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Book Review

Caribbean and Latin America

Carlos Aguirre. *The Criminals of Lima and Their Worlds: The Prison Experience, 1850–1935*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press. 2005. Pp. xi, 310. Cloth \$79.95, paper \$22.95.

Carlos Aguirre begins his book by emphasizing that the prisons of Lima in the period 1850–1935, rather than being sites for the regeneration of criminals, were bastions of authoritarianism and exclusion whose operations reveal the excluding nature of the process of modernization in Peru. This familiar argument is followed, however, by a comprehensive and fascinating study, exhaustively researched, that brings together discourses, social and institutional processes and practices, and daily experiences. 1

In the first part of the book, Aguirre studies the emergence of the criminal question in Peru, the introduction of criminology, and the institutional development of the police and police practices. Aguirre's ample knowledge of Peruvian history allows him to demonstrate clearly that class and ethnicity were present in the discourses that practitioners of positivist criminology constructed, how workers attempted to separate their world from the criminal world, and how the police of Lima, in spite of their limitations, became an effective instrument of vigilance and control of specific sectors of the population. 2

The development of penal infrastructure in Lima and a quantitative and qualitative study of the inmate population are the main objects of analysis of the second part of the book. Particularly interesting is Aguirre's analysis of the failed attempt to turn the Penitenciaría de Lima into a research center designed to produce knowledge about criminals in particular and popular sectors in general. Nevertheless, the most valuable contribution of this second part is the profiles of specific types of inmates: assassins, *rateros* and *faites*, vagrants, and political prisoners. With clarity and precision Aguirre explains why the political prisoners belonged to the world of the prison but not to the criminal world: they enjoyed certain kinds of privileges, at least before the 1930s when the conditions of prisons worsened. 3

In the third and the most interesting part of the book, the author analyzes the daily life of inmates in the subcultures constituted in the prisons, and the inmates' challenges 4

to the prison order. Aguirre argues that the inmates succeeded in taking advantage of the administrative weaknesses of the prisons because they were able to create a "customary order" that supposed a combination of control and tolerance, abuse and negotiation, punishments and small concessions. Within the framework of this order, it was possible to establish partnerships between the inmates and the staff, a cash economy, and the use of prisoners as *caporales*. Such circumstances gave rise to subcultures reflected in the use of tattoos, the consumption of alcohol and cocaine, the development of criminal jargon, and homosexual practices. In his analysis of homosexuality, Aguirre disregards the question of ethnic and regional differences, whose importance he recognizes when he studies conflicts among inmates and the violence that dominated the daily life of Lima's prisons. Although Aguirre offers an excellent analysis of feeding, health, and amusements in the prisons, he scarcely considered the important subject of death.

According to the author, inmates' challenges to the prison order were diverse, and they included suicides, individual insubordination, escapes, and riots. In response to these challenges, the authorities used diverse strategies, including the labeling of troublesome inmates as "insane" and the use of informers and collaborators. Political prisoners used the defense of their rights and denunciations of the injustices of their incarceration as weapons, sometimes cooperating with criminal inmates to develop a common front. 5

In sum, Aguirre's book is well organized and well written. It constitutes a model of how to combine in one investigation diverse sources, quantitative and qualitative methods, and levels of analysis (from discourses and representations to practices and experiences). Apart from its academic contribution, it is also a work that allows us fully to understand the statement that the great Spanish poet, Jorge Guillén, made about prisons in a poem about Antonio Gramsci: they are a revelation of the incredible power of injustice that is the human being. 6

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