"America's Best Political Newsletter" Out of Bounds Magazine
counterpunch
edited by alexander cockburn and jeffrey st.clair

Teaching the "Slave Ship" to Prisoners: Inside Auburn Prison

By Marcus Rediker
Published September 3, 2009

Auburn is one of America's oldest and most infamous prisons. It was founded in 1816 in upstate New York as a model prison, in which work would be a significant part of punishment and rehabilitation. The first execution by electric chair in the United States took place here, the chair itself apparently designed by Gustav Stickley of Arts and Crafts fame (although, there is some debate about this). There is no debate that Stickley ran a factory at the prison, in which 300 prisoners constructed his stylish furniture, the expensive brand remaining to this day. One wonders whether they also built the ghoulish new killing machine.

I visited Auburn on two occasions recently, in April and May 2009, courtesy of the Cornell University Prison Education Program (CPEP). While I was a visiting scholar at Cornell's Society for the Humanities, Noelle Brigden, a graduate student in the Cornell's Government Department, kindly invited me to meet with her prison class on "Pirates and the Political Order." I eagerly accepted.

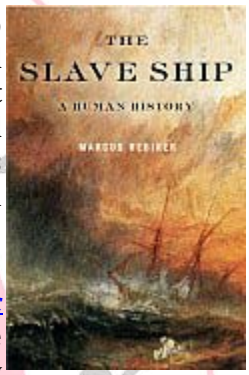
Auburn Prison is a forbidding place – its sheer massiveness is daunting, even suffocating. It has always been a maximum-security prison, and it feels like it, from the gloomy fortresslike architecture of stone and steel to the large number of guards to be seen almost everywhere throughout the prison. The original hammered black iron gate of the prison hangs on the wall in the public entrance. A sea of pickup trucks fills the parking lot outside.

A guard told me that the prison population at Auburn is around 1,800. The number officially listed as of January 1, 2008, was 1,747. Of these, 19 per cent are white; 21.9 per cent are Hispanic; and 57.1 per cent are African-American. (The state population is 74 per cent white, 16 per cent Hispanic, and 17 per cent African-American.) A little over half at Auburn are from New York City. In terms of religious affiliation, just under half are Christian, about 20 per cent are Muslim, and a little more than 11 per cent are Rastafarian. Almost 6 per cent are veterans. Three in four are described by the state as "violent felony" offenders – the overwhelming majority convicted of murder, robbery or burglary. The mean sentence at Auburn is 15 years, which is higher than the median for the state system. A third at Auburn have served more than six years, so there are quite a few wise old heads around. It is unknown how those admitted into the CPEP reflect these larger figures, but I could see that white prisoners were better represented among the students, probably because admission to the program was competitive and they had backgrounds of better schooling.

Noelle and I made our way through the metal detectors and a long maze of corridors, through the yard alongside the basketball court and weight equipment, to the prison school and our classroom. Soon 15 students, coming from breakfast, began to file in. A big, burly, tattooed one (prisoner 1) smiled at me and said, "You've come to meet with the real pirates!" So I had.

As we went around the room and introduced ourselves, almost all of the prisoners made it a point to tell me how long they had been incarcerated, at Auburn or elsewhere. The range was two to 21 years, with most people in double digits. Many spoke gratefully of the opportunity to "improve themselves" in this program.

As class discussion was beginning, prisoner 2 wanted to know whether I had ever been in a situation like this. The subtext of the question was: have you been in prisons and what is your attitude toward prisoners? I answered that I had never been imprisoned myself but that members of my family had, including an uncle who had managed to escape from a federal joint inColorado. (This piece of information produced approving, even admiring nods.) I added that I been in prisons many times, not least to visit political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal, on whose case I had worked for years. Upon the mention of Mumia's name, an electrical current of murmurs surged around the room, punctuated by prisoner 3 who spontaneously blurted out, "Power to the People!" It was the old Black Panther slogan.



