

A SHIFT IN THE BALANCE OF POWER

there was a state of permanent protest that had its effects on the regulatory structure because the prison is this it's a structure that elaborates the regulation of the body to the maximum and so the fact that this regulation is rearranged corresponds to a shift in the balance of power between prisoners and custody



What follows is a short excerpt from Nanni Balestrini's novel The Unseen. The radical style of the book, which unfolds via a flood of language from an unidentified narrator, reflects the book's origins in extensive interviews Balestrini conducted with a close friend about his experiences with the Autonomia movement that rocked Italy in the 1970's, as well as with the repression that followed. Bouncing back and forth between prison and the outside world, the book is without a doubt one of the most inspiring and heartbreaking works I have ever read. This passage depicts the narrator's arrival at and reflections upon a special prison for radicals and flight-risks that he is sent to after being sucked up into the penal system on account of his political activities. While these reflections were formed in a very different context than the one in which I write, I have found the conclusions drawn about the role that prison and the threat of prison plays within society to be enormously applicable to my own fight for liberation in the here and now. It is with this in mind that I pass these words on.

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minister with every protest you made and since by now what was at stake was by now always the trigger for a sequence of events leading to taking guards hostage perhaps proceeding merely from the fact that you wanted a blue felt tip pen it was their policy to give way over everything

also because the minister's strategy centred as always on the distinction making that special prison a cooling-down prison let's say at the positive end of the special spectrum while at the other end was a maximum security prison the prison regime is entirely based on this strategy of differentiation with its potential to blackmail you with the threat of a worsening of your conditions with its potential to warn you if you protest watch out or I'll send you to a prison worse than the one you're in now and so the comrades' argument was just because we're well off here it doesn't mean we don't have to make demands but we have to make demands just the same here as well so as to break this blackmail situation that threatens us all with ending up in a prison where we're worse off

I soon became aware of the strained and tense atmosphere arising from this situation and underlying the fairground appearance that had been my first impression there'd been a whole series of protests there were protests to stop the guards doing searches every time cells were left for exercise or demands about going to eat in another cell or demands about visits or meetings with lawyers and so on when you mount a protest and for instance when you refuse to be searched there are two outcomes either the administration gives way and as a result you wind up in a much stronger position and that's that or else the administration reacts and then the struggle goes on and the tension rises until there's a confrontation

so there were constant disruptions at exercise people would refuse to go back to the cells and there'd be concerted hammering on the bars of the cell gates and things like that there's always a ceiling when a protest begins if the administration doesn't give in right away you trigger the mechanism of mounting conflict but then there's a ceiling and this ceiling measures the balance of power for example if the prisoners are in the position of power to threaten to take guards hostage then of course the administration yields first because it knows that the prisoners can go as far as taking hostages and the administration usually always yielded there because it was afraid of this that the prisoners would take guards hostage of course you couldn't ask the impossible you couldn't ask them to unlock the cells for you and let you go home but you could push all the time to extend social spaces

and the protests succeeded because they were solid everybody joined in right away without even thinking about it by now the guards no longer took any responsibility the guards reacted on every occasion by passing on decisions to their superior who in turn dumped them on his superior and so on up to the prison governor and he'd take it to the minister which meant whatever you did inside the prison you were never confronting the guards but the strength of your position was such that you ended up dealing directly with the

I remember that when I was transferred to that special prison I was a bit scared just that name special prison scared me and the evening before I left I was up all night talking with my cell mates they realized I was frightened and they stayed awake all night with me to keep me company then there was the whole transfer trip which was very long the whole length of Italy chained up in that armoured van but I'd no sooner arrived at the special when that fear more or less went when I got there I was pretty astounded by the way that prison worked I hadn't had any idea it was like that now that I'm describing it I realize that in fact the atmosphere there was tense to say the least there was enormous tension but on my arrival it looked to me like a big fair

that name special prison I thought when I first got there they could label it as that but it was really a fair and the cells were bazaars you could more or less have anything in your cell all the cells were overflowing with things of every kind you could play musical instruments there were guitars and tamborines bongo drums accordions there was even somebody who had a violin and he played it whenever he wanted you could have every kind and colour of paint you wanted you could have canvases oils tempera pastel crayons charcoal typewriters you could have the books you wanted all the magazines and newspapers you wanted you could have tape-recorders and cassettes football boots and tennis shoes there was no limit to the amount of clothes you could keep in your cell all the shoes all the sweaters all the hats you could keep everything you wanted there in the cells

the association time there as they called it was quite unbelievable considering it was a special there were four hours two in the morning and two in the afternoon there were four exercise hours a day and on top there were two hours twice a week when we could all meet in a big room together and what's more at the time for the midday meal there was the opportunity for the comrades who were in the single cells to go and eat with the comrades who were in the dormitories which meant association time was this you got up at

nine you went for exercise at eleven you went back up and it meant an incredible lot of work for the guards at eleven you went back up from exercise and then they had to organize all the shifting around to escort all the people who were moving to go and eat in other cells

all you had to do was apply to go to another cell you did it on the spot on a slip of paper and that was enough they really should have carried out searches but you can't start moving sixty people in less than half an hour and search them as well and so everybody moved around with no fuss from one cell to another to go and eat it wasn't a case of applying a day ahead you did it there on the spot it was a formality for sure they couldn't keep track of the applications they could maybe do it later on and it helped them most of all to figure out how things fitted to work out from the people who spent time together what the political links were between the comrades the groupings the different political tendencies

the guards were really duty-bound to search you when you left your cell in the morning for exercise and they were duty-bound to search you again when you went back up to your cell and to search you again once more when you left your cell to go and eat in another cell but all this had become impossible they'd stopped doing it and so they'd stopped checking altogether there was this constant movement there was this constant cell locking and unlocking there was this huge mass of objects piled up in the cells and when this is the situation when there are all these areas that you take for yourself that you win for yourself then the situation becomes ungovernable what struck me there was the enormous scope there was inside the prison it was a special prison but you could move around there just as you wanted

nor were the cell searches properly seen to the more stuff there is in a cell the harder it is to search it all well the difference from the normal prison that I'd just come from was

that here they did one search a week where there they did one a month but here the way things were with the guards meant that if a ballpoint pen went missing during a search there was an outbreak of hammering on the bars in every cell so that right away this guy would come back with the pen and apologize and here the way things were with the guards meant that they put up with the worst insults and the worst threats and if you called a guard at midnight to get him to take cigarettes or a newspaper or wine or a plate of pasta to someone in another cell even if it wasn't his job he'd do it right away all the same and in double-quick time this was the way things were with the guards

if one day during a search you told him no don't you lay a hand on me he'd even stop searching you and if while they were searching the cells they found knives they didn't even say a word they didn't even give you a hard time about it any more they'd got used to finding knives in the cells they confiscated them and that was all that was the atmosphere there was there before the revolt there were visits without glass screens the rules said they were to be an hour but they were always two hours to the minute and sometimes even longer if you pushed it and you could have four visits a month plus a special visit that you could have on top and if you didn't have a visit you could make a ten-minute phone call instead

the non-politicals in the specials aren't the non-politicals of the normal prisons they're people who in prison have tried at least once to escape they're all people from the world of big-time crime or important gangs and there you could associate with the non-politicals too you could exercise with them and go and eat with them too all you had to do was apply to go and see them so this amounted to a situation of progressive extension of areas inside the prison there was a state of permanent protest that had its effects on the regulatory structure because the prison is this it's a structure that elaborates the regulation of the body to the maximum and so the fact that this regulation is rearranged corresponds to a shift in the balance of power between prisoners and custody