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Understanding the Carceral Experience and the "Carceral Imaginary" in a Lockdown Situation: An Exploratory Study of Social Representations of Prison during a Health Crisis

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Abstract

Since the beginning of 2020, we have witnessed the development of a global pandemic with the sudden and worldwide spread of a new virus: COVID-19. By mid-2020, many governments across all continents had decided to impose a total lockdown on their populations to contain its propagation, limiting freedom of movement and social interactions. For people imprisoned in French carceral settings, this health crisis led to their subjection to more restrictive measures. In this paper, we argue that a sense of identification between being in lockdown and being in prison arose from this peculiar situation, and from the feeling of shared experience it created. Drawing from the French lockdown experience, this article analyses it through the concept of "carceral," in order to understand the subjective mechanisms that it underpins and grasp the social representations shaping a "carceral imaginary" (Fludernik, 2005). Conceptualizing the lockdown situation among the broader population then allows us to examine this "carceral imaginary" through individuals' representations relating to prison within this special experiential context, through an analysis of comments made on an online social network. Overall, this paper suggests that social representations and feelings relating to prison seem to have been rekindled through what we consider as an "involving" context, resulting from the current health crisis. However, it shows that above all, this shared experience perpetuates the traditional differentiation between common "lockdowners" and imprisoned people, who have to endure the "carceral reality" through an everyday constraining experience of confinement.

Introduction

At the end of 2019 in Wuhan, China, a new form of coronavirus emerged (called COVID-19), whose global propagation currently[1] has the whole world on tenterhooks. At the time of writing, in March 2020, nearly half of the world's population is locked down at home to deal with the health and pandemic crisis.[2] This lockdown situation—combined with the disease's unknown and unpredictable character, its sudden appearance and its rapid transmission—is ceaselessly producing disruptions, whether psychological, emotional, social/relational, medical, economic or institutional. This situation fills the imagination with the darkest scenarios, either hatched in the minds of people confronted with this exceptional situation, or relayed on the pages of a wide range of media.

In this context, due to prison outbreaks, the social situation and health conditions of individuals doing time seem to raise questions and provoke anxiety, because of the threat of contamination and spreading COVID-19 poses to those inside prisons as well as to the wider community.

Carceral Context: From the Risk of Contagion to the Fear of People in Prison

From a social point of view, the current situation has eroded the living conditions of people in prison, which were already complex and conducive to many incidents and tensions. In French prisons, the measures adopted to reduce the risk of propagation have led not only to early release for some to decongest the establishments, but also to restrictions on movement and the suspension of both family visits and access to outside visitors and volunteers for activities. This isolation and this total confinement are aggravating pre-existing pathologies in certain imprisoned people and increasing the risk of riots (like those

[1] This article was written during the French lockdown that took place in 2020 from March 17 to May 11; as such, the authors made the choice to preserve the present tense, taking into consideration the "involving" and reflexive context in which they themselves were placed at the time of writing.

[2] According to data collated from an AFP database on April 2, 2020, more than 3.9 billion people, or half of the world's population, were in lockdown at home to prevent the spread of the deadly COVID-19 virus at the beginning of the month.

that took place in prisons in Italy, Colombia and Guyana), and also of suicides, isolation being one of the primary risk factors when it comes to suicide in prison (Calati et al., 2018). In terms of health, the risk of contagion is particularly high in prisons, as it is in all places of confinement (Bick, 2007). Ever since they came into being, prisons have been hotbeds of transmission and propagation for all sorts of diseases, leading to high mortality among imprisoned people, to health safety problems among staff, and more broadly to dysfunction in the penal system as a whole (Moreau, 2010).

If prisons were often condemned as epicentres of infectious disease, this observation still holds true today. There is a variety of reasons for this: risk factors aggravating the disease are higher (such as old age and cardiovascular disease); contacts made necessary by overcrowding and dependence on supervisory staff who are in close proximity (making it difficult to apply social distancing measures); the premises are unhealthy and poorly ventilated; and access to health services is poor or has deteriorated (Kinner et al., 2020). Prison is therefore considered a pathogenic place that concentrates disease and allows it to spread and circulate.

Moreover, carceral institutions were conceived around the idea of separating misfits, heretics and criminals from the rest of the population through their spatial exclusion, to separate the "guilty" form the "innocent" and avoid all moral contagion (Salle, 2011). Perceived by nineteenth-century analysts as a school of vice and crime, prison was said to facilitate the learning of criminal behaviours within its walls and also contribute to spreading them outside, particularly through the media's publicizing of sentences and through an imitation phenomenon (Renneville, 1994). Through these theories, crime assumes a contagious character in the same way as diseases like the flu, rubeola or the coronavirus.