The students had read portions of my book, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age*, and we had one of the very best discussions of it I have ever witnessed. This was partly because Noelle's good teaching had already generated fruitful discussion on many themes. It was partly because prisoners, like everyone else, are fascinated by pirates and could not wait to talk about them. But mostly it was because this group was hungry for learning, interaction and the exchange of views. Their questions and comments signaled repeatedly how closely they had read the assigned material. There was never a point in our two-hour meeting when several hands weren't waving politely to join in the discussion next.

A few of the highlights included a suggestion by prisoner 4: "Let's compare the self-organization of pirates in the eighteenth century to the self-organization of prisoners today." We did, with this conclusion: pirates were better at overcoming their own internal differences.

Another subject of special interest to the Auburn prisoners was how pirates would, upon the capture of a ship, enact what they called the "distribution of justice" – that is, call the sailors of the captured vessel up on the main deck and ask how their captain treated them. If the sailors gave a bad report, the captain was in trouble because pirates, who had been common sailors themselves, would act as avengers against abusive captains, who were many in the early eighteenth century.

I decided we should act this out. I asked prisoner 5 to come up to the front of the room and play the part of captain. He did, with relish, taunting his sailors (the other students) as he came forward. Then I asked prisoner 6 to come up and tell everyone how the captain treated him and his brother tars. "He treats us very badly," was the solemn verdict. "Lash him," was the cry. The captain started to argue and was told to shut up or he would make matters worse. Prisoner 7 handed me (as the pirate quartermaster) a pencil, which, he told me, was "cat-o'-nine-tails." The captain looked increasingly ill at ease, as if he was no longer quite sure we were role-playing. Finally, the laughter exploded and everyone sat down as good-natured banter broke out.

We then discussed themes such as the pirate as "other," the power in labeling and defining "criminals," the social uses of "deviance," and what pirates themselves were up to as they built autonomous communities after spending their working lives as sailors who had experienced low wages, poor food, harsh discipline and high mortality. We also had a spirited discussion of why pirates remain romantic folk heroes.

With about half an hour to go, prisoner 8 thanked me for visiting with them and began a rather formal, earnest goodbye. When prisoner 9 spoke up to do the same, I interrupted, asking, "Why are you saying goodbye now? Don't we have half an hour to go?" Answer: "Whenever the guards see that we are really into something, their first instinct is to break it up."

The last person to speak was prisoner 10, who was clearly a leader. He had done a lot of time, he was active in all kinds of organizations, and he was treated with great respect, even a touch of deference, by the others. He said that on behalf of everyone he wanted to invite me back to speak to a larger group of prisoners on the subject of my most recent book, *The Slave Ship: A Human History*.

As it happened, the guard who was assigned to the visitor let us take the full class period. After he signaled that time was up and everyone began to leave, prisoner 11 asked with an ironic grin, "You do know, don't you, that we call this place 'the modern slave ship'?" Yes, I knew. The next meeting, should it happen, would have a powerful political charge.

On the way out, I left copies of my books, including *The Slave Ship*, with a guard at the entrance, requesting that they be placed in the prison library. Given the look he gave – first to the books, then to me – I was not confident that this would happen.

Somehow the word of the invitation to return got to Jim Schechter, director of the CPEP, and arrangements were made for May 8. A few days before that date, Jim wrote with bad news. There had been a lockdown at Auburn: the lecture and all other "voluntary programs" had been canceled.

The lecture was rescheduled for May 21. When I arrived (with Jim and Noelle), I found that there were many opinions about the cause of the six-day lockdown. One guard explained that it was time for "spring cleaning" – shakedowns and searches for weapons in preparation for coming warm weather. Another said that the lockdown was simply a rehearsal, practice for a real emergency. Prisoner 12 had a different interpretation, saying dryly: "You know how prisons are. They always have to show who is in charge."

We gathered for the lecture in the prison chapel off the yard. It was a room of modest size with old oak pews (built by Stickley?), a low ceiling and poor lighting. The rather large number of prisoners who attended (about 70, most of those enrolled in the full Cornell program) required several guards to be present. After the guards listened to Jim Schechter introduce me, they were apparently reassured of the tameness of the occasion and retired to the chapel anteroom beyond two big glass doors, leaving us to ourselves.

