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No Cell for the Soul: Prison, Philosophy and Bernard Stiegler - A Short Appreciation

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Abstract: *Bernard Stiegler was a French philosopher who served 5 years in prison for a series of bank robberies committed in his youth. He died in August 2020, aged just 68, a professor celebrated in the highest ranks of continental philosophy. Stiegler subsequently published over 30 books, at the core of which is the series tellingly gathered under the title 'Time and Technics'. His essay, 'How I became a Philosopher', convinced me he, and it, should be on every prison philosophy course. In this article I outline why, as a convict criminologist, I feel an affinity with Stiegler's project.*

Keywords: *Bernard Stiegler, philosophy, prison, convict criminology*

“I wanted to play the role not of ex-convict but first of all of philosopher, discretely, out of this material, in remaining *faithful* to it but, in a sense, without citing my sources or resources.” (Bernard Stiegler, “How I became a Philosopher,” 2009, p. 33)

Before researching my book on convict criminology, I hadn't realised how many people whose names I recognised as academics or literary figures had done 'time'. Some are more well-known than others. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Wolde Soyinka, Ruth First, and Victor Serge, to name but a few, all wrote highly acclaimed books about their time inside. In my book I celebrate the political philosopher Peter Kropotkin's contributions to criminology and note the way his extraordinary analysis of prisons (Kropotkin, 1878) draws from his own experience of imprisonment in France and Russia (Earle, 2016). The political context of the imprisonment endured by these exemplars is perhaps a special case, although critical scholars of crime should be wary of any ease they find in making a distinction between crime and politics (Cohen, 1996).

Bernard Stiegler was a French philosopher who served 5 years in prison for a series of bank robberies committed in his youth. He died in August 2020, aged just 68, a professor celebrated in the highest ranks of continental philosophy. Bank robbers are an important criminological archetype featuring heavily in the public imagination, popular fiction, penal symbolism, and The Clash¹ songbook. You can't really say the same for philosophers, about whom pop songs are rarely written. Among criminologists, bank-robbers are commonly seen as the 'professionals' of the 'underworld', skilled in planning and daring-do, the craftsmen of crime. They embody the masculine codes of class resistance and refusal examined in Eric Hobsbawm's (2001) classic study, *Bandits* (see also Hobbes, 2013). Bank-robbers are romanticised in countless films and television series as heroic figures. This was the classic role taken by Victor Serge, a celebrated novelist, memoirist, and political agitator who became involved

¹ Bankrobber, by The Clash, opening lines “My daddy was a bankrobber/But he never hurt nobody/he just loved to live that way/and he loved to steal your money...”



with a group of anarchists for whom robbing banks in early 20th century France was deemed an essential part of the international class struggle sweeping Europe. Unfortunately, they were as criminally adept as they were politically sophisticated and their chosen method of advancing the class struggle was short-lived. Serge was caught in a police ambush during one of their botched bank raids. Bravely refusing to divulge the names of his comrades under threat of torture and a heavier sentence, Serge did a long stint in various French prisons which formed the basis of his non-fiction novel, *Men in Prison* (Serge 1931/1977). It is a brilliant book about both, its pithy title enclosing with three words much of what contemporary penology is about.

Stiegler, like Serge, was inspired by the prospects of insurrections in France. As a teenager in 1968 he was swept up in the revolutionary upheavals shaking various European states as their colonies in Africa and South East Asia asserted their determination to attempt their own futures rather than simply provision Europe's. Paris was brushed with revolutionary hope and Stiegler was on the barricades that sprang up across the city. As the barricades came down and the insurrection faded, Stiegler moved on to indulge his love of jazz music by running a jazz café in the south of France. His facility for improvisation and distaste for the conventions of capitalist debt management led to a series of armed bank raids designed to pay off the overdrafts accrued by the jazz café ventures. On his fourth bank raid an unrepentant Stiegler was caught and subsequently jailed. His five years in prison, from 1978 -1983, turned out to be the making of the philosopher.

