

Beyond the bars, the prisoner no longer feels like a man, cast out as he is from the normal spaces that are innate in man. The prison takes shape as a place of complete annihilation. The regressive force exerted by the prison's environment places him in a very risky position, and this accounts for the worrying rate of suicides and attempted suicides through a noose.

Most energies are rather spent in building up another inner cell, which may look fit to offer protection, or a semblance of self-control.

Prisons are walled-up, violent, ruthless cities. The events that take place there, the feelings, the emotions, the fears and the hopes, the hatreds and the loves look strangely unreal, charged as they are with meanings of alarm and allusiveness.

"As you go to prison - said one prisoner - you feel crippled. You have no arms, no legs. The things I need are far from me. I am no longer self-sufficient. I always have to ask someone else: the shopping man, the worker, the guard. I have to ask for every little thing. The impact with stillness, with space restriction, is devastating".

Prisoners keep living in artificial physical conditions.

They live the risky life of a hunted man.

Above all, they feel rejected, chewed and spit by society.

Frustrations, inhibitions, repression of instincts inexorably prevail.

They essentially feel like aliens and become alien to themselves.

Their senses are changed and distorted.

A prolonged stay in prison causes:



A - **deterioration** of individuality, that damages the individual's ability to think and act for himself;

B - loss of culture, loss of values and habits that the person had before going to gaol;

C - estrangement, inability to adapt, once set free, to the development of the environment;

D - extreme isolation: poor social interaction with the outer world;

E - physical and psychological damage;

F - sensory deprivation, adjustment to the poverty of the environment and to the unnatural rhythms of the prison.

Among a prison's walls, the biological maturing process stops, the sensory faculties shrink. Many factors intertwine with the main one, i.e. the serving of the sentence, and some of them affect, above of all, the body. This does not only concern the perception of an inconsistent time, which sees the body as an opportunity to be reproduced or cast, through other people's eyes, as if reflected on a mirror. It is a time that inexorably clings to the body, to play these sounds and silences, these changes and permanence.

Used to the tiny size of a cell, they lose all sense of distance, of proportion. Bound to a reduced physical activity, performed only in cells and corridors, their physical balance is just enough to keep normal postures, but absolutely inadequate to a normal behaviour, for instance, on a crowded pavement.

“Living in a cell – told me one prisoner – is like living in a corridor. If one walks, the other lies on the bed. We take our meals side by side; we sleep like in a spaceship. You have to fight for a few centimetres, for pieces of light and sun and, through them, for life”.

They feel dizzy. All usual landmarks suddenly disappear.

Forced to the evenness of unnatural colours, they are easy preys to sight alterations and eye diseases.

The segregation of the eyes, their look always cut by the closeness of the walls and partitions, forces them to focus all the time on short distances, without ever getting any rest on the line of the horizon.

Prisoners are doomed to become short-sighted, they turn into shadows.

The prisoners eyes are often lifeless, bewildered and never fix on their interlocutors' faces. Thus, they avoid betraying lies and truths alike, since they never stare at you.

As far as the smell is concerned, there's contamination and anaesthesia. The prison is above all a compound, oppressive smell, which gets stale and soaks everything.

A smell which makes everything even, so invasive as to become stifling. The loss of the ability to locate smells shakes and upsets the convict, throwing him down in a hostile and messy environment.

Sharpness of hearing becomes, instead, excessive, so the convict can locate and make sense of even the softest noises.

Locks, hinges, bars, gates, toilet flushing, echoing steps, cutlery, cries, calls, make up a wide collection of mixed sounds. Hitting of irons. Always excessive, always obscurely threatening.

After some time, this condition of alarm always causes hearing alterations, generally marked by deafness.

