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“Security here is not safe”: violence, punishment, and space in the contemporary US penitentiary

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Abstract. The US penitentiary at Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, was retrofitted in 2008 to offer the country’s first federal Special Management Unit (SMU) program of its kind. This model SMU is designed for federal inmates from around the country identified as the most intractably troublesome, and features double-celling of inmates in tiny spaces, in 23-hour or 24-hour a day lockdown, requiring them to pass through a two-year program of readjustment. These spatial tactics, and the philosophy of punishment underlying them, contrast with the modern reform ideals upon which the prison was designed and built in 1932. The SMU represents the latest punitive phase in American penology, one that neither simply eliminates men as in the premodern spectacle, nor creates the docile, rehabilitated bodies of the modern panopticon; rather, it is a late-modern structure that produces only fear, terror, violence, and death. This SMU represents the latest of the late-modern prisons, similar to other supermax facilities in the US but offering its own unique system of punishment as well. While the prison exists within the system of American law and jurisprudence, it also manifests features of Agamben’s lawless, camp-like space that emerges during a state of exception, exempt from outside scrutiny with inmate treatment typically beyond the scope of the law.

Keywords: prison, violence, supermax, punishment, state of exception, USP Lewisburg

Introduction

On 5 May 2011, Alexander M Shoemaker, a nineteen-year-old inmate of the Union County Jail in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, who is serving a two-and-half-year sentence for involuntary manslaughter of his sixteen-year-old friend, made local headlines for his request to a judge that he be moved from the county jail to the state prison. “There’s so much more to do” in state prison, Shoemaker argued at his hearing, “I’d be around more people for a change. There’s sports leagues, a bunch of different things to do.” The incredulous judge denied the request: “Prison is no place you want to go”, he announced. “If you think it is a place you can hang out, do your own thing and play in sports leagues, you are totally clueless” (Moore, 2011).

We in the central Pennsylvania Middle District are unfortunately home to one of the highest concentrations of correctional facilities anywhere in the United States, with thirty-four county jails, eleven state prisons, and eight federal corrections facilities—with more planned.⁽¹⁾ Among the Middle District prisons is the United States federal penitentiary in Lewisburg (hereafter USP Lewisburg). This penitentiary was built in 1932 during the ‘reform craze’ in US prisonization (Johnston, 2000; Lasansky, 2005), and offered many of the spaces and activities that the naïve Shoemaker would have, however misguidedly, appreciated:

⁽¹⁾The prison industry itself is second only to agriculture in the state. In the lean 2011 Pennsylvania state budget, lawmakers managed to find \$200 million for two new prisons while cutting the education budget by \$1 billion.

it featured basketball courts and a baseball diamond, a gymnasium, a well stocked library, a theater, metal factory, working farm, and hospital.

Fast forward through decades of mass incarceration to 2008, when the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) began the transformation of USP Lewisburg from a regular penitentiary to the first four-step Special Management Unit (SMU) prison of its kind in the country. This ‘model’ SMU program is the latest manifestation of the BOP’s attempt to enclose and contain in one place federal inmates from around the country whom it deems the most troublesome (typically those identified as gang leaders). Among other things the SMU features double celling of inmates in tiny cells, in 23-hour or 24-hour a day lockdown. Not only do the former ‘community’ spaces within the prison serve no current purpose as they sit virtually empty, but the cellblocks themselves, under the SMU philosophy and practice, have become spaces of unprecedented fear, terror, violence, and death. Within the first year of the SMU operation over forty inmate assaults occurred that were serious enough to be reported by the BOP—that number rose to 478 by mid-2011—and five inmates suffered violent deaths: two by suicide; two murdered by other inmates; and one due to staff mismanagement—the spraying of pepper spray into the cell of an asthmatic inmate to break up a suspected assault.