A prison cell provides philosophers with plenty to think about, but their reflections are usually more hypothetical and speculative rather than based on the actual experience of imprisonment. Stiegler entered prison with ideas of his own about life and philosophy influenced by the Communist party, of which he had been a member: "I believed philosophers were necessarily on the wrong side, to the degree that they are inevitably on the side of the interpretation of the world and not of changing the state of things" (Stiegler, 2009, p. 31).² He was not prepared for the philosophical challenge that confronted him in prison. This involved an acute existential threat - the disappearance of the world and the disappearance of himself. In prison he found the abstract concerns of philosophy had become concrete:

The conditions of the constitution of the world appear in the absence of the world in particular as the impossibility of choosing – one's clothes, one's home, one friends, the use of one's time, and so on – and consequently of articulating and arranging. The world is being-toward-the-world, I then began to enter into Being and Time. (Stiegler, 2009, p. 26)

In the decommissioned society of the prison, life is what you make it since you've got the time and so little else. This is what Stiegler discovered via a sustained reading of Heidegger: "In prison I permanently and in a kind of pure way had the experience of the remains that framed me and that in the end I am". In being removed from the world, he concluded its possibilities are constituted by a transcendental ego, by a subjectivity in continual correspondence with its material surroundings. Reading Heidegger inevitably led to his "avidly reading" Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. On leaving prison in 1983, he proceeded directly to Paris and Derrida himself at the École Normale Supérieure, France's most prestigious university. Derrida was impressed enough with the ex-convict's intellect to provide work and company. Stiegler subsequently published over 30 books, at the core of which is the series tellingly gathered under the title *Time and Technics*. This substantial and influential oeuvre represents his efforts to persuade himself and his readers that philosophers were not on the wrong side of history, and that he could reconcile his materialism with his idealism. Significantly, he puts down the vigour, rigour, and vitality of his efforts, to his period of imprisonment. This attribution was itself prompted, relatively late in his career, by an invitation from Marianne Alphant in 2002 to contribute to a prestigious series of lectures at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in which phi-

² "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." Karl Marx, Thesis Eleven, Theses on Feuerbach

losophers would be invited to respond to the questions “Why and how has one become a philosopher? Why does one remain a philosopher?”. His response appears in the form of an essay ‘How I became a philosopher’ gathered in a collection published by Stanford University press in 2009. Although this collection remains all I possess of Stiegler’s work, it convinced me he, and it, should be on every prison philosophy course. Given my ignorance of such courses, it is possible that this is already the case, but I fear otherwise, so below I outline why, as a convict criminologist, I feel an affinity with Stiegler’s project.

Political philosophers like Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau who focus on everyday life and the way we find meaning and some kind of fulfilment in the routines of going-to-work, paying-the-bills, managing the day-to-day, would appreciate the significance of their removal in prison. With basic food and shelter guaranteed and provided, the dull patterns of prison life remove the (sometimes not so) gentle imperatives of day-to-day survival and replace them with empty echoes, a penal simulacra of everyday life in spaces where every surface, every wall, corner and corridor has the recognisable imprint of control and regulation. No door in prison is innocent of its function. As the French filmmaker Robert Bresson, who had himself spent time behind bars in a German prisoner-of-war camp, observes, “When you are in prison, the most important thing is the door” (Bresson, 2009, p. 28). And this because it operates as both metaphor and material reality.

On the outside of a prison, questions of who owns the spaces of life, why they vary as they do, what convolutions of their various histories have shaped them, and whose interests are best served by the spaces you inhabit, are relatively obscure, discovered perhaps by students of urban sociology or property developers. Inside prison, spatial and temporal practice is rarely so neutral, innocent, or obscure. They confront the prisoner at every turn. A prisoner studying with the Open University reported the almost unbearable realisations that accompanied their growing immersion in studying psychology and sociology:

Attitudes, roles and structures are so easy to see in here and so unchanging, and I had nothing else to think about. I spent weeks feeling as though I was behind a glass window, just watching it all. I could barely speak to people. (cited in Weinbren, 2019, p. 64)

That sense of being removed from the world and of a world revealed is unsettling, the feeling of a glass barrier a telling description of the vicissitudes of prison studying. It can be like discovering how the misting effect of one’s own breath on the glass window reveals what you can see through but not pass through. It almost rendered the student speechless, a prisoner still, on the edge of an unknown freedom.