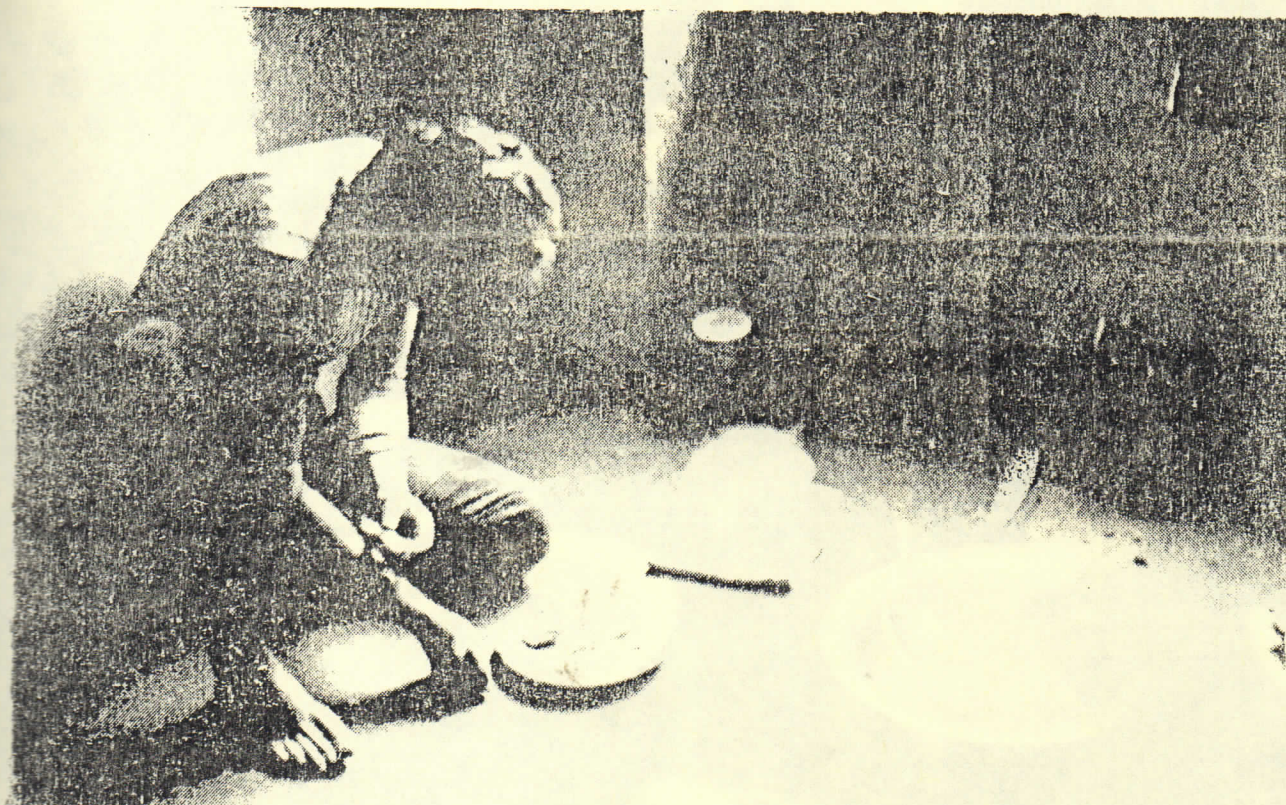
Tactile alterations are serious. One convict used to ask for cotton wool and gauze. This sounded like a groundless claim. He did so, instead, to keep his touch in good conditions, because these materials helped him to build up a whole tactile range.

The softness of the cotton wool, the roughness of the gauze, the uneven fibres of the cotton, the even web of the bandage.

The flat, the round, the spiral, the sphere, the smooth, the raised, mean tactile variety.

"I would like to touch the neck of a real bottle, not plastic, but glass, right there where the narrowing begins, where it is smooth and round, where you feel the coolness. I have had enough of beer cans with no head and no bottom. But what I miss most is the touch of the touch, it's another skin against mine, the skin of a woman!..."

"You are caged – said one prisoner – in a concrete box. The tinkling of the keys is the symbol of your being a slave. Words carry weight, it's as if they were actual gestures. A word means a slap in your face, another means a cuddle. You learn to think of what you say, of how you say it. It's an enclosed world, where you speak commonplaces. Nobody speaks one's mind. Few people think what they say. One of the most frequently used anaesthetics is sleep. To me, the time of going to sleep feels like a real release and I look forward to it as if to a pleasant daily event."



What shall I say: after a day of non-existence!

Restrained among bars and gates, forced to do or not to do things, he lives his artificial life in a place where his will, his liberty are practically locked up, just like his body.

In the attempt to stand up to all sorts of pressures and violence, he cannot but rely on his own ability to find, within the prison's enclosure, some way of getting along. He can adapt himself, provided he can objectify himself. Basically, he denies himself as an independent individual in order to survive as an object, as a thing. Two types of convicts in particular have no adaptability: drug-addicts and the mentally ill. They will therefore suffer like mad. It's the first few days, the first few months, the first few years in prison that are terrible and violent. Adaptability slowly builds up, and here the individual loses the sense of his value, of his own identity. He is uprooted from the system wherein he lived, undergoes a relentless physical and psychological collapse which deteriorates his physical (agility, dexterity, quickness of reflex), working (skills and fatigue resistance), affective (love for one's family) and psychological features.

Here is why 25-30-35 years, and even less a life sentence, make no difference in terms of punishment.



By now, the prisoner has changed.

Altered, deranged, violated in his essential features.

A prematurely aged body.

A nondescript face marked by deep sufferings.

Dull, blank eyes.

Shaky hands.

All energy, all directions of action have gone lost.

**A man whose will, whose independence, whose simplest desires
have died away.**

A body taking shelter in his bag of skin.

A ghost, a real lived-in shadow.