The theories previously discussed regarding prisons and fear of contagion, whether based on common sense or scientific research, reveal the inherent stigmatization of the prison institution and people who are imprisoned. Generally, prison—as an institution that is opaque and mysterious because it is impenetrable by external eyes—has long been the subject of numerous fantastical ideas. What people

say about the prison world is often impassioned and based on prejudices and clichés, usually conveyed by the media or inspired by the cultural imagination through literary or cinematic representations of prison (Fludernik, 2005). In fact, imaginative conceptions of crime, inspired by news stories that shape the resonances and logic of emotion, have an effect on representations of the "criminal" and the carceral (Chauvenet, 2009; Marsh, 2009). They favour the projection of imaginary individuals determined by natural (essentialist) characteristics and devoid of complexity, of particularities and, indeed, of qualities. They are obliterated or reduced to simple, impoverished images. Individuals involved with the justice system are in fact often seen as nothing but their acts, nothing but dangerous, monstrous and/or bestial figures. Society seems therefore to project feelings of fear and anxiety on prisons and the people inside them: "in prison you find everything that society rejects—poverty, illiteracy, deviance and mental illness" (Vanderstukken et al., 2015, p. 679). Studies on social constructions and representations of prison are unanimous: it is fear that prison and imprisoned people are most often associated with. On this subject, Chauvenet writes that "the common consciousness—grafted onto security ideologies, and intended to represent the 'deviant' or criminal as 'other'—fundamentally rests on fear, at two levels: the fear of crime and criminals, and the fear of prison" (Chauvenet, 2010, p. 43). This fear affects thought by means of division: the distance established between oneself and the "prisoner/delinquent" through the representations one constructs makes it possible to reduce the tension to which one is subjected (Faugeron, 1981). In line with this, a study by the *Direction de l'administration pénitentiaire* (2019) reveals that 96% of the French population is against abolishing prisons, although a majority of those polled recognizes the particularly difficult detention conditions (overcrowding, lack of privacy, violence). This study shows the significant contradictions among the commenters, once again illustrating the lack of knowledge about the carceral world, the imaginative conceptions built around it, and the divisions and tensions this can engender. Marsh (2009) also highlights these contradictions in his study on the British population's representations of prison: although prisons are perceived by some as "dangerous,

violent, and demeaning" institutions, they can also be likened to easy-going "holiday camps."

The study of social representations is interesting because of what these representations say about how individuals "construct" their social reality, orient themselves in it (through actions, practices, words, etc.) (Herzlich, 1969, p. 23), and share it with others (Jodelet, 2003). This construction is developed based on elements of the situation, and in interactions, and through exposure to ideas circulating in the public sphere: individuals interpret the surrounding reality in order to appropriate it according to what makes sense for them. These constructs, which have the status of "naive theories," then serve as guides for action, as a system of meaning, and as an interpretive framework for understanding the course of events and social relations (Jodelet, 2003). In other words, their symbolic function offers a framework for coding, categorizing and interpreting the world, its events and what is happening in the relationships at play within it.

Prisons, the people inside them and the stories behind their imprisonment have always elicited fascination and/or repulsion. Could the current health crisis and what it reveals have effects on the social representations and feelings associated with prison?

An Involving Context: A Common and Shared Experience

Social representations are embedded in our social life (Jodelet, 1991), giving them a contextual and environmental dimension. They can arise from a specific situation or be intensified by it. For Moscovici (1976, 1984), it is in threatening situations that social representations are constructed, and from them that they can evolve. Through the collective and individual issues it generates, this crisis has given rise to an experience shared by everyone in society—though to different degrees.

On the one hand, the health crisis favours negative emotions and feelings like anxiety, sadness, fear or disorientation, linked to the situation of uncertainty it produces. We suggest that this special situation can be treated as an "extraordinary event," which Orfali

(2005) defines as "sad" events that generate feelings of powerlessness, individual fear and mass panic (Orfali, 2005; Moscovici, 1976). The engendered emotional state could cause variation in, and potentially reinforce, judgements and social representations with regard to a situation whose common and shared character legitimizes its expression. These social representations can be constructed either in immediate reaction to the situation or based on stereotyped points of view that have already taken root.

On the other hand, this imposed lockdown is creating a common experience of confinement, which the collective unconscious will sometimes (too) easily and simply liken to incarceration (Lhuissier, 2020). Parallels between being a "prisoner" and being in lockdown at home have proliferated online, from formerly incarcerated people being asked to give advice on how to deal with quarantine[3] to Ellen DeGeneres joking about being imprisoned in her mansion.[4] Our house—that once-protective home, a refuge from the outside world and a special place of privacy (Serfaty-Garzon, 2003)—becomes an imposed place, a prison whose gate can only be crossed on rare occasions. This phenomenon could give rise to a feeling of identification with all other experiences of confinement, something that could potentially intensify solidarities just as much as it could contribute to reinforcing the feeling of rejection towards a different population.

Moreover, by limiting interactions with others in the physical world, the imposed lockdown contributes to extending these interactions into digital and virtual worlds, in a spirit of "social compensation": social interactions and reassurance are all the more needed when "extraordinary social media events generating large-scale collective emotions" occur (Courbet et al., 2015). While going through these negative emotional experiences, the social network in which the individual is embedded actively affects not only the production of the

[3] See, for example, "Coronavirus: How to deal with months of quarantine, according to a former inmate turned prison consultant." Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/coronavirus-quarantine-tips-advice-isolation-prison-jail-mental-health-boredom-work-a9415336.html

[4] "Quarantine like jail joke brings fierce backlash for Ellen DeGeneres." Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-ellen-idUSKCN21Q342

meaning of the experienced event, but also how it is understood and the feelings it generates (Bruchon-Schweitzer, 2014). Social networks thus play a role in regulating individual and collective emotions after these sorts of events. This could explain the intensification of the use of social networks during the lockdown: some social media have reported an increase in use of over 60%.

The special situation created by the health crisis led us to consider the emergence of what we designate as an "involving" context: by fostering an emotional and social restlessness, as well as creating a shared experience and a feeling of identification, it encourages stances, judgements and reactions on subjects that affect or disturb us. Therefore, we aim to shed light on social reactions and representations relating to prison revealed by the collective lockdown experience during this time of pandemic crisis.