What ideologies and practices have been built into the prison, and how have these changed over time? This paper traces the spatial and penal logic of USP Lewisburg from a facility built in 1932 to accommodate reform and rehabilitation of inmates, to one that today facilitates only punishment and violence. As outlined below, US prisons began moving away from the modern rehabilitation model from the 1970s onward—in ideology, in structure, and through massive expenditures—towards increased lockdown to control exponentially expanding numbers of prisoners. The current retrofitting of USP Lewisburg as an SMU manifests many of the conditions of the premodern prison that had been abandoned, at least at the level of ideology if not in practice, in the 19th century (Foucault, 1977). Yet what emerges in the supermax generally and Lewisburg SMU specifically is what we might call a late-modern prison. As Rhodes (2009, page 194) puts it, the supermax and control prison of today represent the inevitable “evolution and intensification” of enclosure that followed the mass incarceration trends that began thirty-plus years ago. Thus the study of the supermax and SMU allows for an analysis of the (nonsequential) mixing of prison typologies—premodern, modern, and late modern—both in terms of form of punishment and in terms of the function of the prison itself (Foucault, 1977; see also Alford, 2000; Hallsworth, 2005).⁽²⁾

As I argue below, the spatial and penal logic of USP Lewisburg does not reduce the overall level of federal prison violence, as the SMU program ostensibly aims to do (Finnerty, 2011); it dramatically sustains, promotes, and increases it. The late-modern ‘punitive turn’ of mass incarceration and lockdown (Pratt et al, 2005) is unlike earlier prison models in that it produces neither ‘nothing’—the simple elimination of bodies of the premodern prison—nor the (ostensible) docile, reformed bodies of the modern prison. Through its oppressive spatial tactics and retributive penal logic, the late modern prison produces new sources of unprecedented fear, tension, terror, and violence, and/or their constant threat. Some of USP Lewisburg’s spatial practices and penal logics are typical of other supermax and control unit prisons in the country, but some represent an insidious departure from them. The use of tiny, bare cells within which two men are to coexist in lockdown for two years represents a particular type of spatial torture against which even the total isolation units of the infamous ADX prison in Florence, Colorado seem preferable. And unlike in the failed experiment at the first federal supermax at Marion, Illinois, inmates in the Lewisburg SMU are always

⁽²⁾There are differences of opinion on the definition of ‘supermax’ facility. I use the term to refer to the trend in permanent isolation and lockdown in maximum-security prisons.

restrained when moved, and the cuffing and uncuffing procedure itself during this movement has led to many of the violent incidents described below.

In this late modern prison we find a congruence between such spatial tactics and penal philosophies on one hand and, on the other, the present neoliberal security state apparatus that makes this new late-modern prison form possible in the first place (Hallsworth and Lea, 2011; Peck, 2003). SMU Lewisburg exists within the current crisis of the neoliberal market economy, which has produced increasing numbers of poor, unemployed, and marginalized men and women who are contained and regulated by incarceration. It also exists within what the political philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998; 2005) identifies as the current ‘state of exception’ that sovereigns claim in order to retain some legitimacy outside of the market, often by becoming more authoritarian, suspending rights and laws, and eventually seeing to it that the state of exception becomes the rule or norm. This state of exception and the ensuing suspension of law and jurisprudence in particular make Agamben’s ‘camp’ paradigm an apt description of the situation at the Lewisburg SMU—the spatial expression of the state of exception (after Minca, 2005). While the prison resides within the American legal system and its violence is thus an instrument of it, the SMU (and supermax generally) also manifests features of a lawless, camp-like space, exempt from outside scrutiny with inmate treatment typically beyond the scope of the law (Czajka, 2005; Rhodes, 2009). This is what, in turn, requires intervention and the exercise of civil liberties on behalf of inmates.