After *The Slave Ship* was published in the fall of 2007, I gave dozens of lectures and informal talks about it, to all kinds of groups, academic, public, and community. But never in a setting like this, in which everything I said about incarceration, violence, and the horrors of life aboard an eighteenth-century slave ship would be immediately translated into the idiom of the twenty-first century prison. That my approach was one of "history from below," stressing the social realities of expropriation, enslavement and resistance, made the transposition all the easier.

In the lecture I talked about the broad context of the Atlantic slave trade, how the many millions transported were central to the establishment of the plantation system and, therefore, to the rise of modern capitalism. I talked about the slave trade as a human experience, the deliberately inflicted violence and terror of the Middle Passage. I talked about the nature of community among the enslaved aboard the ship, how they overcame ethnic differences to create a common culture of resistance that would be carried off the ship and into the slave societies of the United States, Jamaica, Puerto Rico and Brazil. (This point seemed to have a special resonance.) I concluded by talking about what kind of movement from below was necessary to abolish the slave trade, in Great Britain (1807) and the United States (1808).

The students participated in the lecture while it was going on, joining in call-and-response style (we were in the chapel, after all) with comments such as "uh-huh," "that's right," "say it," and, "now you're talking." They were as attentive and engaged an audience as I have ever seen.

When the lecture ended, they gave me, to my surprise, a standing ovation. The guards in the back snapped to attention, looked around alertly, then sat back down after the prisoners themselves did so. Then up shot the hands, lots of them. I was surprised again when it became clear that quite a number of prisoners had already read *The Slave Ship*, and when others complained that some not-to-be-named people had been hogging the copy of the book from the library! The guard had placed it there after all.

The second question, asked by prisoner 13, went straight to the core issue. "OK, violent incarceration is central to American history, beginning with slave ships and coming down to where we are right here, right now, today. So, what is the relationship between the two?" The next hour was spent discussing this question and numerous others. Many opinions were expressed, and some had considerable learning behind them. Prisoner 14 discussed "the struggle to remember this history," both inside the prison and outside, in society at large. Several prisoners asked for specific references, wanting to know the names of authors and full titles of books I had mentioned. Another wanted the URL of the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database. Prisoners will ask friends and loved ones to go online, print out information, and mail it to them. The questions and comments reflected a range of personal, political, historical, contemporary and scholarly interests.

When it came time to end the session, Jim Schechter took the podium and announced that he would not have believed that this kind of discussion could have happened in a prison. I was stunned by what had transpired: I had found a shocking degree of freedom of speech where one might have least expected it, inside Auburn Prison, for me and, it seemed, for everyone else. We milled around afterward for a while before the prisoners began to file out, trudging slowly out the chapel door into the sunlit yard.

In the end, I was much impressed by the great good work of the Cornell Prison Education Program, which has been built over the years by Cornell faculty, students and community members, especially by Pete Wetherbee (English) and Mary Katzenstein (Government), and which has recently expanded its course offerings. I would wish for programs of this kind throughout the nation, not only for the benefit of the prisoners – it has been proven again and again that education is the only thing that keeps former prisoners from coming back – but for the benefit of people like myself, who get to see at least one part of what is going on in normally opaque places like Auburn Prison, this in a nation with a record 2.3 million incarcerated, one in a hundred of our national population.

Most of all, I was impressed by the intelligence, the thoughtfulness, the engagement, the curiosity – in short, by the life of the mind – I found among the people inside Auburn Prison. That mind, I am pleased to report, cannot be imprisoned. It is generating a lot of electricity at Auburn these days, of a variety far different from the one for which the prison is known.

Marcus Rediker teaches history at the University of Pittsburgh. He is the author of *The Slave Ship: A Human History* and (with Peter Linebaugh) *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*. He can be reached at marcusrediker@yahoo.com.

Source: http://www.counterpunch.org/rediker09032009.html