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Michael Meranze. *Laboratories of Virtue: Punishment, Revolution, and Authority in Philadelphia, 1760-1835.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. viii + 338 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2277-7.

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Freedom and Nonfreedom in the Liberal State

The past three decades have witnessed a growing fascination on the part of scholars in England, Europe, and the United States with penology in general and with the rise of the penitentiary in particular. Naturally enough, much of the scholarly interest has focused on the reforms on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and on the public debates that accompanied them. Works by Michel Foucault, David Rothman, and Michael Ignatieff, published in the 1970s, have been particularly influential in shaping subsequent thinking about imprisonment and the rationale behind making incarceration central to the practices of punishment within modern society.[1]

The studies of Foucault, Rothman, and Ignatieff share a number of assumptions and perspectives. Each believes the historical origins of the humanitarian commitment to incarceration to be largely the by-product of Enlightenment thought; each analyzes the process through which imprisonment became the principal sanction assigned criminals; each examines how society came to link justice in punishment with the deprivation of personal freedom; and each explores why, despite heady expectations for the regenerative powers of reformative incarceration, the result invariably was institutionalized violence. The three authors also argue that the emergence of the penitentiary ideal was part of a wider strategy intent on curbing crime, poverty, and idleness, transforming the character of offenders, and enhancing the capacity of the state to intervene in the everyday life of its citizens. That is, each posits that the movement toward the penitentiary represented more than a growing humanitarianism and more than merely a response to crime. It evolved, they contend, from efforts to confront issues of authority and insubordination, order and discipline. Some of the best recent work on penology, including Adam J. Hirsch's *The Rise of the Penitentiary* (1992), has challenged the findings (and approaches) of Foucault, Rothman, and Ignatieff.[2]

Now Michael Meranze's much-anticipated *Laboratories of Virtue*, which examines the debate over punishment and authority in early Philadelphia, offers its own challenge to the work of the 1970s–and to Hirsch's efforts. Meranze draws heavily on Foucault's insights into the growing reformist preoccupation with transforming the soul or character of offenders and Foucault's perception of discipline to inform his own work. Freud's analysis of "uncanny experiences" and of the consequences of the traumatic disruption of a person's symbolic world also shapes Meranze's approach, as does Jurgen Habermas's sense of the historical evolution from private toward public spheres of debate.[3] Using these and other strategies, he traces the evolution of public policy toward criminal activity from public and largely corporal punishment to public and congregate labor, to segregative and reformative incarceration. In brief, he discovers in Philadelphia an impulse to move from coercive violence toward miscreants to spiritual engagement in an effort to transform their character. The objective increasingly was to reclaim and rehabilitate rather than to expel or to alienate offenders.

Meranze's story primarily is that of reformers outside the prison looking in, rather than of inmates looking out. His is essentially the history of a cluster of ideas, not the account of those suffering the penalties. Given this perspective, he is meticulous in his depiction of each step in the process from capital and corporal coercion to reformative incarceration, and in his examination of both the rational for, and the opposition to, each carceral experiment. The first real break from colonial (and English) practices occurred in 1786 when, at the instigation of private reformers and public officials, Pennsylvania discontinued public whipping, severely reduced the number of capital offenses, and experimented with public penal labor. Four years later, the state replaced public, congregate labor with imprisonment. In 1794 Pennsylvania virtually eliminated capital punishment, keeping the death penalty only in cases of first degree murder. That re-

mained the pattern until the third decade of the nineteenth century when solitary confinement was instituted on a broad scale and public executions were ended.

Meranze concurs with Hirsch that Jacksonian reformers were more practical-minded than Rothman concedes. Yet Meranze joins Foucault, Rothman, and Ignatieff in placing the debates over punishment–including those in the Jacksonian years–in the largest possible social and political context. In doing so, he dismisses Hirsch's arguments that political and social themes remained incidental to the reformers' focus, and that they concentrated on traditional criminological concerns. Meranze demonstrates that arguments over the most effective and humane punishment for criminals and over what specific disciplinary techniques should control them often were the very ones employed in efforts to curb poverty, delinquency, prostitution, and idleness. He emphasizes that reformers were aware of the contradictions inherent in a liberal society's seeking to create better citizens by depriving them of their liberty, and that they grappled with this fact as urgently in their efforts to reclaim prostitutes and to encourage industry in the idle as they did when focusing on penal reforms.

Meranze rejects the contention advanced by Foucault, Rothman and Ignatieff that Enlightenment ideas primarily fueled the penal reform movements and that the aims of penologists were firmly rooted in nostalgia for a more stable world. Though not wholly dismissing their argument, Meranze believes the struggle to define an appropriate penal system drew more heavily on contemporary pressures and visions for the future. He sees both private reformers and public officials striving diligently to reconcile the realities of the criminal world with their own visions of, and aspirations for, a liberal state. It was the determination of philanthropists to minimize, even eliminate, the contradictions in America's concept of an enlightened, liberal state, he maintains, that urged them toward new penal experimentations. More than other scholars of early penology, Meranze places the liberal state at the center of his story.

For Meranze the history of carceral rehabilitation in Philadelphia identifies the fundamental paradox of liberal society then and now. Reformative incarceration failed in Pennsylvania because it denied individuals their freedom and their voice, the very elements necessary to be productive citizens in a free state. Pennsylvania's penitentiary was unsuccessful for the same reason that current facilities also fail. To contront these failures, he argues, would necessitate acknowledging the very real contradictions inherent in the liberal state, including the presence of a structure of submission upon which it rests.

Although Meranze's organizational scheme permits readers closely to observe carceral strategies unfold, it results in annoying repetition. Also, his efforts to explain the motivation behind each penal experiment in Philadelphia are not always convincing. He does not ignore criminal activity, for instance, but it is never clear specifically what role crime rates (or perceived crime rates) played in the public's attitudes toward punishments–or in the particular shifts from one strategy to another. Because he is more interested in analyzing ideas than in recording behavior, he offers no sustained exploration of the connection between what was happening in the streets and in the courtrooms and what was being proposed in private drawing rooms and legislative chambers. In addition, though paradigms drawn from Foucault, Freud, and Habermas often inspire provocative insights on Meranze's part, the models at times assume a life of their own. As a result, the book's framework–and the language(s) of that framework–occasionally loom too prominently and obscure rather than edify. A nagging question arises: would the writers and readers of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century materials Meranze interprets for us have any idea what he is talking about?

These caveats aside, Meranze's work is an important contribution to the field of early penology. His is the best treatment available of the rise of the penitentiary in early Pennsylvania and a closely nuanced analysis of the changing schemes that first foreshadowed that institution, then shaped it. In arguing that liberal society is predicated on a denial of its own contradictions and inequalities, Meranze has not offered up a new idea, but he has given us a deeply researched and richly detailed historical example of that reality.

Notes [1] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977); David Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1971); and Michael Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850*(New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

[2] Adam Jay Hirsch, *The Rise of the Penitentiary: Prisons and Punishment in Early America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992). See also, for example, Pieter Spierenburg, *The Spectacle of Suffering: Executions and the Evolution of Repression from a Preindustrial Metropolis to the European Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); John Langbein, "Albion's Fatal Flaw,"

Past and Present 98 (1983): 96-120; and Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Penguin Press, 1991).

[3] Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).

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