Conceptual and Analytical Framework

The "Carceral" as an Analytical Tool

To explore the various elements of experience entailed by the situation in which the population finds itself, our paper apprehends the nature of the lockdown experience through the "carceral" concept, in order to understand the subjective mechanisms and dimensions that it underpins, and to be able to grasp the social representations it models. This concept has recently been the subject of revived interest within carceral geography, a relatively new field of research that, among other things, explores the geographic distribution of places of incarceration, the nature and architecture of carceral spaces, as well as incarceration practices. In a 2017 article, Moran et al. offer an etymological analysis of the concept "carceral," enabling its contours to be clarified. "Carceral" originates in the term *carcer*, designating the ancient prison of Rome, the *Carcer Tullianum*, which seems to have established this notion as a synonym of prison. However, carceral geography frees itself from this restricted and rigid approach, to designate it thus: "something more than merely the spaces in which individuals are confined—rather, the 'carceral' is a social and psychological construction of relevance both within and outside of carceral spaces" (Moran, 2015, p. 87).

Consequently, the notion of carceral is no longer exclusive to prisons, but serves a comprehensive view of confinement and loss of autonomy beyond prison walls.

In this article, the notion of carceral is used as an analytical tool that can help us frame and discuss the experiences and representations addressed. This conceptual entryway enables us to question the extramural carceral experience and the effect it can have on the "carceral imaginary," which we treat as the result of prison representations constructed on the basis of cultural preconceptions about the experience of confinement (Fludernik, 2005).

To that end, our paper offers a two-level analysis. The first level will examine the shared, common experience of confinement in a time of health crisis through the concept of carceral as defined by Moran et al. (2017), who single out three conditions whose product enables the carceral to be characterized: detriment, intention, and spatiality.

1- The first criterion corresponds to the constraining experience as lived by those who suffer it. It encompasses the psychological, physical or emotional suffering that follow from the situation in which the individual is placed.

2- The second criterion is on the side of structures or organizations that have the intention of causing damage, by imposing a form of confinement. This condition of intentionality implies the existence of an external agent that, through the power it exerts, initiates the constraining experience.

3- The third criterion implies that the carceral is fully achieved in spatiality. It is within or through space that the restrictive intention is realized and the forced experience is lived, challenged and resisted. For Moran et al. (2017), this "carceral spatiality" is characterized by what they call a "technology of confinement": those who are shut away are intentionally—and to their detriment—kept inside, while the outside cannot get in.

Examining the lockdown experience of the general population through these three criteria will enable us to consider the possibility of an extension of the carceral beyond the prison walls.

The second level of analysis examines the carceral imaginary through individuals' opinions, feelings and representations relating to prison within this special experiential context. To this end, we will look at two articles published by the newspaper *Le Monde* on its Facebook page, and at the comments it received. This page has over four million subscribers, making this one of the most present and most read newspapers on Facebook. Every day, it posts the essential news in the form of articles, to which internet users can react though likes and comments. These comments are posted primarily by Facebook users, who are not necessarily subscribers or readers of *Le Monde*. Each "shared" article can be commented upon by internet users regardless of whether they adhere to the relatively progressive values espoused by the newspaper, leading to significant heterogeneity in the points of view in the comments section.

Methods

To understand a social process in its operating context, we chose to use as a data source comments posted under the first two articles that *Le Monde* published about our topic of interest, with a view to giving an exploratory scope to our research. The first article concerns "the risk of carnage" in prisons due to the epidemic: it focuses on the families of incarcerated individuals, who are concerned about the health of their incarcerated loved ones in the event of major outbreaks of COVID-19 in prisons. This fear is shared by people in prison themselves, who believe they are insufficiently protected (article 1).[5] The second article covers the decarceration strategy to keep the virus at bay in prisons. In France, 60% of incarcerated persons live in shared cells, and this led legal authorities and the government to take

[5] Laemle, B. (2020). 'Ça risque d'être une hécatombe', la grande crainte d'une épidémie de Covid-19 en prison. *Le Monde*, March 27. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2020/03/27/ca-risque-d-etre-une-hecatombe-la-grande-crainte-d-une-epidemie-de-covid-19-en-prison_6034707_1653578.html

unprecedented action in the face of the pandemic risk (article 2).[6] Among the articles posted on the theme of prison during the lockdown, these are the two that provoked the most "reactions": 272 likes, 205 comments and 72 shares for one of them, and 345 likes, 417 comments and 64 shares for the other.

Because it enables different communities of internet users to express themselves freely and more easily, Facebook is a good tool for tracking, observing and analyzing what is being said on a very specific subject, displaying comments that are entirely and undisguisedly subjective. Social media can be considered "the largest, richest and most dynamic evidence base of human behaviour" (Batrinca & Treleaven, 2015) and can therefore represent a new way to access and understand social representations. It is an online socialization space enabling everyone to meet and interact, debate, demand and challenge, especially through the use of the comments section. During the period of passivity resulting from the lockdown measures, the possibility of writing and interacting by posting comments enables people to "take back control," to play an active role by stating an opinion or defending a position.