These topics will be explored more fully below. But first I offer a short historical geography of USP Lewisburg, depicting its original spatial structure and penal philosophy as the quintessential modern prison when it was built in 1932. Next, I frame USP Lewisburg’s change from a modern to late-modern prison within the larger punitive turn in the US, drawing from works that characterize the current historical moment as one brought into being within the neoliberal security state paradigm and whose prison ideal is the supermax facility. I then draw on a range of evidence, including letters from inmates at USP Lewisburg, to examine the SMU as the latest expression of the late-modern prison. I conclude with a brief discussion of some of the resistance tactics that inmates and others employ to challenge these toxic conditions, while reflecting on the BOP’s ‘need’ to perpetuate violence as a primary carceral technique. As will become evident throughout, this research aligns with a genre of scholarly-activist work that is public or ‘organic’ in its explicit attempt to engage in real-world dialogue in order to make a real-world difference (after Burawoy, 2005). My direct engagement is as an executive board member of the Lewisburg Prison Project (LPP), a local nonprofit organization that provides legal and advocacy assistance related to the conditions of confinement for those incarcerated in the Pennsylvania Middle District. The letters just mentioned are among the daily batch sent to the LPP alerting us to the current conditions at the prison.

USP Lewisburg: a model modern prison

When USP Lewisburg was built in 1932, its architecture reflected an ideology of reform and rehabilitation of its 1200 male inmates. Lewisburg was considered the most modern prison of its day, and others were subsequently modeled after it (Johnston, 2000; Lasansky, 2005). Over the decades it has housed some of the most famous and infamous of American crime figures such as Mafia bosses and those associated with them (Jimmy Hoffa, John Gotti), civil rights activists and political prisoners (Alger Hiss, Philip and Daniel Berrigan, and American Indian Movement leader Leonard Peltier), suspected terrorists, white-collar crime celebrities, and, probably most disproportionately, those convicted of federal drug offenses over the decades-long American ‘war on drugs’. Its history is one of which the BOP is quite proud, evidenced by, among other things, the trophy case in one of the main lobbies of the administration

building featuring paraphernalia of its famous inmates.⁽³⁾ The prison has been the subject of a number of books and films, including a 1991 Academy Award-nominated documentary *Doing Time: Life Inside the Big House* by filmmakers Alan and Susan Raymond, as well as a 1983 book by the same title produced by the US Commission on Civil Rights.

Alfred Hopkins's design for Lewisburg represented a radical departure in prison architecture. The structure exemplified the avant-garde philosophy of the period that stressed reform over retribution of the surging prison population of early-20th-century America (Johnston, 2000; Lasansky, 2005, pages 22–24). Foucault, in his *Discipline and Punish* (1977), offered a comprehensive genealogy of this move from the premodern to the modern prison and with it, the changing relationship between punishment and the human body. He argued that premodern punishment was characterized by spectacular torture and brutality, a prison system based on corporeal punishment with few consistencies in practice and fewer expectations that prisoners could be reformed. Beginning in the 18th century a type of modern 'scientific penology' took hold in Western societies; the modern penitentiary was spatially and temporally organized to supervise, organize, and regulate bodies in time and space according to technical methods and surveillance. This modern prison 'disciplined' the body into docility through surveillance and by regulating and controlling the operations, movements, and positions of the body and the spaces and times within which it moved—through drills, exercise, timetables, and the 'indefinite examination'—and all with an aim to reform the soul (1977, pages 184–194). In design and operation this meant moving from "an art of unbearable sensations ... to an economy of suspended rights" (Driver, 1985, page 426). To Foucault, the origins of the modern prison could be found in the monastery and army, both of which emphasized self-control, obedience to rules, and regulation through drills (1977, pages 135–169).

