official who, knowing me, guaranteed for me, I requested official documentation certifying that I could access the institute, but that all my activities would be monitored and would therefore fall under the full and sole responsibility of my contact person. Although this document did nothing but confirm what was already tacitly agreed, it allowed me to overcome easily one obstacle but set up another, greater one. My efforts to gain the approval to win over penitentiary employees obtained minimal results in the health area as well with the Penitentiary Police but almost no results in the administration, among the 'educators'— the direct colleagues of my referent, that is — who did everything possible to keep me at bay. I thought that attitude was circumstantial, but I would soon discover that it was far-sighted. Sooner or later, my presence would have created a specific disturbance in the work activity. Moreover, escorting me for a few minutes a day to the archive — an ancillary practice done only as a personal favour — was an activity that no one wanted to carry out. This combination explained the distance that was being taken from me. The staff saw

me as a problem, and in a prison, both staff and prisoners have a vested interest in avoiding problems; this varies considerably from prison to prison (King and McDermott 1990) but in my case it seemed that many had become extremely skilled in doing so. I only became aware of this issue many months later. In the early days, I maintained constant telephone contact with my contact person at the institute to schedule my time there. We agreed on the schedule from day to day, but I spent many hours waiting for the right moment to go to the archive, which, however imperfect the system, worked well. My referent, who was my most valid supporter within the prison environment, made it clear that I would certainly have operational difficulties in his absence. So, I decided to be there mostly when he was.

The situation changed drastically when my contact person was forced to take time off from work for an indefinite period. It only took a month for me to find out just how true his advice was. Not knowing for how long he would be absent, I decided to continue my research activity, hoping that once I was on site I would find someone willing to support me. This was ideally a perfect plan but immediately clashed with denials and administrative issues. That month I was forced into long waits which did not always end with a positive outcome. During those days, I was often invited to go home without being able to complete my investigation; only a couple of times did I get someone to escort me to the archive and, in both cases, he was an agent perhaps adequately solicited or more simply moved to compassion by the incompleteness of my stay in the institute. This difficult phase affected my spirit of adaptation, forcing me to give up, at least temporarily. Because no one would perform duties not specifically attributed to their job, in the harshness of that environment, the absence of my referent increased the need to obtain authorization even for the most banal procedures.

In the Barcellona P. G. prison, there were complex reasons responsible for a constant state of tension between the various operational teams of the institute. Earlier, I mentioned the legal position and the upheavals that the prison had experienced in recent years. It was in this climate of change that various internal conflictual dynamics developed. Perhaps I became a scapegoat in these conflicts. The real reason for the tensions was the process of de-structuring of the entire work activity. There was no more group planning or team work activities aimed at the achievement of common objectives. Instead, there were four distinct teams that no longer responded to a single imperative, but acted according to the rules, codes and dictates of the Ministry.

The prison environment was entirely managed and organized under the authority of a single person, the Director, who modelled the statutes by responding personally to the authority of the Ministry of Justice in a rather original way. This partially removed other operators who would have worked following the Director's instructions. In the Barcellona P. G. prison context, the Director was identified as not only a problem solver but also as a real point of reference. He was admired and appreciated by all operators as well as by prisoners and patients. I interviewed several professionals who had personally experienced the statutory transition and, listening to them, I identified a common leitmotif, appreciation and nostalgia for the time under the former Director. His departure, and the restructuring inevitably generated confusion and tensions. Today the administration, the Penitentiary Police, the School and Health Care Unit coexist

within the institution. Teams must work together, but they follow different dictates. They proceed without certainty as to which dictate prevails over the others.

While waiting for this state of affairs to change, some penitentiary workers have taken other paths; some have moved to different jobs, others have chosen early retirement. Those who have stayed or have recently joined the staff have to deal with a climate of tension both between the different operating units and within the unit to which they belong. They do not necessarily take part in the underground conflict but are inevitably influenced by it in the performance of their duties. I found myself in this situation because the team put me in the most difficult situation. They withheld the support prescribed by the management; they agreed to grant me interviews and then prevented me from addressing certain issues; they paid attention to me lasciviously, also commenting on my clothing; they gave me countless appointments that were often postponed or even cancelled. Obviously, all these difficulties did not cancel out the sympathy, honesty and hospitality of most of the operators with whom I had the pleasure of sharing my days. However, these difficulties remain in my memory as a marker of my experience in that specific context and as examples of what can be encountered in similar situations.

**The Logic of Extreme Confidentiality: Criticality and the 'Off the Record'**

The last significant elements to be taken into account are the 'unspoken', the 'off the record', and all those subdued silent practices that express the reality of the logic of extreme confidentiality that is in force in prisons. Given the strict confidentiality attitude of all the officials, from the first moment, I had the feeling that in that closed system, it would be difficult to obtain information on the present activities or even on grisly past events. As King and Liebling (2008) state, there are situations where access has been denied and researchers have found themselves temporarily side-lined. Although small critical issues always arise but can be managed with immediacy and ease, things are different when more unusual events occur, especially when they attract media coverage.

