CHAPTER 12

From Neighborhood to Prison

Women and the War on Drugs in Portugal

MANUELA IVONE PEREIRA DA CUNHA

By the end of the twentieth century, Portugal, like most other Western nations, had experienced a dramatic inflation in prison populations.[1] The country steadily leads this trend in the European Union (EU), registering the highest carceral rate per 100,000 inhabitants throughout the last decade. In addition to its leading position in the relative general level of imprisonment, Portugal holds two other records in the EU context that are worth noticing: the highest proportion of convictions for drug-related offenses and the highest rate of women's imprisonment. These facts are not unrelated. I wish to address here some aspects of their connections as well as some of their implications as they are reflected in a Portuguese major women's penitentiary where I conducted fieldwork for two different periods of time (1986 to 1987 and 1997). Women represent 10 percent of the imprisoned population in Portugal. As far as ethnicity is concerned, the majority of the carceral population is Portuguese (86 percent). The more important non-Portuguese categories are composed of immigrants of African origin (more precisely from Portuguese-speaking countries), who represent 1 percent of the general population but amount to 9 percent of prisoners.[2]

During the past decade, a surprising reorganization of imprisoned populations in Portugal has taken place. Drug-related crime is the pivotal element that shaped this reorganization. The sudden growth of prison populations since the 1990s was accompanied by a qualitative shift. Its most fundamental aspect is the fact that these populations are now often articulated in networks of kinship and

neighborhood, that is, in variable clusters of preprison relations. As I will argue later, what at first sight is no more than a curious detail has in fact an enormous analytical significance for prison studies. For the moment, I am going to briefly present two main sets of reasons for this particular restructuring.

The first one lies with the specific patterns of repression that retail drug trafficking came to induce in the penal system and in law enforcement agencies. Apart from having motivated legal changes that constitute a historical regression in the general philosophy of Portuguese criminal law,[3] the war on drugs has intensified, if not created, indiscriminate mass procedures in crime control. Reported "drug-trafficking networks" frequently have in fact little sociological consistency and are no more than the artificial outcome of the way individual cases are dealt with and juxtaposed by the criminal justice system. These judicial devices can thus produce otherwise inexistent continuities between two or three dozen people. Such practices do no more than extend and compound the effects of certain law enforcement interventions favored by the war on drugs. As law enforcement became increasingly proactive instead of reactive (there are usually no drug victims' formal complaints to react to), so did the potential for selectivity and bias. These interventions are aimed more than ever at specific poor urban neighborhoods, which have become collective targets of surveillance and of routine indiscriminate sweeps. With such intense police attention, the probability of arrest is evidently higher in these territories. As in several other countries where the war on drugs has reinforced similar styles of crime control,[4] these stigmatized areas are now massive suppliers of prisoners, and the geography of imprisonment has begun to be extraordinarily predictable. It is therefore not surprising that coprisoners are often relatives and neighbors, imprisoned successively or simultaneously.

This transformation in prison populations is mainly caused by massive targeting processes, but it is also produced by the specificity of the Portuguese drug economy itself. Retail trafficking, which is the more exposed and risky scale of this activity, develops in Portugal along kinship and neighborhood ties and has benefited from the way traditional solidarities operate in underprivileged residential areas. Such is the case with *fiado*, one of the robust cultural forms of mutual assistance and interest-free informal loans that bear the circulation of both legal and illegal products. This does not mean that the drug economy is organized in the form of those extensive networks of the kind we can now find in prisons. Most of the time, in fact, it is quite the opposite. This economy evolves around small, variable circles of associates (whether kin or neighbors) that have flexible structures and work autonomously. We are far, therefore, from the stereotypical *mafia* familism. What happened was that small-scale drug trafficking brought to impoverished urban settings a booming structure of illegal opportunities in which all, regardless of age, gender, or "race," could participate.

A similar claim of social inclusiveness was also made about U.S. markets, where some authors have argued that drug retail provided an "equal opportunity" structure, albeit an illegal and unintended one.[5] And it was women's recent visibility in the drug economy that led to what seems to be an exhumation of the "new female criminal" theme. According to this view, quite popular in the 1970s, feminism had had the collateral effect of also emancipating women into crime.[6] Soon afterward, the idea was so convincingly refuted that it seemed it had been definitely buried.[7] As a matter of fact it has remained so, except for this recent partial recycling, now limited to drug-related female criminality.

