Co-producing Brazilian prison order

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Brazilian prisons are characterised by extraordinarily high levels of imprisonment, overcrowding and understaffing. Explanations for Brazilian punitivism largely reflect those that have been associated with the global export of American penal policies. Brazil is far more than an exemplary case of contemporary global punitivism, however. It is as much an exporter as importer of international penal policy norms, and might now be regarded as the leading figure in what Chris Garces and I have described as “the [Latin American] new mass carceral zone” (Darke and Garces, 2017). Nuanced explanations for Brazilian punitivism are needed that take the country’s history and social and institutional cultures into account.

Further, while material deprivations and staff shortages tell us much of what it is like to work or be incarcerated in the country, the picture is complete only when we take into consideration the informal staff-inmate relations dynamics of survival that shape everyday Brazilian prison life, in particular the ways in which inmates and staff negotiate order. This will be the main focus of this talk. Most Brazilian prisons operate under a normative, if sometimes fragile reciprocal order. In some prisons officers have gone so far as to delegate even their most basic of tasks – security and enforcing prison rules – to inmates. Moreover, it is not unusual for Brazilian prisoners to be entrusted with keys. These phenomena are likewise only part explained by theories that were originally developed to study prisons in the global North.

This talk therefore takes as its starting point the importance when undertaking comparative research of paying equal attention to local and regional specificities as global trends. It seeks to demonstrate and explore the reasons why Brazilian prisons are not necessarily as disorderly, predatory or violent as they are typically depicted, and this because of, not in spite of inmate collaboration and self-governance. Prison life in Brazil, it concludes, is shaped as much by attachments as detachments, between inmates and staff, and also between prisons and the localities in which they are situated.