From the late 19th century, American social and moral reformers had sought to redress and ameliorate the deplorable conditions in American prisons—they were overcrowded, unregulated, poorly ventilated, dark, unhygienic spaces. When the BOP was created in 1930, among its principal goals were education, vocational training, and recreation, an approach in line with the contemporary scientific penology noted above. USP Lewisburg was designed under a 'telephone-pole plan', providing beneath one roof a number of interior spaces and buildings all connected by a single central corridor. It departed from conventional prison architecture in a number of ways, including featuring segregation and classification by grade of prisoner, intended for flexible programming and training as well as scaled levels of security (Johnston, 2000, page 141). The BOP issued a booklet describing just how forward thinking it considered the prison, calling it a place that offered the "prospect for ultimate rehabilitation" (Anon, 1939, page 1). Its architecture was meant to appear as little like a conventional prison as possible, for instance in giving the prison a monastic atmosphere—offering spaces for contemplation, study, and enlightenment. Stylistically, the cluster of Italian Renaissance-style red brick buildings "perched at the crest of a hill [was] more scenic than imposing, more serene than threatening ... more closely resembl[ing] a college campus than a prison" (Lasansky, 2005, page 21; see figure 1). Its spatial configuration reflected a philosophy that both work and play were necessary for rehabilitation. The BOP declared that

"in prison, all work and no play leads to brooding, plotting, perversions and riots. Deprived of recreation even the normal individual becomes morose and irritable, his nerves dangerously on edge" (Anon, 1939, page 13).

⁽³⁾I participated in an LPP group tour of USP Lewisburg in April 2009 (when I noticed the trophy case), but subsequent requests for visits have been denied, with the prison citing "security precautions". LPP staff do regularly visit inmates in the prison. When I approached the warden, public relations officer, and prison historian with requests for interviews for this paper, they reacted helpfully at first but after initial contact ignored my calls and e-mails.



Figure 1. View of the Lewisburg Penitentiary 9 October 1947 (photographer: Robert Tebbs; courtesy of the National Archives).

Aided by an enthusiastic local community which sought a panacea to Depression-era farm economics, Hopkins selected the rural Pennsylvania site for the prison for the “beneficial and stimulating qualities of the sunshine and fresh air [that were] more readily available in such settings” (Hopkins, 1930, page 19) and which allowed inmates to farm poultry, dairy cattle, hay, corn, clover, soybeans, alfalfa, sorghum, and potatoes (Lasansky, 2005, page 38; see figure 2). Inmates also participated in a variety of sporting events: baseball, long jump, basketball, boxing, and weight lifting; others were active in musical and theatrical groups that performed on the auditorium stage (as did Louis Armstrong’s big band and others in the 1950s); some produced a newspaper; and still others labored in the metal workshop. Ten classrooms, a library, and a reading room offered spaces for education, training, and religious services (Lasansky, 2005, pages 58–59; see figure 3). Hopkins’s design was published in the leading professional architectural journals of the time, and USP Lewisburg became the standard in prison architecture for the next four decades, widely copied in prisons throughout New York, Pennsylvania, Indiana, and California (Johnston, 2000, page 151).

This almost pastoral picture of life inside USP Lewisburg likely never mapped onto any sort of reality, but in any case the BOP ideology of reform and rehabilitation suffered a short life span. By the 1970s the discourse of reform and rehabilitation completely lost traction within the federal prison bureaucracy and in the courts, and stood in stark contrast to the norms and practices of everyday life inside penitentiary walls (Abramsky, 2002; Richards, 2008; Wacquant, 2005). Guard brutality, overcrowding, unsafe working conditions, infrastructural deterioration, and inmate civil rights challenges led to a breakdown in the BOP’s ability to control its facilities, and riots at many facilities (including later at USP Lewisburg) occurred with increasing frequency—most notoriously at Attica State Prison in upstate New York in 1971. By 1975 the BOP had abandoned its concept of rehabilitation, and by 1984 the US Congress passed the Sentencing Reform Act, which abolished parole for federal prisoners



Figure 2. Potato harvest at the Lewisburg Penitentiary farm, fall 1947 (courtesy of the National Archives).