Encountering Hobbes’ *Leviathan* or Rousseau’s *Social Contract* in the pages of a sociology textbook is one thing, but to find the ideas almost literally stalking your footsteps is another. Being introduced to Max Weber’s account of the reconstitution of the human subject under bureaucratic capitalism in ‘a shell as hard as steel’, a prisoner may recognise certain features of the ‘iron cage’ as something more than a famous metaphor. A prisoner may be more easily convinced of Weber’s (1919) suggestion that the state is not just a random political association but a “relation of men dominating men” because he (and more than 9 times out of 10 a prisoner is a man) has been thrown into the cold, calculating heart of this association – it’s ultimate concrete and situated reality.

The interminable proximity of the subjective and the objective inevitably pull a prison student of philosophy toward a style of phenomenological thinking, a kind of thinking wherein their experience amounts to something. For Stiegler it was more than a style. It was salvation. Philosophy, to Stiegler, is a forceful, loud, vocation far removed from its reputation, perhaps in England more than France, as ‘scholastic chatter’ drifting across the academic greenery of Oxford and Cambridge.

The prison paradox is that in cages better designed for animals is revealed Aristotle’s

primal human – the zoon politikon. This figure of the human, so familiar to African existential philosophy (Fanon, 1986; Gordon, 2000), is the figure who can be human only so far as they can be social. The specifically political clash between this figure and the state is explored to great effect in Susan Easton's (2018) recent book but Stiegler's project is more oblique, perhaps more continental: to explore the time of the individual – a life – and the time of the group, a kind of species-time out of which societies are fashioned and things made. Time and Technics.

Stiegler likens the situation and experience of being in prison as revealing the world to him as water might, hypothetically, be revealed to a flying-fish as it leaves the water for the air (see Kouppanou, 2013). His removal from the natural world of 'ordinary life' by his imprisonment brought aspects of life into view that would otherwise remain invisible, taken for granted. Significantly for my purposes as a convict criminologist, Stiegler refers to the 'après-coup' – a term from psychoanalysis that refers to something an individual experiences at a certain time but makes sense of only later. An experience that leaves traces that may be gathered together after the event, after a necessary elapse of time. Stiegler refers to the connection he found between his life, his work and his prison cell like this:

I thus discovered what one calls in philosophy the *phenomenological epokhe* – the suspension of the world, of the thesis of the world, that is, of the spontaneous belief in the existence of the world, which constitutes in Husserl's language the natural attitude – what I previously called ordinary life. I discovered this philosophical theory and practice by chance and by accident, long before studying it in the works of Husserl: I deduced it from the situation... (Stiegler, 2009, p. 22)

In 'How I became a Philosopher' Stiegler confesses that "up to the age of 26 I had not ever philosophised" but discovered its absolute necessity in his prison cell. It was only later, on being urged to 'reminisce' on the origins of his thinking by Alphant's initiative, that he realised what he had "effaced from memory" and the invitation allowed him to "plunge back into moments [he] had forced into the background of [his] existence". These consisted of "five years incarceration... spent in philosophical practice, in experimental phenomenology, and in passage to the limits of phenomenology...".

In phrases that recall aspects of Oscar Wilde's (1905) extraordinary meditation on the experience of imprisonment Stiegler finds that:

Deprived of an 'exterior milieu', my 'interior milieu' took on that incommensurable depth and weight sought after by mystics and ascetics... Absent, the world reigned in my cloister like 'the absence of all bouquet'.... I no longer lived in the world but rather the absence of a world (Stiegler, 2009, p. 26)

He declares that the denials of imprisonment form an "ascetism without end" but then, like Serge before him, he discovers "a victory over jail is a great victory. At certain moments you feel astonishingly free" (Serge, 1931/1977, p. 66):

One perceives with astonishment that, in that cell, one is much more free, or at least that liberty is much more accessible there, much purer, appearing then essentially as fragility, as what is intrinsically fragile, that which must be made the object of the whole of one's care. (Stiegler, 2009, pp. 20-21)