To draw avenues to explore, we used a qualitative discourse analysis approach appropriate for the study of texts (Gill, 2006) to understand underlying public representations of prison and incarcerated people, while taking into consideration the specific context in which they emerge. This approach allows us to go beyond the texts to understand the use, meaning and significance of the words employed and perceive the statements they make as both constructive and constructed.

Three stages structured the manual analyses conducted. The first stage consisted of creating a database: the information was extracted from the social network to form a corpus made up of all of the comments on the two articles (without replies). The second stage consisted of cleaning and trimming this data. We only retained comments containing either an opinion or meaningful information

[6] Jacquin, J.B. (2020). Face au coronavirus, la France réduit le nombre de personnes en prison. *Le Monde*, March 20. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/03/20/face-au-coronavirus-la-france-reduit-le-nombre-de-personnes-en-prison_6033755_3224.html

linked to the subject of the two articles. We ended up analyzing 113 comments on the two articles from *Le Monde*. The third stage consisted of analyzing this structured data in the context of the specific problem that interests us. To that end, we conducted a thematic analysis, classifying the comments by theme and sub-theme based on finding keywords and determining their centrality, as well as identifying the emotional valence of the information (positive, negative, neutral). A semantic analysis enabled us to give special attention to the words used to speak about imprisoned people and prisons, conveying meanings and opinions. Each identified theme thus forms a homogeneous set of words conveying the same meaning and the same emotional valence. Even if short, incisive social media comments—like the ones we collected—do not reflect the complexity and contradictions in individuals' representations, this research strategy is based on the belief that statements found in text play a role in creating and reinforcing these representations (Van Dijk, 2001).

However, it should be noted that the lack of socio-demographic data on the internet users who posted these comments constitutes a significant limitation in the analysis of their social representations. Even though *Le Monde* is a daily paper whose readers are primarily senior professionals, or from high-revenue households (Dupont, 2004), the profile of internet users expressing their opinion on the news (by publishing it or commenting on it) is more diverse on social media. According to Le Caroff (2018), individuals' relationship to social media, their social profile and the intensity of their relationship with politics all influence the mapping of the news links they share, and their means of expression.

Results

1- Being Locked Down at Home: A Carceral Experience?

The health crisis has placed a large proportion of the world population under an imposed lockdown at home. The vocabulary used to describe the situation is evocative: there is talk of lockdown, coercive confinement, reclusion, restricted freedom to come and go, or the monitoring of movement. The experiential framework created by these circumstances mobilizes notions that are traditionally

connected with the penitentiary field, but can designate other situations of constrained confinement and autonomy loss.

Confinement at Home: A Painful Experience?

As previously mentioned, the lockdown situation in which society finds itself acts in several ways, on both individual and collective levels. The crisis situation in itself inevitably produces suffering and fear: fear of the disease, fear of contamination, fear of an uncertain future, fear of the loss of loved ones and fear of death. These fears are shut away inside homes and amplified by the hermeticity of the walls containing people. Based on a meta-analysis of the psychological impacts of quarantine, Brooks et al. (2020) identify various effects of being locked down that are substantial and potentially long-lasting: confusion, anger, boredom, frustration, fear of contamination and even post-traumatic stress. For some of us, whose dwellings do not represent protective bubbles, a restrictive lockdown is synonymous with an increased loss of security, involving the impossibility of reaching temporary outdoor refuge.[7] Cut off from the presence of our loved ones, deprived of our social links, restricted in our mobility and in our freedom to come and go, forced to stay within the four walls of our homes, it is possible to think that this lockdown experience will leave individual and collective after-effects in its wake.

The Underlying Mechanisms of a Constraining Experience

The physical and social isolation to which we find ourselves subjected is the result of an intentional decision taken by our governments, motivated by the health emergency. In France, as in many other countries, the state saw the lockdown as an inescapable means of managing the ongoing pandemic crisis. The measure would consequently seem to stem from a "lesser evil" strategy, justified by reasons of public health: we all go along with the lockdown "game" by agreeing to temporarily sacrifice our freedom to come and go, in order to protect ourselves and our loved ones for the common good.

[7] Since the beginning of the lockdown, many press articles have reported on the fear of a surge in domestic violence.

Despite being mandatory, the lockdown measure[8] is not completely restrictive. Breaches take place and outings are allowed for work, to buy food or to exercise—although these are limited temporally (one 1-hour outing per day is allowed) and spatially (within one kilometre of one's home), as well as conditional to providing an exemption certificate. Margins for manoeuvre exist and it is sometimes even possible to play with the legal framework, with no regard for the prescribed regulations; for example, breaking the time and space rules by gathering as a group. However, this measure reveals latent coercive intentions, found in the management of the lockdown and the behavioural expectations that follow from it. Thus, mandatory isolation implies the punishment of any unauthorized outing, put into effect through the implementation of social control and coercion strategies as well as increased surveillance of behaviour that contravenes the regulations. The war-like rhetoric[9] used by French president Emmanuel Macron at the beginning of the crisis and the fear it was designed to spread, provide an apparent justification for the perpetuation of a repressive logic favouring a penal—indeed carceral[10]—response to violations of the imposed lockdown, whose unclear announcements and changing exemption certificates[11] become tools. As Foucault (1975) points out, disciplinary mechanisms infiltrate more easily when a fear of contagion exists.

The inevitable corollary of imposed isolation in a set place and of the monitoring of movements outside of these enclosed spaces is the societal dividing-up of the population. We find ourselves distributed across national territories according to our social class, without any of the mixing that was made possible—even if temporarily and illusorily—by circulatory movements and everyday displacements. It

[8] This paper addresses the lockdown measure imposed in France in March 2020, through Emergency Law no. 2020-290. Since then, other measures have been taken, assuming various forms.

