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Contents

List of Illustrations vii

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction xi

1. Back to the Future:
   France and Penal Colonization 1

2. The Desire to Deport:
   The Recidivist of Fin de Siècle France 21

3. Life in the Penal Colony:
   The View from Above and Below 39

4. The Lords of Discipline:
   The French Penal Colony Service 59

5. The Battle over the *Bagnard*:
   Tropical Medicine in the *Bagne* 83

6. The Not-So-Fatal Shore:
   The Criminological Conception
   of the Fin de Siècle *Bagne* 101

7. The *Bagne* Obscura:
   Representational Crisis and
   the Twentieth Century 121

Conclusion 147

Notes 155

Bibliography 185

Index 207

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Introduction

For most people, the French overseas penal colonies typically call to mind the motion picture *Papillon*, based on the best-selling eponymous novel of former convict Henri Charrière and so named for the butterfly tattooed on his chest. Even today, long after its theatrical premiere in 1973, images of a defiant and determined Steve McQueen running through the jungle and evading his cruel captors linger in the collective subconscious. Indeed, with the advent of VHS, cable television, and worldwide film distribution, it is likely that Charrière's story has never really stopped playing since its original release more than three decades ago. As a result, two generations of viewers have learned of the penal colonies only through the distorted lens of a self-aggrandizing autobiography and Hollywood movie magic.[1] Therefore the *bagnes* (the word originally referred to the dockyard prisons of the early modern period in France and would later be extended to the overseas penal colonies of French Guiana and New Caledonia) are distant and exotic, ensnared in myth and legend.[2]

Until recently, scholarly treatments did little to address this lacuna. Most works on the subject fell into one of three camps: those that touched upon the *bagnes* only within the more general framework of the history of crime and punishment in France; those that examined the penal colonies within broader colonial or national histories; and those that focused primarily on the features which made the institution an affront to humane penal policy and a place of unparalleled misery for those unfortunate enough to be held within its confines.[3] The picture that emerged from this historiography was unchanging, undifferentiated, and ahistorical. We knew the penal colonies only in relation to other modes of incarceration or in terms of their inherent cruelty and barbarism.

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There is evidence, however, that the penal colonies are being examined in new and exciting ways. Anthropologist Peter Redfield has juxtaposed the *bagne* with the Ariane space program in an effort to explain French Guiana's uniqueness, both in terms of its nature and culture and in terms of its complex place in French memory and contemporary consciousness.[4] French Guiana was a "laboratory of modernity," an epistemological and geographic site that allowed for the experimentation and dissemination of French knowledge and power.[5] In this vein, the penal colony is a small but important part of a much larger story surrounding the intersection of technology and colonial development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

For historian Alice Bullard, the primary purpose of the penal colony in New Caledonia was to inculcate a French national identity among the exiled Communards and the Kanaks (the indigenous people of the island).[6] Through their control of the *bagne*, and by extension their control of daily life in the colony, officials "civilized" by using the "body"—both metaphorically and corporeally—as a site of discursive and violent intervention. Such efforts were self-legitimating, as they were aimed at two populations who were seen by those in the metropole as manifestations of a fundamental physical, mental, and moral deficiency. With the Communards and the Kanaks as the primary focus, however, little attention is paid to the common-law convicts who composed the vast majority of the population of New Caledonia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Of course, the specter of Michel Foucault hovers above these and most other works that touch upon issues of deviance and social control. Although Foucault had little to say in regard to the *bagne*—noting simply that it was "a rigorous and distant form of punishment" that was "of no real economic or colonial importance"—his work on the prison was paradigmatic.[7] Through his analysis of the normalizing techniques that emerged in conjunction with the factory, army, and school, Foucault uncovered the various strains of a nineteenth-century discourse that cohered into a mechanism of imprisonment (i.e., the penitentiary) that was conceived not simply to punish but to reform criminals. Thus the body was the focus for a new kind of power relation, and corporal punishment gave way to the meticulous observation, investigation, and control of the human subject.

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Although Foucault's analysis enlightens, it also elides, as he conflates rhetoric with administrative practice. By privileging the voices of juridical and social-scientific authorities, Foucault indulges in his own fantasy about the power of intellectual discourse itself. What results is a caricature of the modern prison, a vast, gray, monolithic institution, mechanically ordered and rigidly stratified through the ever-invasive panoptic gaze of professionals and staff. In this sense, all historical contingency and nuance is absent from his account.