This apparent gender issue deserves closer attention. The fact that the astounding proliferation of drug markets has expanded illegal opportunities is undisputed, as is the increased presence of women in those markets. However, the nature of this presence diverges significantly according to place and context. A comparative perspective can therefore be illuminating. One compelling reason for taking a comparative approach is that presence is not synonymous with equal participation, as Maher persuasively argues about U.S. drug markets, where most of the opportunities opened to women are located only in the lower, riskier, and less lucrative segments of the business.[8] In the limited way women are allowed to participate (namely as a reserve supply used when there is a shortage of male labor or an imminent risk of arrest), they occupy peripheral functions such as drug advertising, renting or selling drug paraphernalia, and assisting others' consumption. These are small niches that women have carved out for themselves in the interstices of this economy. By doing so, they have generated new, specifically female roles that did not match former typologies concerning the actors of the drug business.[9]

This sharp gender stratification is a strong argument in favor of those who see continuity rather than change in the nature of female participation in the drug economy.[10] In other words, the proclaimed change was in fact illusory; the new cornucopia was out of women's reach. Two features of these particular markets converge to produce this outcome. First, they are dominated by gender notions that confine women to domesticity and to traditional gender roles. This "underworld sexism"[11] not only seems resistant to emancipatory moves of any kind but also apparently finds fertile ground in the endemic violence that pervades most U.S. retail drug markets. Hegemonic masculinity is in fact reinforced by the fact that, in this economy, employers define employability requirements along the lines of abilities perceived as inherently male: women are assumed to lack the necessary capacity for intimidation and the mental and physical ferocity to prevail in a violent milieu.

One cannot say, however, that ideological barriers to female access are new in these settings. They became more effective during the 1990s because of a mutation in the structure of retail drug markets—a mutation that occurred not only in the United States but in European contexts as well. Such markets had

by that time adopted a "business" profile that, according to the typology proposed by Johnson, Hamid, and Sanabria, consists of vertically integrated organizations, with a rigid centralized structure, involving crews of employees with nearly no autonomy.[12] Ruggiero and South characterized similar structures in Europe as "crime in organization."[13] Up until that decade the prevailing model was a different, more fluid one; with little hierarchical interdependence or permanent wage relationships, a weak functional division of labor, it rested mostly on individual entrepreneurialism. It was thus qualified as "freelance"[14] or "crime in association."[15] Even if these markets were equally oriented by male domination and by an aggressive *ethos* that also made them from the onset hostile arenas to women, their own freelance structure rendered the barriers to female participation fragile and inefficient. These permeable barriers left women more latitude as well more autonomy in the decisions they made about "where, when and how to sell."[16]

It is precisely the latter market structure that presently prevails in the Portuguese retail drug economy, where the evolution has even been opposite to the one I have so far described for European and U.S. contexts. That is, the business model evolved in the 1990s towards a freelance one. With relative ease, many women could get started on their own in dealing as freelancers, obtaining drugs on a loan or consignment basis through neighborhood networks; they often use the *fiado* female circuits, borrowing a few grams of heroin from a neighbor for resale, in the same manner as, on another occasion, they borrowed from her a few eggs or a cup of salt. Other women collaborate with male partners once in a while in a drug commercial transaction. Nevertheless, when they do, it is as kin, friends, and neighbors, not as subordinate employees of an organization led by men.

In addition to the fact that the freelance market structure prevalent in Portugal is by its very fluidity more open than the business model that became dominant in other countries, the Portuguese retail trafficking scene is also comparatively less violent. Relying more on the strategic mobilization of social relations and vicinity codes of solidarity than on conspicuous parades of virile brutality,[17] its *ethos* does not impose special qualifications of "manhood" on would-be dealers. There is, however, another reason for the relatively ungendered character of Portuguese narcowork, in other words, for the low level of filtering of participants along gender lines. This low filtering is also the counterpart, in the illegal world, of the relative frailty and ineffectiveness, in the legitimate world, of ideological obstacles to female work and to women's direct financial participation in the household budget.[18] Such frailty and ineffectiveness are especially salient among poor populations. In these contexts, the cultural definitions of gender roles also assign the realm of domestic and family responsibilities to women. However, they do not deny them the nondomestic role of provider,[19] and this circumstance is not necessarily considered as a distortion of the female cultural "script" or as an unwanted consequence of male economic failure. Poor women have always resorted to labor, not as an emancipatory or counterhegemonic option[20] but mainly as a straightforward, ordinary strategy for survival.