[9] In his address to the French people on March 16, 2020, announcing the beginning of the lockdown, Emmanuel Macron repeated the phrase "we are at war" six times: https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/03/16/adresse-aux-francais-covid19.

[10] Emergency Law no. 2020-290, passed on March 23, 2020, to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, stipulates up to 6 months in prison and a fine of 3,750 euros in the case of a repeat violation of the lockdown measures.

[11] Since the beginning of the crisis, exemption forms allowing to leave temporarily home have multiplied, constantly replaced by new forms or added to ones preexisting.

is therefore not so much the imposition of a lockdown that characterizes the damaging “intention” criterion in this case, but rather what it allows and legitimizes.

A Spatial Experience that Disrupts Ways of Dwelling

In order to participate in the common effort to contain the epidemic, people in the community find themselves relegated to their homes and kept off the streets, which are under police supervision. In the case of a mandatory lockdown, one’s home—normally a place of everyday-life expression, identity construction and family structuring—also becomes an office, school or gym, necessitating the implementation of new ways of inhabiting. The carcerality of domestic space during a health crisis is characterized by the sudden hermeticity of the home’s walls; venturing outside of these walls is now synonymous with prohibition and punishment. The home’s various thresholds—boundaries protecting the inside of the dwelling from external contamination—are those that envelope and contain. The walls become uncrossable barriers: the door becomes the object that encloses without any possible way out, while the windows become openings onto a freedom of movement normally taken for granted and now restricted. Self-isolation possibilities are reduced when the home is shared, the everyday practices of the space are disrupted, and the meanings attributed to each room are blurred. Spatial analysis of carcerality is also inseparable from a certain form of temporality that animates the space in which we live. Through the mechanisms it establishes, the carceral changes our perception of time and its passing: the alteration of reassuring set routines, the integration of new obligations in terms of family, school or work, the development of strategies to help pass the time and escape boredom and solitude, and uncertainty about the near future (for instance, the end of the lockdown, or returning to work).

The carceral experience as lived and perceived within the designated lockdown location necessarily varies from one home to another, depending on the number of people who live there, the nature of their social relations, the degree of crowding, the level of privacy possible, the thickness of the walls, the layout and separation of its rooms, and access to private gardens or outdoor space. It also varies because of

the partitioning of the locked-down population. As Foucault (1975) suggests, this reinforces social inequalities and perpetuates class divisions. The experience of a lockdown at home is obviously very different depending on whether it is undergone in a spacious country dwelling, a city house with a small garden, or an apartment with or without a balcony—not to mention individuals with no home of their own, or people who are incarcerated and thus doubly confined. We are therefore locked down in an egalitarian way, but we are not equal in the face of the lockdown.

Thus, some people can experience the lockdown as something distressing and constraining. Analyzed from the perspective of its carceral nature, there is an assumption that a subjective process of comparison or identification can be established between situations and environments. If some people either consciously or unconsciously perceive the lockdown as a "carceral reality," then within that situation, how do they express themselves on the subject of prisons and the living conditions inside them? To what reactions and representations does this shared experience give rise when the question of prisons and the fate of incarcerated people is broached in the media?

2- "Carceral Imaginary": Social Representations of Prison and Imprisoned People among Locked-down Internet Users

The topics of the release of some incarcerated people and the possibility of carnage in prisons provoked strong reactions and debates from internet users. Though brief, their comments always convey opinions, demands or support that are unequivocal, but also often without nuance. Several types of reaction were identified, covering various themes: the virus *and* the "convict"/the crime/the victim; prison staff; detention and lockdown conditions; "prisoners" and people at risk of exposure; and the permissiveness of the justice system and the government. These themes will be discussed through four prominent points picked out from these reactions.

Comparisons and the Scale of Merits

A large majority of the comments draw comparisons between environments (prison, care homes, street, hospitals) or people (convicts, victims, elderly people, the homeless, care workers, prison guards). In this context, a hierarchy is established according to subjective criteria of misery and distress, between "those who deserve versus those who do not deserve" (to be spared or affected by the virus), "those with a right to complain versus those who do not" or "what is worrying and deserves attention versus what is not." Within this classification and this conception of justice, incarcerated people are always at the bottom of the scale of merit: "[Prisoners!] *Not exactly the population's problem at the moment." "All they had to do was not act stupid, they have what they deserve… and what about the victims, do we pity them?" "All the better, there will be less of them. Old people in care homes are worse off." "Give priority to care homes!!!" "Our elders have been completely abandoned, we don't protect them, we leave them to die without care, without contact with families. Do you prefer a convict to your grandfather?" "Awww 1614 are sleeping on a mattress on the floor… go tell that to the homeless people in the area… if they're in prison, they should be happy to have a roof over their heads!" "And a lot of homeless people sleep without mattresses, yet they're not criminals." "No one's crying for them! Our care workers are risking more than they are for a good cause!" "No respect for victims."*

In this context, the criterion of merit gets mixed with that of discrimination: people in prison "have no right" to the same treatment and consideration given to the homeless, the elderly, or care workers, because of their situation, for which they alone are said to be responsible. One can assume that talk by politicians and the media about care workers' roles as "heroes" (earning them first place on the scale of merit), contributes to these social constructions regarding merit. Security staff are also on the upper rungs of the scale of merit, where one finds those who "sacrifice themselves to save us" from contamination, whether viral or criminal. From this perspective (and still from that of denigration towards incarcerated people), a few people stated their support for prison staff: *"I support prison guards. Not prisoners"* (comment 31, article 1); *"Like everyone, guards*

should have protection… But releasing prisoners and listening to their moaning when their [victims] are scarred for life, no" (comment 64, article 1); *"If they're inside they'll have to manage, personally I'm only thinking of the guards who have no choice"* (comment 104, article 2).