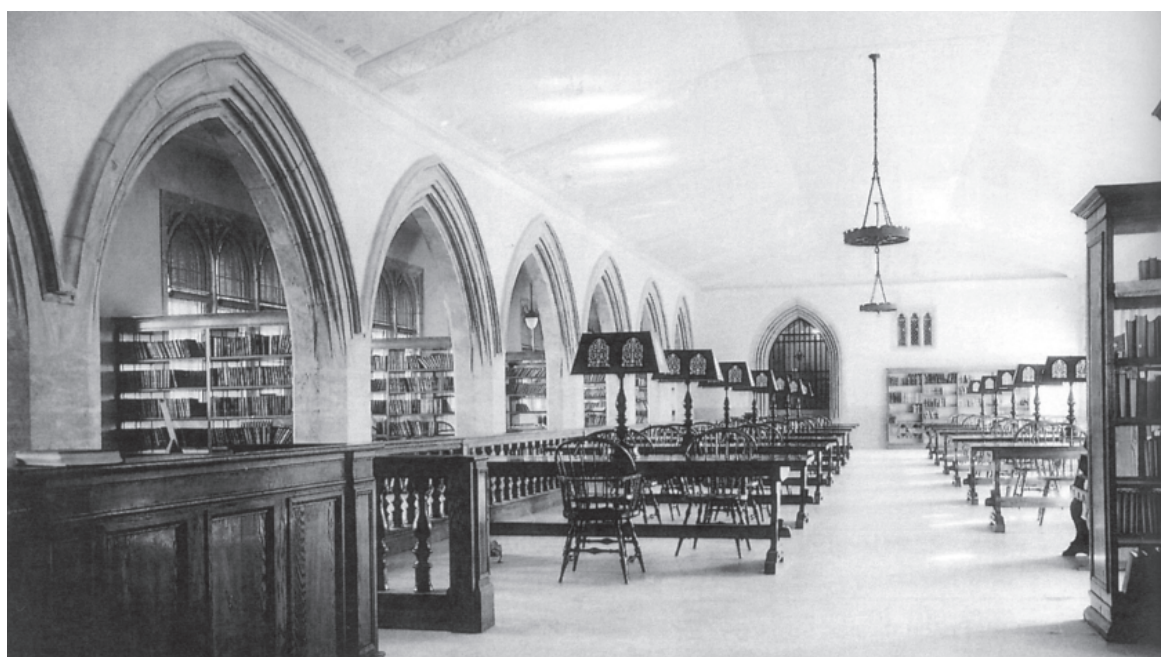


Figure 3. Prison Library. The ceiling of the main reading room is decorated with stucco reliefs depicting open books and other decorations (Lasansky, 2005, page 64) (courtesy of the National Archives).

and guaranteed that they serve at least 85% of their prison sentences. The BOP's response to the further problems this predictably caused (such as overcrowding) was what Abramsky (2002) aptly called a "return to the madhouse"—the increasing use of solitary confinement and permanent lockdown as primary methods of prison control.

Pure punishment and retribution in the supermax became the norm of the day (Haney, 2008; Richards, 2008). The next section details the spatial and other changes inherent in the 'ideal' of the supermax system of punishment brought into being during this late-modern punitive turn, a shift that can be understood within the wider social relations of American neoliberal reforms and the emergence of a new security state (Peck, 2003). This establishes the frame for what I depict as the latest version of the supermax ideal (and its corollary, the SMU) made manifest at 'camp' Lewisburg (Agamben, 1998; 2005).

The new penal state and the supermax ideal

Many scholars and critics have documented the current crisis in the American prison system generally (Gilmore, 2007; Peck, 2003; Wacquant, 2009). It is a penal system that now has a higher incarceration rate than anywhere else in the world and the highest rate in its own history, with 2.4 million behind bars. This current trend in mass incarceration is widely understood to have begun in the mid-1970s, and to be continuing unabated into the present (with decreases in some US states compensated by increases in others). Wacquant describes the “great American carceral boom” (2005, pages 5–11) and Pratt et al the “new punitiveness” (2005) that continues despite the fact that crime rates have been declining since the 1980s (Jones, 2010, page 396; Peck, 2003, page 226). While some scholars refer to this current period as a return of Western societies to the premodern spectacle of pure punishment that Foucault described [eg, see discussions in Hallsworth (2005) and Alford (2000)], most see it as a new phase in managing massive prison populations.