Women can thus be important actors in the drug economy—regardless of their ethnicity. Unlike similar drug markets elsewhere in Europe and in the United States, which are often racially stratified,[21] the Portuguese retail drug economy is occupied by both poor minorities and nonminorities. At the bottom of the market, drug dealing has become one of the vectors of ethnic social leveling. However, such leveling must be understood in the context of the retail drug economy's inscription in poor urban neighborhoods, areas with a specific interplay between categories of race/ethnicity and class. Although minorities in Portugal (mainly gypsies and immigrants from lusophone African countries such as Mozambique, Angola, Cape-Verde, and Guiné-Bissau) *are* disadvantaged, they share this disadvantage—more than is the case in other countries—with large segments of the white Portuguese population, for instance insofar as labor and the residential markets are concerned. As Machado argues, "In comparison with countries such as France, United Kingdom, Germany or Italy, in Portugal the social contrasts between 'third world' immigrant minorities and the national population are weaker, not so much because of a homogeneity in the class composition of minorities, a homogeneity which does not exist either in those countries' minorities, but mainly because in Portugal *the weight of ethnic minorities is lower within the set of underprivileged social categories*."[22]

Referring specifically to the residential status of these minorities, and with the exception of the Cape-Verdean community, which presents higher rates of poor housing and residential concentration, this author states that "such minorities *are not comparatively more represented* than the Portuguese population in poor neighborhoods, nor are there predominantly ethnic residential areas."[23] Furthermore, as a general social gap has widened, the same social segments of both minorities and nonminorities have found themselves further removed from more affluent segments of the population. To draw a brief, if oversimplified, comparison with other contexts, it has been observed that U.S. inner-city neighborhoods tend to be racially/ethnically more uniform[24] than European ones, where more diverse populations tend to congregate in deprived locales.[25] But even here, the Portuguese case seems to present some specificities in relation to other destitute urban settings in Europe, where the poor are stratified along ethnic lines. For example, blue-collar residents resent newly arrived deprived immigrant neighbors, seeing their proximity as a sign of social demotion or an obstacle to social mobility.[26] But in Portuguese public housing neighborhoods and in the few remaining shantytowns, poverty is much more severe and survival is a priority for both minority and nonminority groups.

Such urban settings are not usually the scene of symbolic struggles around ascending or descending social trajectories.

The retail drug economy reflects this trend, which can be labeled integration within exclusion. Neither race/ethnicity nor gender determines or restricts involvement in the drug retail industry, which provides a relatively open illegal structure of opportunities. Thus, by both the specificity of its inscription in Portuguese neighborhoods and the massive repressive targeting processes it has triggered, the drug economy stands out today as the main route organizing the collective trajectories between deprived urban communities and the prison. As mentioned earlier, imprisoned networks of kin and neighbors are a central feature of this circulation, and they lie behind one of the major transformations of the contemporary prison.

This transformation is especially conspicuous in women's prisons, turning these institutions into important settings for understanding emergent phenomena, which are also widely occurring in other carceral contexts, albeit in a more diluted manner. It may well be that, for once, the study of women's institutions could set the terms of the theoretical debate about prisons, thereby inverting the asymmetries of the past: men's imprisonment has framed the debate in an universal manner, quite oblivious to gender, whereas research on its female equivalent remained invariably gender bound, unable to export its insights in a reciprocal encompassing way. In geopolitical terms the same could be said of research findings in peripheral countries, which can draw attention to phenomena whose scope is not inevitably parochial and may have a universal relevance.