These social constructions based on merit are in turn used to justify inequalities and differences in treatment, and they contribute a bit more to the process of social division mentioned above. Furthermore, in this pandemic situation, incarcerated people could be the first ones "sacrificed." Several comments mention Darwin's theory of natural selection: *"If we can get down to 61,000 through natural selection, all the better"* (comment 10, article 1); *"I don't call that carnage. But natural selection"* (comment 45, article 1). Based on the principle of a "social" interpretation of this theory ("social Darwinism"), one applies to society the natural law of selection of the socially "less adapted." It is interesting to note that here, the category of "prisoners" is treated as almost homogeneous, represented by "big crimes": "murderers," "rapists" and "pedophiles." With the aim of shifting thoughts and emotions, the media in particular contributes to this general, stereotyped construction of the criminal, fixated on that emblematic figure of the (child) rapist and murderer. The projection of this imaginative category is then used to justify forms of discrimination, stigmatization and hatred towards sexual offenders (at the very bottom of the scale of merit). These representations, which testify to a lack of knowledge about the prison population, increase the harshness of the statements: the hatred is proportional to the perceived seriousness of the crimes committed (a generalized, imagined seriousness).

The Virus as a Tool of Vengeance

The negative image suffered by prisons is found in most of the comments, referenced with considerable aggression, and sometimes with hate. The expression of these feelings is found in the function that internet users ascribe to the virus in prisons; in the ways in which they designate imprisoned people; and in their fantastical representations of detention conditions.

In the carceral context, the virus is mostly associated with functions of punishment and vengeance. The virus "compensates for" or "avenges" the social damage caused by the infractions committed by imprisoned people, by giving them disease, suffering or death in addition to their sentence. These ideas are expressed through variations on *"all the better"* or *"if they're in prison, it's because they were asking for it,"* and they go as far as updating and reconsidering the death penalty: *"a nice, searing pandemic in every prison would be a good thing"* (comment 113, article 2). In this case, some commenters justify and express themselves without restraint: *"Hatred and words are the only outlet people can have in the face of this mess. The laxness of the justice system, light sentences, reduced sentences and the comfort of prison are extremely frustrating for victims and the families of victims. So let us have our hatred, it's the only thing we have left against those social misfits"* (comment 61, article 1).

In the comments, the different ways of designating imprisoned individuals also reflect hateful views and very harsh stances: "those crooks," "those social misfits," "child killers," "sub-citizens," "pampered criminals," and "thieves and rapists of freedom." These attacks against their identity reinforce the depersonalization and dehumanization that certain authors like Goffman (1961) evoke to describe what the carceral experience can engender. They also reinforce the division between oneself and the deviant: the latter is considered "other," separated from the "I" and the "we" by an unbridgeable gap. The defensiveness or harshness of these comments can conceal feelings of insecurity and frustration linked to this unsettling and excluding present situation. In order to free themselves from their own fears (and cause fear in turn?), and in order to restore or protect a self-image weakened by this situation, commenters resort to brutality and to the casting of negative projections of hatred and death onto the figure of the "prisoner." These projections enable commenters to separate themselves from that wholly "bad" other person, while preserving a fantastical image of themselves as totally "good." Chauvenet (2010) evokes that "radical alterity," taking a sociological perspective in reference to the division of groups. In her view, "the alterity of those 'others' arises from the social division that

underlies Western societies, and it contributes to legitimising this division" (Chauvenet, 2010, p. 136). Thus, although some see the current situation as increasing the "brutality of small inequalities,"[12] and as dividing our society all the more, one might wonder if this opposition or alterity of which Chauvenet speaks is not also currently asserting itself even more forcefully.

The "Prisoner" as Virus

Internet users view these people as a "threat" because of the possibility that they could be "released," as the newspaper announced. In this context, the permissiveness of the government is condemned and criticized, and the justice system is accused of not fulfilling its function of protecting society. Fear again takes a central place here, supported by fantastical projections. According to the people expressing their views on this subject, if imprisoned individuals are released, society will be in danger, because the people being released are dangerous recidivists (*"They're set free… and once they're out they'll resume their misdeeds…"* [comment 82, article 2]), and because they will not obey the lockdown and might therefore transmit the virus (*"It's good they're in prison, they don't pose any risk, you're going to set them free in nature, and you believe they'll stay locked down at home… Don't tell me you believe that…*" [comment 98, article 2]). The "prisoner" is considered a dual threat: a criminal threat and a health threat. In this context, the sphere of disease gets mixed up with that of deviance: prison is then defined as "a containment tool against contagion" (Salle, 2011)— of both crime and the virus. The "prisoner" is reduced to the status of "virus propagator," even seeming to personify the virus: "prisoner" and virus form a single "one," in order to present an even greater threat.