Many scholars examine recent prison growth as an industrial complex involved in state restructuring and the crisis of the neoliberal market economy (Gilmore, 2007; Harcourt, 2010; Peck, 2003), where “rollbacks on welfare correlate to high incarceration rates” and signal a regime shift towards a more punitive approach to regulating social marginality (Peck, 2003, page 224; Wacquant, 2005; 2009). Seventy percent of those incarcerated are unemployed or marginalized African-American or Latino men and women, and thus mass incarceration rates can be seen as a racialized strategy for regulating the urban poor (Peck, 2003, page 226). Within the ostensible free market of state economic restructuring, cuts in welfare and other resources for the poor—ideologically as well as financially—have now been reallocated to the development of prisons and thus have created a ‘penal state’ to stem the consequences of rising destitution (Jones, 2010; Wacquant, 2009). Those who are “structurally irrelevant” to capital accumulation are warehoused in prisons (Hallsworth and Lea, 2011, page 142).

As Peck succinctly observes, “this is not less government, but different government. A more punitive approach to social marginality”, an “uneasy marriage between economic liberalization and authoritarian governance” (2003, page 225). Peck and many others contend that this reduction in the welfare state is used to legitimate and harden new regulatory regimes and new forms of governmental rationality, suggesting that “the prison system can be understood as one of the epicentral institutions of these neoliberal times” (Peck, 2003, page 226). Harcourt (2010, page 77) concurs, arguing that neoliberal penology is a type of rationality where the state can claim—that is, retain—a measure of ‘legitimate’ control outside the dominant logic of classical economics, where it is claimed to be inefficient anyway. These and numerous other scholars argue that the security state is the successor to the liberal welfare state, and that this is evidenced in the new punitiveness and intensified authoritarianism (Pratt et al, 2005). Harcourt (2010) further explains that, since the state cannot cope with the costs of the prison boom, the private sector is increasingly brought in to build prisons and operate them at a cheaper rate, often locating them in economically depressed rural communities. Some geographers have examined such locational and economic development issues, particularly of those prisons in rural areas (eg, Glasmeier and Farrigan, 2007).

A number of scholars have expanded on this relationship between neoliberalism and increased prisonization, focusing primarily on international war detention centers such as Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib and framing their arguments around Agamben’s thesis of the current ‘state of exception’—which can be extended to US supermax facilities more generally (Agamben, 1998; 2005; Czajka, 2005; Hallsworth and Lea, 2011; Rhodes, 2009). Briefly, Agamben argues that a characteristic feature of the contemporary world is the claim by sovereign governments of the existence of a national security emergency, or state of

exception (such as the ‘war on terror’). In this state of exception judicial law and order is suspended and provisional measures are put in place (such as the USA PATRIOT Act), a progression in which the exception eventually becomes the rule as such measures are transformed into normalized techniques of government—the norm becomes indistinguishable from the exception (Agamben, 1998, pages 168–169; 2005, pages 1–31). Agamben modeled the paradigmatic state of exception on Nazi concentration camps and Auschwitz in particular (1998), and later offered Guantánamo Bay as its parallel, arguing that such camps become the materialization, the ‘exemplary locus’, the modern physical *space* of exception when the state of exception becomes the rule (Minca, 2005). As Agamben claims (1998, page 170):

“Only because the camps constitute a space of exception ... is everything in camps truly possible Whoever enter[s] the camp move[s] in a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective right and juridical protection no longer [make] sense.”

The camp is a space removed from the law and judicial process, the “material and mappable space within which violence becomes the constitutive element of *both* the torturer and the victim” (Minca, 2005, page 407).