This leaves to historians the task of tracing how the various strategies of normative reason embedded within such institutions were actually implemented and diffused. As David Garland has cogently pointed out, however, one must keep in mind that "there are elements of the penal system which malfunction and so are not effective as forms of control or else are simply not designed to function as control measures in the first place."[8] This was nowhere more apparent than in the colonial prisons of French Indochina. As historian Peter Zinoman has recently discovered, these were not sites of methodical bureaucratic control but rather premodern jails that had the unintended effect of imbuing in its prisoners—through their shared sense of suffering at the hands of an "antiquated and ill-disciplined" penal regime—a distinct national identity that actually helped to facilitate and strengthen anti-French sentiments.[9] Given that they had always been seen as the "Other"—colonial subjects whose identity and culture were problematized and marginalized—those who happened to be both Indochinese and "criminal" were beyond the pale.[10] Therefore a disciplined and well-ordered penal system that was focused on the rehabilitation of its prisoners was simply irrelevant to French authorities.

This was not the case with the *bagne*, however, as it was seen as having a rehabilitative purpose separate from its social function as a mode of punishment and permanent exile. Simply stated, the penal colonies were founded on the fantasy of regenerative work and labor in faraway, unoccupied (devoid of French citizens, if not indigenous peoples) lands. In this sense the French penal colonies had much in common with Britain's Australia. Both systems were inextricably tied to colonial ambitions, as they shared the same basic idea of making convict labor productive in the colonies and, after a period of probation, allowing convicts to establish them-

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selves on the land. But from this notion came an inevitable and ultimately insoluble dilemma: should the penal colony serve positive colonial development—through such mechanisms as concessions of land to prisoners as would-be pioneers—or should it be punitive and harshly disciplinary? No system could equally serve both imperatives, and therefore penal colonization was always an uneasy, forever-shifting, and in some ways unworkable compromise between reform impulses and social-defense advocates of severe treatment of prisoners.

Indeed, transportation ran counter to the contemporaneous notion of reformative punishment, which attempted to recover criminals for the state by making them productive members of society. For instance, individuals such as penal reformer John Howard complained that by shipping the malfeasant to Australia the state lost any possibility of benefiting from his recovery and that his punishment would no longer serve as a criminal deterrent.[11] The founder of the panoptic prison, Jeremy Bentham, was similarly critical of the Australian penal colonies, also charging that they offered little in the way of criminal deterrence and that they were far too costly for the state.[12]

While British policymakers eventually came to this same basic conclusion and officially halted shipments of prisoners to New South Wales, Port Philip (Victoria), and Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) in 1840, 1850, and 1853, respectively, the French landed their first shipment of common-law convicts in Guiana in 1852. Historian Colin Forster has attributed the belated effort at penal colonization to colonial or territorial envy, as France had lost most of its overseas empire in 1814 and was in desperate search for another. In addition, the establishment of penal colonies was a way for the navy to extend its interests abroad. Certainly after the defeat of Napoleon I and throughout the 1820s and 1830s, the navy was "pitifully weak" in comparison to the army in terms of both strategic importance and prestige. As Forster has cogently argued, a newfound colonial empire based on penal colonization was attractive because it would require a concomitant expansion of the navy for transport, provisioning posts, defense, and management.[13]

While the navy got its wish in 1852, the same basic dissonance as to the raison d'être of penal colonization in Australia fatally undermined the French system as well. Indeed, there was a profound tension between the-

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ory and praxis as the carceral ideal embedded within the written directive of the Ministry of the Marine (later the Ministry of the Colonies)—which oversaw the entire operation from France—was openly questioned, often challenged, and sometimes superseded because of perceived "local" imperatives. With its intricate and multiple layers of bureaucracy, the penal colony complex operated, not in a vacuum, but in an environment involving many areas of contestation. By examining the various collusions, alliances, and conflicts among multiple parties, one sees not a monolith of surveillance and success but rather a deeply contingent and often fractured domain. Whereas Foucault depicts an ever-encroaching normative discipline as the historical dialectic of the penitentiary, the history of the French penal colonies was driven by a continual and often contentious fratricidal struggle that belied a pervasive will to power among those within the administrative apparatus itself.