In this context, to justify the idea that people "must" stay in prison and away from society, commenters put forward stereotyped, provocative rationales based on fantastical representations on detention conditions. Several people believe that those who have been convicted are safer in detention than outside ("*They're more*

[12] See, for example, the opinion piece in *Le Monde* by sociologist François Dubet (March 25, 2020), Coronavirus : Le confinement accroît la violence des "petites inégalités."

sheltered than everyone, and get their bed, board and laundry done for them, and have TV…" [comment 21, article 1]; *"They're already locked down, aren't they? So I don't see where the problem lies"* [comment 32, article 1]). Others, presenting confinement as the only constraint linked to incarceration, liken the lockdown conditions experienced by the population to the detention conditions experienced by convicts. The idea of a kind of equality of situation is advanced to legitimise this view: *"Being locked down in prison and being locked down in an apartment are the same"* (comment 62, article 2); *"Why are they being released, when we're locked up too. If they stay in their prison they're better off"* (comment 64, article 2). Based on this principle, releasing individuals for health reasons is perceived as an injustice: *"While innocent people are being locked down, criminals are being released"* (comment 82, article 2). The constraints linked to incarceration and the problems that follow from it are sometimes broached, but their impact on people is negated, being unimportant or invisible to the commenters: *"Very surprised, if they stay in their cells, without visitors, and if the guards have masks and gloves, how can there be propagation?"* (comment 24, article 1). The opinions expressed are thus focused on crime, on the virus, or on the relationship between the two, without ever being contextualized: overpopulation, the number of individuals who are able to exercise, the impossibility of distancing between incarcerated people and guards, the closing of visiting rooms and suspension of all activities, and the tension and suffering that result from this dual punishment are never mentioned.

From Opposition to Understanding

Although various forms of rejection/repulsion were identified in the majority of comments, it is important to highlight that other internet users expressed views that opposed and contradicted the ideas mentioned above. Although they represent a minority, these comments should not be neglected, because they broaden the meaning and diversity of the analyzed representations by placing some of them at the opposite end of a spectrum, while staying within the same experiential framework. Two main angles stand out. The first, which mobilizes the most people, involves indignation and the denunciation of provocative and hateful comments: *"Punishment and*

detention are only the deprivation of liberty, and certainly not disease and a lack of hygiene. I mean really, during this lockdown, people are sending their neurons packing" (comment 12, article 1); *"Unbelievable that people can think like that!!! What hatred!!! I think those people believe themselves to be 'untouchable'"* (comment 13, article 1); *"Your comments are enough to make me cry... crass nastiness, people who've lost their humanity in the face of a virus, as long as they haven't had it themselves. I'm ashamed to see the extent to which these right-thinking people, doling out lessons, are prepared to encourage so much hatred"* (comment 21, article 1). It is interesting to note that it is these commenters themselves who make the link between the expression of hatred towards imprisoned people and the current situation: they say that the lockdown has a negative effect on some people's reasoning abilities, and that the virus causes them to "lose all humanity." The second angle more specifically concerns the social representation of prisons and the people inside them, and it is manifested through an apparently more humanistic and empathetic attitude. Through this representation, internet users seek to reposition "prisoners" as "human beings" (or at least some of them) and to present a more realistic view of detention conditions: *"There aren't just murderers and child killers in there, they're humans above all"* (comment 67, article 1); *"You can't stand being in an apartment for a half-day with Netflix and a computer, but you explain that two people in 9m² is Club Med"* (comment 11, article 2); *"Inhuman! When a person is locked up, it has to be in a hygienic context with a minimum of space… Even after 15 days with all the comfort most of us have, we're already getting a little glimpse of what it means to be locked up. Imagine the people in prison"* (comment 44, article 1). Whereas from the first angle, internet users mainly criticize "hatred" and the harshness of the opinions generated by those articles, in this second group, the people are more outraged by the lack of empathy on the part of the majority of commenters. The function of these comments seems to be twofold: to "repair" the harm (caused by other internet users, through their comments) but also to create, or pursue, the solidarity advocated, encouraged and valorized in the current situation.

Discussion

The experience of the crisis, and the lockdown that has resulted from it, favour a climate of fear and tension that gives rise to various feelings and social representations that are spreading, particularly through Facebook. By removing certain barriers or filters thanks to the security one feels behind a screen, Facebook enables a wide and varied population to express themselves and broadcast their reactions without self-restraint. The analyzed comments present a dichotomous vision of incarcerated people, between rejection and empathy, with the former predominating. The ability to view "prisoners" as "other" (and not as people) acts as an obstacle to empathy and understanding, and it contributes to considering them mediums of contagion. Conversely, in statements evincing greater empathy, one perceives a tendency to speak of "prisoners" as fully fledged "people," conveying a more humanistic approach.

The results of this exploratory research thus seem to confirm traditional representations of incarcerated people as outcasts and morally inferior individuals. In this sense, our results are similar to those of Orfali (2005), who analyzes "extraordinary events" by applying social representation theories: the pandemic context has not only led people to express opinions, but it has also revived dormant, previously constructed stereotypes, which were updated in response to the special situation.

However, it is interesting to note that the shared carceral nature of the experiential framework could lead to a form of identification between the situation of someone who is locked down and that of imprisoned people. In social representations of individuals, the carceral imaginary replaces carceral reality, and is here projected into a situation perceived as confining and constraining (Fludernik, 2005), in a sense justifying an identification between incarceration and the general population's lockdown experience. This process could play a role in reinforcing pre-existing social representations and legitimizing beliefs that oscillate between rejection and empathy, translating into extreme oppositions, paradoxical feelings and very radical opinions on the prison world.