Agamben’s theories of sovereignty, states of exception, the camp, and the associated production of “bare life” [human beings ‘so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer a crime’ (Agamben, 1998, pages 71ff, 181)] are rich and provocative. Because of this, they have stirred much debate and controversy across disciplines and continents, such as about the extent to which state violence is enacted as much through the law as outside of it (Gregory, 2006). Notwithstanding the important and extensive discussions about states of exception, the camp, and bare life, Rhodes (2009), Czajka (2005), and Spencer (2009) offer compelling arguments that Agamben’s camp paradigm can serve as an apt description of the late-modern American supermax prison, in ideology and practice. Though Agamben himself resisted conflating camps with correctional facilities generally (because they ostensibly exist within legal structures), Czajka (2005, pages 130–131) in particular argues that such a conflation is justifiable when applied specifically to the supermax—where residents exist so far outside the rubrics of citizenship and rights that everything committed against them “is truly possible”.

The evolution and entrenchment of super-maximum security prisons indicates a case of the exception becoming the rule, or the normalization of a state of exception. To Rhodes (2009, page 194), the growth of the supermax over the past thirty years “suggests that a new form has emerged ... replac[ing] older forms of segregation to become a taken-for-granted element”, a normalized state of exception in the penal landscape. Historically, total isolation and lockdown were temporary measures but they now have become a permanent fixture in American penology. Czajka (2005, pages 123–124) explains that the insulated nature of supermax institutions, combined with the seeming nonexistence of the rule of law on their premises—or at best, a severe disregard for it—situates these institutions within the realm of the lawless space of Agamben’s camp. Rhodes (2009, page 194) agrees, arguing that such spaces are “untethered from the specifics of criminal justice policy”. Moreover, as Czajka (2005, page 130) further observes, a camp does more than “enclose, warehouse, and exterminate”; its most important function is the showcasing of bare life, its illumination of human beings ripped out of their social contexts and gutted of their politics and identities. As Spencer (2009, pages 230–234) adds, it is this bare life that is abandoned by the law during a state of exception, and thus it faces at every instant the threat of violence and death.

As explained below, the supermax and its recent incarnation at the Lewisburg SMU can be easily cast as camp-like projects: their workings are internal to the BOP, rarely scrutinized

by outsiders; inmates are sent to these facilities by prison administrative decision, not judicial decision or court order; inmate placement is indefinite and cannot usually be appealed; and inmate treatment within these facilities is typically beyond the scope of the law (Czajka, 2005, pages 124–125; Rhodes, 2009, pages 194–199).

Supermax incarceration: from reform to retribution

The modern history of the supermax began in the 1970s, when prisons became increasingly violent and dozens of guards around the country, including two at the first federal supermax prison in Marion, Illinois, were killed and numerous lawsuits followed (King et al, 2008, page 146; Richards, 2008, pages 9–10). USP Marion had opened in 1963 to take the place of the infamous Alcatraz prison when it was closed, and USP Lewisburg in turn has now taken over the mantle—and some staff—from Marion (which subsequently became a medium security facility).

Richards (2008, pages 17–18) estimates that there are approximately 200 000 US prisoners in high-security solitary confinement today, and the number is growing. Among many other ostensible ‘benefits’, the BOP argues that the supermax is cost effective because it offers fewer amenities, services, and programs to inmates. However, the reality is a staggering annual cost of \$50 000 per prisoner, compared with \$20 000–30 000 for those in lower security facilities (Abramsky, 2002, page 28). Much of the additional cost is in staffing, to bring services to inmates rather than inmates to the services (medical, dining, religious) and to maintain a high-security regime, for instance in employing three to five correctional officers to move a single inmate to a recreation cage. And these costs do not even include construction or reconstruction costs. Supermax facilities are very expensive to build as they feature state-of-the-art technology and surveillance equipment, ubiquitous electronic controls, specially designed steel grates and concrete cell blocks, and so on (Morris, 2000, page 98).⁽⁴⁾

