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19th Century Prisons in Practice

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Organizational Theory Applied to the Penal System

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Abstract
There are many regulations for how a prison should work as a system according to the state, but the ones who actually have the most control over how the prison is run are the employees and officials who work in and manage the facility. These people have a stronger effect on how punishment is actually meted out. This project offers a longitudinal case study of Eastern State Penitentiary from 1829 to 1875. Through records kept by the State, the ones who actually have the most control over how the prison is run are the employees and officials who work in and manage the facility. These people have a stronger effect on how punishment is actually meted out.

Background
Existing empirical analyses of prisons suggest three factors that may influence penal actors’ decisions. Penal actors must navigate between different, competing priorities/goals of punishment; they may act in ways that will bolster the external legitimacy of their prison; and their decisions may be guided by socially constructed biases about gender and race.

However, punishment scholars currently lack a theoretical framework through which these influences can be understood. This study suggests that analyzing prisons as organizations, and drawing on the rich body of organizational theory to do so, offers a useful theoretical framework for identifying and understanding the factors that shape penal actors’ on-the-ground decisions.

- Previously the prison has been viewed as a ‘closed system’ which views the prison’s internal operations as closed off from the rest of the world.
- There is a lack of theories that recognize how a prison functions within its institutional setting.
- There has also been a lack of proper data.

Organizational Theory provides a framework through which we can understand the realities of the penal system and administrators’ decisions.

Organizational Theory
This study combines several approaches to organizational analysis. The primary theory utilized posits that organizations look to their environment for cues about how to act. Moreover, organizations that do not conform to their environment lose legitimacy and thus resources and even accreditation. This project ultimately explores the interaction of organizations by themselves, within their external surroundings, with other organizations, and how managers and operators balance competing objectives.

Results
Two semi-routine patterns were evident that violated the principles of the Pennsylvania System but were consistent with an organizational theory framework.

1. Double-celling inmates: the Pennsylvania system prescribes solitary confinement, but the administrators allowed 2, and sometimes 3, inmates per cell.
2. Allowing inmates to work outside of their cell, which enabled a range of unintended consequences including prisoners keeping themselves and prevent insanity among the inmates.

Conclusion
Like other examinations of administrators’ decisions, this case study has demonstrated that Eastern’s administrators’ decisions reflect the influence of multiple factors, including competing goals of punishment, the need for legitimacy, and the role of socially constructed biases. As predicted, the decisions at Eastern were heavily influenced by their organizational field and institutional environment and less by their technical penal goals. The external forces and the desire to avoid criticism were more important than the prison policy.

Organizational theory provides a framework through which we can understand how prison officials make decisions and how the prison functions within its institutional setting. Because organizations differ in their setting and are always changing, it is hard to make permanent statements about the likely influences on a particular organizational type, such as a prison. Each organization’s needs for legitimacy will vary by time, space, and the organization’s position in the field.

Method
This study uses examples from Eastern State Penitentiary (1829-1879) to examine behind-the-scenes decision making. To research this unique prison this study focused on documents collected from the Pennsylvania State Archives, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the American Philosophical Society, and the UC Berkeley Doe Library.