Such is the case, I believe, of the kind of prison networks that have emerged in Portugal in the last decade. The prominence they gain in women's institutions stems partly from the startling homogeneity of female imprisoned populations. In the 1990s, women in prison became unified not only by a blatant impoverishment but also by a reduction of the former penal diversity.[27] Although the population of male prisoners is also fairly homogeneous (property offenses and drug-related crimes account together for the majority of convictions), its internal distribution is much more balanced than that of its female counterpart, which concentrates overwhelmingly on drug trafficking. In fact, women serve proportionally more prison sentences for drug-related crimes than men. The centrality of drug crimes in women's convictions is also what best illuminates the faster rise of female incarceration rates: these are the crimes with the highest conviction rates and which receive some of the harshest sentences. This means, as Karen Leander noticed in another context, that the present rise of women incarceration rates would owe little to a hypothetical change in the way courts deal with this gender (say, using the terms of an old controversy within the discipline of criminology, from "chivalrous" to severely punitive).[28]

Whether because of the gender inclusiveness of local drug markets or the multiple levels of its harsh repression, women occupy a central position in the processes that systematically link prisons to a small number of neighborhoods, that is, in the processes that generate carceral clusters of kin, friends, and neighbors. In the major women's penitentiary of the country, where my research was based, aunts, cousins, sisters, sisters-in-law, mothers, grandmothers, and mothers-in-law now find themselves doing time together, in a circle of kin that often amounts to more than a dozen people, sometimes encompassing four generations (when a great-grandson is born in prison to a prisoner whose daughter and granddaughter are also imprisoned). I do not include here the male kin serving their own sentences in other facilities. These circles of relatives in turn intertwine with circles of neighbors, therefore forming wide networks of prisoners who knew each other prior to imprisonment. This is to say that they reenact preprison networks of acquaintance. Hundreds of lives can thus be interwoven by these previous ties when, on the contrary, prisons are supposed to combine lives rather randomly.

These clusters of preconnected prisoners have implications that bear upon the way we think about prisons. If we were to single out one notion about the prison that could stand as a common denominator amidst the variety of views and discourses on the subject (whether scholar, expert, or lay), "a world apart" would certainly qualify.

Of course, prisons do not fit the old clichés as neatly as they used to. In the West, since World War II, they have tended to become less isolated and more open to the outside world in several ways: open to outside scrutiny and more strictly tied to a set of rules and regulations through which the state limits penitentiary managers' and wardens' margins of discretion[29]; open also by a growing flow of goods, services, and communications between the interior and the exterior. Indeed, aspects such as the penetration of the media, material exchanges, and heterocontrols have led some authors to question the adequacy of the model through which Erving Goffman depicted the prison as a "total institution."[30] Besides, it was realized long ago that prisoners do not leave their cultural background behind[31] and that what goes by the name of "prison culture" is more a contextual combination of these backgrounds than a pure endogenous product.[32]

Why, then, would I maintain that the notion of a world apart nonetheless still shapes in a fundamental manner the way we think about prisons? Because the walls of these institutions are supposed to separate prisoners from their *external* relationships, which is to say, from their *previous* social relationships. For all the increasing porosity mentioned previously, these walls would always materialize this basic social split, and even regular visits, phone calls, or letters cannot but render it more tangible. In this sense imprisonment would invariably be an interruption, a reality between brackets. As far as researchers are concerned, I do

not know when this social split ceased to be an empirical question—if it ever was one—and began to be an assumption or, more important, an analytical starting point. In any case, it is this core notion that the contemporary emergence of preprison networks invites us to reconsider in a new light.

To begin with, when imprisoned, a prisoner is not detached from his or her social world anymore. Important segments of this world are transferred with him or her. So much, then, for the classical social hiatus that no prison study could fail to comment on. When one is initiated to prison life *with* kin, friends, or neighbors, or *by* kin, friends, or neighbors, personal and social identity can better resist an environment that tends to suspend or otherwise corrode them. Preestablished relations act like filters interposed between the penitentiary order and the self. Yet this is only one aspect of the continuity between the interior and the exterior world created by these particular networks. My fieldwork revealed still others.