On the one hand, this identification makes it possible to distance and differentiate oneself from individuals with whom the carceral experience is shared, but who are themselves responsible for their situation. In this context, it helps explain the hostility towards "prisoners" as a group, and the tendency to perceive them as the threatening antagonist. At the same time, the threat of the hostile group serves to reinforce the cohesion of the opposing group, which is created by the rejection of a common enemy ("prisoner"/virus) and the battle waged against that enemy. It therefore justifies the designation of a kind of scapegoat that would shoulder all responsibilities and enable some of the population to unload all of the anxieties and frustrations that are being amplified and refreshed by the current situation. The imprisoned person, both unable to answer back (being distant, shut away, inaccessible) and on the margins of society, becomes the ideal culprit, whose designation and sacrifice seem totally acceptable to a segment of the population.

On the other hand, this identification mechanism summons a feeling of solidarity and empathy, though it is less pervasive. The similarity between the experiences causes a kind of projection of the situation of the person in lockdown onto that of incarcerated individuals, in the aim of better understanding the difficulty of imprisonment and making people aware of it. This form of empathy, which mainly develops in response to hateful messages, is characterized by the ephemeral nature of the identification and by the individual's ability to preserve his or her separation from the object of identification (Beres & Arlow, 2004). In this context, it is the lockdown/imprisonment situation that creates this limited identification (which does not extend beyond the context of the lockdown), while retaining a separation that is both real and fantastical between our lives under lockdown and their lives as convicts.

This separation is central and, in this sense, justifies qualifying the prison/lockdown analogy, which, though it seems appropriate for some people through the lens of their carceral imaginary, remains far removed from the carceral reality. It is obviously far removed in structural and organizational terms. Rostaing (2006) evokes a carceral experience in prison that is characterized by an enveloping

institutional custody, a challenging of identity and an attack on the dignity of incarcerated people. In addition to seeing their liberty confiscated, incarcerated people find themselves deprived of their autonomy, their privacy and their feeling of security.[13] Constantly threatened by the inherent violence of the carceral institution, people in prison are also confronted with the omnipresence of control systems, such as institutional surveillance or body searches.

It is also far removed in terms of spaces and confinement within four walls, where the analogy nevertheless seems obvious. The spatiality in which incarcerated people live mainly boils down to a cell space of around nine square metres, almost inevitably shared with one or several individuals, under conditions of overcrowding and total insalubrity. The materiality that surrounds them acts as a constant reminder of their detention conditions and of the scant margin for movement they possess in their environment. In the current situation of the health and pandemic crisis, movement normally permitted in prison is being limited (school, visiting rooms, training rooms, gyms), social and family links are being cut (visits suspended, means of outside communication limited), and incarcerated people find themselves in the paradoxical situation of a dual confinement—in prison and in their cell—yet without the possibility of self-isolating and maintaining the recommended social distance. The fear of contamination characteristic of spaces of confinement (Goffman, 1961) is revived in this case, without any possible way out. Whereas a home, even when it takes on an isolating materiality, preserves its familiar and protective character, the encompassing aspects of prison are reinforced during a health crisis, making prison, more than ever, an obscure institution that generates fear and suffering.

Conclusion

In the view of Nils Christie (1978), the tendency to call everything "prison" contributes to emptying this notion of meaning, by denying the specificity of the painful experiences undergone within it. An analysis of a confinement situation through the carceral concept

[13] On the effects of imprisonment, see Liebling, A., & Maruna, S. (2013). *The effects of imprisonment.* Abingdon, New York: Routledge.

makes it possible to characterize a constraining experience by qualifying it in light of experiences in particular contexts, without negating it however. The collective and shared construction of a carceral imaginary can therefore have a dual effect among individuals who adhere to it: on the one hand, it revives pre-existing negative representations of prison and reinforces the "them versus us" division, and on the other hand, it contributes to blurring the boundaries of carceral reality through the emergence of a feeling of identification and shared experience. However, this article highlights a lockdown experience that is ultimately far removed from the carceral reality, and is more of a metaphorical imprisonment, a feeling of being confined at home. It shows the importance of giving back meaning to the words used to describe experiences and representations, and what is at stake in their use, particularly when they reflect a particular reality and refer to a specific experience. It also highlights the complexity of the carceral and the heuristically fruitful character of this notion in the analysis of a lockdown situation, encouraging a continuation of the conceptualization work undertaken by Moran et al. (2017).

The delimitation of the experiential framework makes it possible to understand the social representations it shapes or revives. Through the contours imposed by the crisis, it favours a limited identification with a shared situation, which rekindles representations on prison while being accompanied by overflowing feelings, with multiple meanings and functions. However, this fictive identification, which is primarily metaphorical and ultimately part and parcel of the carceral imaginary, is not enough to shift pre-existing social representations built on prejudices. In spite of this, our new status as "people temporarily under lockdown," and the experience connected with this, as well as the social representations to which it gives rise, could represent an opportunity to collectively take a comprehensive look at a variety of confinement situations and build an open, reflexive window onto what is being weaved in those impenetrable institutions, where everything we are currently experiencing is intensified. However, one may wonder what the future of these expressions of solidarity, empathy or indignation will be, after the situation has gone away.

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