Three critical events occurred during my field research; at least, three that I was aware of. The first took place right at the beginning of my fieldwork. Two restricted inmates, who were transferred to the Barcellona P. G. prison following some disagreements with other inmates, set fire to the mattresses in their cell in protest, causing the intoxication of seven officers and a nurse (Bruno 2019a). Although this was a particularly difficult event to manage, both initially and later on, it did not influence my activity. This applied also to the second incident, the attempted escape in 2019 of two prisoners and their subsequent pursuit (Editorial Board, Poliziapenitenziaria.it 2019, 2020). In this second case, it was more difficult for me to obtain information, for there was a certain reluctance in addressing the issue; I was given a summary report but most of the information was published in the newspapers. In spite of this reticence, even in this case I was lucky to be able to continue my activity quietly, including my trips to the archive. I was treated differently when the third critical event occurred, which devastated the institute and all its operators. That September (Bruno 2019b), a twenty-year-old inmate committed suicide. On that occasion, I was invited to avoid attending the prison for a short period. On my return, I found that it was impossible to discuss what had happened — the

topic had become taboo. I am convinced that during the time I spent there many more events occurred, perhaps less dramatic and not considered newsworthy. But the events that I have described, and others that were hidden, remain in an aura of mystery and extreme secrecy.

The interviews that I held in the prison revealed the personality of some individuals who had lived through the aforementioned events. It was difficult to break down the barriers and involve the participants in an open-hearted narrative about their work experience. In this regard, it will be useful to mention an episode that put me in an uncomfortable situation. I was to carry out an interview with the manager of the treatment area. As I started, I used the word 'interview', a choice that I made naively and that had unexpected results. This word generated an instinctive reluctance from the interviewee. She apologized, stating that she had thought that ours was going to be just a chat. Unwittingly, I had made alarm bells ring — prison workers seem to be naturally equipped with this defence mechanism, especially when an external agent is involved who might form a judgment or evaluation which they cannot control. In this particular circumstance, our 'chat' was postponed. Then, a ministerial authorization became necessary, and a couple of months later the interview finally took place. Bringing to mind Anne Lavanchy's fiction (2014), this awkward experience engendered a productive reflection on methodological specificities and useful insights on the challenges one encounters in doing fieldwork. The question is, how can we engage in interpersonal relationships whose primary purpose is their usefulness for our research and recognize their instrumental character while avoiding manipulation?

The unfortunate misunderstanding that I have described aside, in almost all the conversations, I noticed a reluctance caused by the use of the tape recorder. The fact that every word was recorded generated an almost natural resistance to face the hottest issues, such as the external interference on the activity of the institute's staff, or the work choices that were made due to bad management, which was attributed to third parties. Stories were told only after I uttered the proverbial phrase 'off the record' and responded to cold glances at the recorder implying that I should turn it off. The attitude originates in the logic of absolute confidentiality to which, evidently, prison workers are tacitly instructed, and which influences them even after they have been discharged from their job.

But what most of all continues to be shrouded in an aura of mystery is precisely the historical archive. Being the main object of my research, I spent time trying to gain information from those papers without ever obtaining clear answers. What I wanted to clarify mainly concerned the absence of part of the documentation. The disappearance of this documentation remained a mystery, considering certain officials' assurances that no document had been stolen or transferred, inferences about some periodic transfer of documents from that archive to another one, the ignorance of some about the existence of the archive and how this was managed. None of this information led me to know the facts, forcing me to fully re-evaluate my project and deal only with the documentation available to me. The complexity of the events relating to the transfer and dismemberment of the archival complex should be attributed to a real neglect of the great historical value of the documentation that has been protected exclusively through custody. There was a real lack of respect for the historical heritage of the

archive. Ironically, this is the legacy of the Judicial Asylum and of the way in which its inmates/patients were treated and guarded, but (almost) never cared for.

**Conclusion**

In spite of all the difficulties, contradictions and narrowness, my experience at the Barcellona P. G. prison progressed by small steps and, thanks to an infinite perseverance, with a fair success. Apart from all other factors that I have described, I am certain that the period in which my research took place was wrong, due to the limitations to which we were all subjected from March 2020. The unexpected advent of the Covid-19 global pandemic has indelibly influenced our way of conceiving relationships, education and work. For us researchers it involved a stop in our activities.

The prison reality, closed by definition, was sealed in order to protect the health of the operators and the inmates, but above all in an attempt to manage the unmanageable. The Italian prisons were real hotbeds of revolt, caused by prisoners' fear for their lives, with the consequence that more rights were denied, such as meeting family members. The Barcellona P.G. prison context, full of all the aforementioned idiosyncrasies and marred by undersized staffing, faced a plurality of difficulties and critical moments linked to intolerance, fears and increased constraints. For example, when two cellmates were diagnosed to be Covid-19 positive, the violent protest that broke out was immediately put down by the prison police (Messinaoggi.it 2020). As I have explained, my presence had never been facilitated before. Now, in such a challenging, new and difficult to interpret framework, the presence of an external subject with external purposes was unthinkable. Furthermore, even if I had wanted to take the risk of going to the institute and had been welcomed there, I would have nonetheless encountered the same difficulties as before (now, perhaps tripled) given that my contact person was not there, being engaged in remote work to protect a fragile partner. A perfect conjunction of events affecting negatively the conclusion of my work at the prison.

In conclusion, is it possible to do research in prison institutions? Given my personal experience, it would seem impossible. However, it is also true that it is not common to come across a global pandemic, just as it is not common to do fieldwork in place undermined by ongoing changes and populated by people who are reluctant to participate in social research. It is possible for the researcher to carry out a good study in Italian prisons, provided that one is aware of the limits and difficulties. According to Lavanchy (2014), successful social scientists rely on their innate capacities to weave friendly and useful relationships, which in turn reinforces the idea that 'the field' must be experimented with but cannot be learned. I believe that a commitment to do research in this difficult sector is indispensable. In Italy there is no lack of total institutions of excellence where to carry out good research. Perhaps, however, it is precisely where there is greater reticence that the work of the anthropologist should focus, with the aim to acquire knowledge and investigate an absolutely confidential system, which is often so because it is too inefficient and ineffective. Afterall, if there was not some small difficulty in doing field research, what fun would there be?

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