Given their remote location and great distance from France, local authorities had immediate and total control over life in the penal colonies. Unlike the Benthamite panopticon, in which adherence to the regimented and monastic existence of the cell was intended to be conducive to reflection, remorse, and repentance, prisoners in the penal colonies were housed in communal barracks and shackled together by chains. While corporal punishment was not a part of the penitential regime, officials routinely engaged in beating and torturing the *bagnards*, even mandating public executions for those guilty of legal and disciplinary infractions while in their charge. It was not therefore architecture but rather administrators and guards who were the linchpins and ultimate moralizing agents of the penal colonies.

To determine how these individuals, faced with the exigencies of everyday life in these far-flung colonial outposts, construed and constructed their own *bagne*, I explore daily reports, internal memoranda, and administrative correspondence. From the multiple vantage points of administrators, guards, and physicians, I uncover alternate and oppositional understandings that reflect particular institutional practices and circumstances. Yet such a focus only tells half the story.

To fully understand the penal colonies, one must move, as David Rothman has argued, "Back and forth, and in and out" of the asylum to free society—or, in the case of the *bagne*, between metropole and colony.[14] In this

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regard I situate the penal colony at those historical moments in which its image is highly contested. As such, I am interested in uncovering the means by which the institution was understood and the rhetorical frameworks that conveyed this understanding. Toward this end, I bring together intellectual conceptualizations and cultural representations in what historian Pieter Spierenberg has termed a "mentalities" approach in which one reconstructs "the wider context of historical processes which may be relatively independent of the motives of prison founders."[15]

Given its approach, this book takes a different path than those that have gone before it. Although I do not dismiss Foucauldian insights regarding modern forms of punishment—as we shall see, there are some points of commonality between the penal colonies and the penitentiary—this study aims to be part of something different: a multilayered social and cultural analysis that focuses on the will of civil society and the will of those who actually lived and worked in the *bagne*. Interwoven within the history of the *bagne* lie the integral moments that gave it meaning.

In this context, chapters 1 and 2 examine the intellectual and cultural milieu of mid- to late-nineteenth-century France in order to understand why penal colonization appeared as a solution to a perceived rise in crime and petty recidivism. In chapter 3 I explore the establishment of an idealized prison regimen intended to rehabilitate and reform the *bagnard* as well as the various means by which prisoners subverted the regime. Through prisoner letters, diaries, biographies, autobiographies, and novels, one sees the outlines of a distinct prisoner subculture that was a site of resistance and struggle. In the following chapter I move on to discuss how, through a variety of internal bureaucratic struggles and ill-conceived policy initiatives, penal colony officials unintentionally undermined the very institution they were charged with administering. Thus the focus of chapter 4 is the highly pitched battle between authorities and local physicians, with the latter seeking to disentangle convicts from the prevailing penal colony structure and reintegrate them within a physically hygienic environment in which they would play a more significant role as normalizing agents. Chapter 5 connects the brutality and violence of penal colony guards to their liminal status and traces the process by which they were subsumed by an occupational model in which they possessed, willingly or not, many of the functional

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characteristics of the military. Turning back to the metropole in chapter 6, I explore fin de siècle criminological representations of the *bagne* and how their prosaic notions led not only to a reconceptualization of the penal colony but also to a fundamental shift in administrative power on the local level as well. In chapter 7 I delineate how the birth of modern journalism—with its focus on the lurid and the sensational—created a transnational awareness and dialogue condemning penal colonization, forcing officials into a period of critical reexamination and ultimately leading to the closure of the *bagne* in the years immediately following the end of World War II.

As an institution that existed for over a century and in which more than one hundred thousand individuals were imprisoned, the *bagne* played a crucial role in the history of modern France. In utilizing its institutional life as a prism through which to examine broader historical themes such as urbanization, industrialization, militarization, bureaucratization, crime, colonialism, modern medicine, the social sciences, modern journalism, and popular culture, we can view its central importance. What may not be as clear, however, is that in exploring the conjuncture/disjuncture between the "lived" and the "imagined" we not only move beyond mythic and monolithic characterizations of the *bagne* but also shed light on how power, discipline, and punishment were construed and enforced in these prison outposts.