In *De Profundis*, Wilde declares from his experience of prison that "religion does not help me.... Reason does not help me..." and that finally his salvation is "the ethical evolution" of his own character: "I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me" (Wilde, 1905, cited in ArtAngel, 2016, p.111). Stiegler's evocation in *Acting Out* of vulnerability as the essence of human freedom and around which prison throws its toxic enclosure, is described as 'the virtue of prison'. In doing so he refers to a kind of triumph that many prison writers, and probably many prison non-writers, will recognise. Malcolm X (1965/2007) for example writes in his autobiography of prison giving him 'the gift of time'. In prison, he is

temporarily released from the grinding struggle to simply exist in a racist society that denies his very being as a black man, much as it constrains his means to survive, to find food and shelter (see Bakkali, 2019; Curry 2017). As a result, he takes the opportunity to educate himself in prison, so eloquently described in a section sub-titled ‘Learning to Read’ in his autobiography.

The ‘virtue of prison’ is its most seductive, dangerous and sustaining feature. The ‘gift’ to prisoners of the time to find themselves in themselves alone was the basis of the silent and separate systems and remains the fundamental principle of the penitentiary underpinning modern prisons. The ideas of individual reform and rehabilitation around which modern prisons reproduce themselves are based not on success but perpetually productive failure, as Foucault (1979) points out. It is sometimes the case that the exceptions provided by the likes of Stiegler and Malcolm X, and others, are appropriated as examples of what the prison can do, while the fate of Oscar Wilde is forgotten as an example of what they more routinely achieve (see Maguire, 2020). A facile identification with ‘the virtue of prison’ as the condition of its possibility reinforces the obstinate idea of prison as a place where a prisoner will reach into themselves so they may re-enter society reformed, rehabilitated. Prisons pivot so easily from philanthropy on the outside to misanthropy on the inside. Populations outside prison are persuaded by the exceptional philanthropy of reform and rehabilitation, populations inside encounter the neglect and abandonment of the misanthropy.

Rodriguez (2003), albeit writing under the shadow of the US carceral atrocity, cautions against a focus on the exceptional experiences of a few incarcerated intellectuals because of the unintended effect it has in deflecting attention from the experiences of the mass of prisoners. He notes the fetishization of the ‘prison intellectual’ and the celebrity literary survivor. While I support his argument for more radical counter-hegemonic prison praxis that seeks out an engagement with prisoners on terms the prison, as an ideological complex, can accommodate less comfortably, I find his argument around fetishization of particular intellectuals less convincing. I am not aware of this tendency in the UK and other parts of Europe. Indeed, the historic antipathy toward intellectuals in England, in particular, is more likely to fuel the current fetishization of ‘raw experience’ out of which is emerging a trend in policy activism toward un-theorised, apparently un-theorisable, ‘lived experience’ (Warr, 2021).

There is a poignant irony in the fact that Stiegler’s journey into philosophy from the prison cell, a place so resistant to deconstruction (see Knight & Turner, 2019) produces a philosopher so fully committed to the deconstructive method. His philosophy has little traction in the English-speaking world and outside the circuits of continental philosophy he is relatively unknown. His final book is intriguingly addressed to ‘The Lesson of Greta Thunberg’ (Stiegler, 2019). Far from being a belated attempt to widen his appeal by jumping on her bandwagon, it is a powerful appeal to her young generation, a generation he fears is to be overwhelmed by ‘the new barbarians’ of a digital technocracy. It is a bleak vision, summed up by Leonid Bilmes (2019):

The catastrophe of the digital age is that the global economy, powered by computational ‘reason’ and driven by profit, is foreclosing the horizon of independent reflection for the majority of our species, in so far as we remain unaware that our thinking is so often being constricted by lines of code intended to anticipate, and actively shape, consciousness itself.

So far, so apocalyptic (see also Kitchin & Fraser 2020; Wacjman 2015). But Stiegler is no ‘Luddite’ who simply wants to trash and smash the digital technologies increasingly shaping our world. True to his Marxist habits, he wants to change the world by knowing it better. The algorithms that generate the predictive text on your phone is not an innocent convenience, according to Stiegler, but a threat to thought itself. Think about that. Think about a government intent on increasing prison capacity and reducing university capacity. As Bilmes insists “What Stiegler hopes for most of all is to get his readers ‘to dream again’ – to become politically hope-

ful.” Perhaps that’s another lesson learned in his prison cell. Is it one we find easier to teach in prisons than universities?

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