The symbolic boundary that the prison used to represent is now eroded. The stigma that used to be associated with imprisonment is now instituted well before detention, one may say "upstream," by the very fact of belonging to certain neighborhoods. It now indicates a structural, rather than circumstantial, marginalization. In turn, the prison is already a reality embodied in the daily life of the same urban territories, where it has become an ordinary element of many biographies, a banal destiny. Everybody in those areas has an acquaintance or a relative who is or has been imprisoned. Members of different families travel together to prison facilities to visit their incarcerated relatives and friends, making the most of the opportunity of a car ride offered by a neighbor. In fact, prisoner and visitor are almost interchangeable statuses, given the frequent shift from one condition to another in different moments of one's life trajectory. More than the banality of the prison, it is its recent "normalcy" that surfaces in the way inmates dealt with my taking pictures of them, for example. When I tried to leave their faces out of the frame, they would insist in being photographed full face and would take a pose with a smile. In one case, a woman asked me for a picture because she already had had a photo taken in every single prison of the country (where she had been either a prisoner or a visitor), and this institution was the only one lacking in her collection.

But if the prison is somehow an omnipresent reality in the neighborhood, the reverse is also true. Because imprisonment can absorb one's immediate circle of relations almost entirely, this does not go without consequences, inside as well outside. The prison became in several ways an extension of neighborhood life, creating new conflicts and notions underpinning everyday sociality: for example, the notion of "respect," which does not bear upon prisoner rank but upon family values and kinship seniority, or the "no-snitching" injunction, which does not pertain to some convict or deviant code but to vicinal codes of solidarity (whereby someone who deeply abhors drug dealing, for instance, will abhor even more the idea of denouncing a "son of the neighborhood"). But above all, the inescapable general effect is that daily life in prison is not self-referential anymore. Its course is inextricably linked to the flow of outside everyday life through these wide networks of acquaintance, which not only connect prisoners between themselves but also connect them to external overlapping networks of kin, friends, or neighbors. For this reason, any intraprison event can have immediate consequences outside, and vice versa. Life inside and life outside permanently affect each other. And their respective rhythms of progression, which used to appear so discrepant in the eyes of prisoners, have become synchronized through these daily events.[33]

This mutual intrusion, this practical and symbolic continuity between two worlds, defies both goffmanian depictions of the prison as a total institution and recurrent assumptions about the prison as a world apart, as well as further undermining the very categories of "prison society" and "prison culture," which for a long time have structured prison studies. It is true that research in this area seems, for the most part, to have abandoned the prison as a subject in itself, or at least it stopped interrogating the theoretical status of these institutions. Instead, it takes the prison as a context for the study of very specific topics, nevertheless a context with given, unproblematic boundaries. But, as I argue earlier, wherever these confined networks of previous relations prevail, the material boundaries do not shape institutional life in the fundamental manner that has long been presumed. The old congruence between social and symbolic boundaries, on the one hand, and, on the other, the physical limits of the institution cannot be taken for granted anymore. It is not enough to replace the prison in the wider framework of the external forces (social, political, economical, and historical) that take part in its shaping. In order to understand inmates' perceptions, experiences, and interactions, in other words to understand imprisonment, without which debates on prisons would be pointless, it is necessary to shift the focus from the inner world of the institution toward the interface between inside and outside. In this way, we can capture the webs of meaning that constantly link both worlds. The material perimeter of the prison can provide neither the text nor the context of a social life that has become inherently translocal.

It is possible to sum up some of the general effects of the contemporary circulation between prisons and specific urban neighborhoods as follows: the former are becoming extensions of the latter. A corollary of this state of affairs is that the debate about prisons necessarily has to take into account another divide, as critical as the one that has structured these debates so far: it has to consider not merely the boundary between the imprisoned and the free but also the one between those whose lives include the prison in their horizon and those whose lives do not. Since the modern prison was born, this same divide that became salient in late modernity is not unprecedented. By the second half of the

nineteenth century it was no less crucial, both in Western Europe and in the United States, as it would be a hundred years later. To put it briefly, what makes these two historical moments similar in this respect is that the object of crime control policies was, ultimately, individuals rather than populations. This is also what presently unites two apparently opposite penological trends. The repressive injunction that produced the extraordinary inflation of imprisonment rates and the defensive injunction that classifies populations according to their degree of dangerousness, simply aspiring to manage them as contained in their territories as possible,[34] have the same tendency to produce collective targets. In the end, both trends create, and are created by, a common atmosphere that is generating a new profile of prison populations, who in turn are changing, through their very characteristics, the nature of these institutions.

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