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1. Back to the Future

France and Penal Colonization

By the mid-nineteenth century the banishment of political prisoners overseas had long been the policy, if not the actual practice, of penal administration in France. During the Revolution, dissidents were deported to the territorial holding of Louisiana, where they were not incarcerated in any way upon their arrival but simply required to live in a designated area for a specified length of time. Indeed, most of those exiled were later pardoned and repatriated. Although deportation for political offenses was an official part of the Napoleonic Code of 1810, it was something of a dead letter, as a suitable overseas replacement for the former American territory could never be found.[1]

The event that impelled the French state to reevaluate its position on penal colonization was the Revolution of 1848. To forestall continued political unrest and to lessen the burden on a penal system charged with housing the twelve thousand June Days insurgents sentenced to prison terms by Louis Napoleon's hastily convened tribunals, the president issued an emergency decree to transport these individuals to a "fortified enclosure" outside continental France. Although a number of possible locales were discussed, including Senegal, Madagascar, and even the arctic Kerguelen Islands, it was eventually decided that the insurgents be relocated to Algeria.[2]

Not until 1854 was legislation passed that formally established the South American territory of French Guiana as a destination for common-law criminals convicted of felonies. Heretofore they had typically served as *galériens* (oarsmen) on the galleys, which, given the brutal conditions aboard these vessels, was akin to a death sentence. Advances in design that allowed for

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more efficient sailing, however, made the ships and the convicts necessary for their propulsion obsolete, and the management and maintenance of the convicts who endured years of arduous rowing was turned over to the Ministry of the Marine.

In 1748 the government's Mediterranean galley fleet was decommissioned, and prisoners were sentenced to *travaux forcés* (hard labor) in such port cities as Toulon, Brest, and Rochefort.[3] The vast majority of prisoners were sent to Toulon, where they were paired together in chains on board the old galleys moored as hulks in the harbor until they had rotted away, at which time the prisoners were placed on pontoons. At the other locales, men were housed in shore prisons. The latter were not jails with cells but barracks-like structures where inmates were chained to their *tolards* (long wooden planks) at night. These crowded, dirty, and disease-ridden quarters were the site of "violence, trafficking, and sexual deprivation," as there was "no efficient supervision" of the men.[4]

In the ports, the prisoners helped build, repair (attending to masts and ropes), and provision ships. Convicts typically worked twelve to thirteen hours a day for a wage of ten to fifteen centimes, which they spent on extra food and wine.[5] Those possessing some mechanical skill had the opportunity to engage in more delicate tasks, such as joinery, drilling, and the caulking of ships, but most were "needed to carry heavy loads, turn wheels, drive pumps, and pull cables."[6] The prison population in the dockyards was about fifty-four hundred in 1789,[7] not including the *forçats libérés,* those freed at the end of their prison term. Whatever their original offense, it was generally agreed that those who completed their sentences were a significant source of crime and disorder in the port towns. Indeed, local officials complained of escapes and the frequent theft of tools and materials that were resold by prisoners to free workers.

Moreover, statistics compiled in the *Compte générale de l'administration de la justice criminelle*—the first government-sanctioned retrospective study of crime—seemed to indicate that France experienced an unprecedented wave of crime during the first half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the twelve years between 1825 and 1837 saw a 39 percent growth in the number of criminal offenses and reported investigated crimes. As official crime statistics also pointed to a dramatic increase in the percentage of those accused

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of both repeat felonies (15.5 percent from 1826-30 to 26.2 percent in 1846-50) and misdemeanors (3 percent from 1826-30 to 17 percent by 1846-50),[8] concern arose over the apparent emergence of a permanent criminal class.[9] Individuals such as the famed prison inspector Louis Mathurin Moreau-Christophe characterized the figures as "a symptom of an active perversity; the indication of an imminent social peril."[10]

This discourse was rooted in a profound demographic shift that swept poor and uneducated workers out of the rural countryside and into the streets of Paris and other urban areas in search of employment and a better life. Indeed, during the nineteenth century the number of people living in urban areas in France almost tripled. According to historical sociologist A. R. Gillis, "urban France (considered as a settlement of at least 2,000 people) contained just over six million people in 1821, which was about twenty percent of the total population. By 1900, almost sixteen million people lived in urban areas, or forty-one percent of the population."[11] Moreover, inadequate measures taken by municipal and state authorities regarding sanitary living conditions exacerbated an already unhealthy lifestyle.[12] This not only made poverty and social dislocation more visible but led social theorists to attribute the "moral decay" of the new social class to the urban environment. The expanding problem of crime signified the deleterious effect of the city on individual morality.

Thus a widespread perception arose that it was in the burgeoning urban centers of nineteenth-century France where "irreligion, ignorance, selfishness, the contagion of example . . . all the vices of man are rampant. . . . [I]n the confused mixing of social classes, and the overturning of all ideas of subordination and duty, one sees immorality, prostitution, and poverty in our cities."[13] Viscount Louis Hermann Brétignières de Courteilles, a prominent philanthropist and penal reformer, agreed: "There are signs of malaise and ferment in the heart of the city where . . . pauperism has increased because of heavy industry. . . . [A]ttacks on property also continue to multiply, and there is a continual and sustained increase in misdemeanors and felonies."[14]

Social theorists did not believe crime to be absent from provincial France, but they regarded the crimes committed by the denizens of urban and rural areas as qualitatively different. In general, they viewed the criminal activity

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of the countryside as less dangerous and premeditated than that of the city. Journalist and penal reformer Léon Faucher explained this difference as one of environment: "Two different types of condemned criminals can be distinguished: the people of the city and those of the countryside; the precocious crime that grows in the cities as in a hothouse, and the occasional, almost childlike crime that occurs in the open air, and in the freedom of the fields."[15] Faucher's opinions on crime and punishment are crucial for the history of the penal colonies, as the Chamber of Deputies appointed him in 1848 to examine the problem of recidivism, and he would serve as minister of the interior in 1849 and again in the spring and summer of 1851.[16]

Recidivism was also perceived as a quintessentially urban phenomenon. In this regard the prominent penal theorist Benjamin Appert remarked: "Why are recidivists more numerous among *condamnés* from the large cities than the countryside? . . . [T]here is a shameful culture of vice and the practice of all types of dissolution and debauchery in the large cities. It is in this impure cesspool of society that exist almost all the criminals who are terrifying society with their misdeeds."[17]

Given such perceptions, many penal reformers advocated "colonizing the interior of the country with ex-convicts."[18] Utilizing a very broad definition of industrial worker and a much narrower one for agricultural laborer, Charles Lucas, the inspector general of French prisons, hypothesized that although there were two agricultural workers for every one individual employed in the city in 1700, this ratio had been completely reversed by 1830.[19] While Lucas's conclusion was erroneous, given that the height of rural under-population did not occur until the 1840s, commentators nevertheless suggested that former prisoners be sent to undeveloped rural areas of southern and southwestern France, where they would be given land and equipment to begin new lives as subsistence farmers.[20]

Commissioned by the French government to examine the penal system of the United States, Gustave de Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville issued a report that examined the relative merits of the Auburn and Pennsylvania modes of imprisonment. While opposed to the principle of penal colonization, the authors were nonetheless enamored with the idea of replacing the police surveillance to which newly released prisoners were subjected with terms of service in agricultural colonies. "If such colonies were estab-

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lished," argued the famed penal theorists, "no idler could complain of not finding labor; the beggars, vagrants, paupers, and all the released convicts whose number continues to increase, and continues to threaten the safety of individuals and the tranquility of society could find a place where they would contribute to the wealth of this country by their labor."[21] According to physician and penal reformer Michel Louis François Huerne de Pommeuse, such labor would "regenerate both physically and morally; the criminal would thus reenter society as a useful member, instead of being debased and a burden. . . . [C]olonization transforms generations of criminals into veritable citizens. . . . [I]t attacks crime at its roots."[22]

This notion of "internal penal colonization" was also based on the apparent success of an auxiliary penal institution that emerged during the 1840s: the Mettray agricultural colony for delinquent boys.[23] Established on a thousand-acre estate in the Indre-et-Loire by Frédéric Demetz, a young Parisian magistrate, the colony was structured around small "families" of forty or so inmates, each family living in a separate house with a "guard-father" who was responsible for their own agricultural production and upbringing. The goal of the institution was the rehabilitation of criminal youths through agricultural work and military discipline in a "family" setting. As its rehabilitative success became public—at government inquests, Demetz claimed that Mettray had a recidivism rate of 14 percent, in comparison to 75 percent for state penitentiaries for children—it spawned the establishment of fifty other agricultural colonies during the 1840s and eventually led to the passage of legislation in 1850 that made the private agricultural colony the most common form of incarceration for juvenile criminals in France.[24] By 1853, half of the minors under correctional care lived in agricultural colonies, giving these institutions a quasi-monopoly during the Second Empire.

Despite the apparent success of Mettray—the institution was closed in 1939 following charges of inhumane treatment—and the various calls to "arm the detainees with pick and trowel without fear, as work in the outdoors will provide a powerful palliative," plans for establishing such institutions for adult offenders did not come to fruition.[25] Nonetheless, the allure of agricultural life, idealized as the "natural occupation of man, that which satisfies him more than all others and which always calls to mind feelings of gratitude and love for providence," remained strong for French

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