Richards (2008, page 11) reports that more than 70% of federal inmates are incarcerated for a nonviolent drug-related crime, many for transporting drugs. This is important to keep in mind, since nearly all those incarcerated in supermax facilities are isolated not for the crime that put them in prison in the first place, but for some infraction that occurred during incarceration. Only about 5% of federal inmates are placed in control units for a crime committed on the outside [Dave Sprout, personal communication, 14 June 2011; Vanyur (1995) estimates that number at less than 9%]. ‘Administrative segregation’ (formerly called solitary confinement) is a system internal to the BOP where inmates are sent by prison administrative decision, not judicial decision or court order (Abramsky, 2002; Czajka, 2005). Most have been labeled gang leaders or threats to other institutions, or they have committed crimes against correctional staff or other prisoners. The BOP argues that isolating such prisoners lowers the assault rate in the rest of the federal prison system and serves as a deterrent to other inmates, neither of which, as many scholars argue, has been empirically proven (Abramsky, 2002, page 28; Mears and Reisig, 2006, pages 33–46; Morris, 2000, pages 100 and 104). The reality is that the supermax socializes prisoners, guards, and the entire prison administrative structure to be more violent (Richards, 2008, page 12).

Descriptions of supermax conditions have been well established in the literature and thus require only a brief overview here. In the supermax, prisoners eat, sleep, live, exercise, and die in their cells alone, or in the case of USP Lewisburg, with a cellmate, as described below. Haney (2008, page 956), among many others, describes the oppressive day-to-day inmate experience in supermax lockdown: it is one of overall sensory deprivation, isolation and loneliness, enforced idleness and inactivity, oppressive security and surveillance procedures,

⁽⁴⁾The Freedom of Information Act request that I sent to the Federal Bureau of Prisons in December 2011, asking to disclose the cost of transforming the Lewisburg prison into an SMU, was subsequently lost. A second request submitted in June 2012 is still pending.

and despair. Those not ‘broken’ by the system may become more dangerous and mean. Both the inmate gang code and the masculinist staff code structure life inside, Haney argues. He argues that most correctional officers are influenced by an occupational culture with deeply “macho” values and perspectives which produce places “constantly in crisis”; staff are always on edge, “pumped up, hypervigilant” (2008, pages 966, 977). Violence, or the constant threat of it, is one guaranteed by-product of the supermax, and mental illness is the other, as many psychologists and criminal justice scholars have found (Haney, 2008; Morris, 2000). Prisoners subjected to prolonged isolation may experience depression, despair, anxiety, rage, claustrophobia, hallucinations, and an inability to think, concentrate, or remember. Mental health interviews are perversely conducted in the hallway: so-called “cell-front therapy” with other prisoners and staff listening in (Haney, 2008, page 975). Haney thus alerts us to the importance of the use of space and spatial design—and particularly the tactic of physical isolation—in producing the despair, terror, and violence of the supermax.

Though many criminal justice (and other) scholars have studied the spatial outcomes of the supermax, Martin and Mitchelson (2009, pages 459–460) observe that the study of American correctional facilities, in general, is a relatively neglected area by geographers. This, they note, is despite the fact that confinement and the “social practices of immobilization are fundamentally reliant on *spatial tactics*, or the use of space to control people, objects, and their movement.” Most geographers who have been interested in the interior spaces of prisons have in one way or another engaged with Foucault’s ideas from *Discipline and Punish*, particularly his discussion of Bentham’s panopticon design (1977, pages 195–299). Alford (2000, pages 127–129) debated Foucault’s analysis of the operation of power, arguing that internal prison space in maximum security prisons did not need to be highly regulated—only the entrances and exits did—since prisoners could not escape and surveillance served no purpose: “all you [really] have to do is count.” As Van Hoven and Sibley (2008) note, however, this does not mean that the internal organization of space in prison is unimportant: “The design of the prison and the ways in which space is configured and allocated to inmates affects levels of privacy, the desire or need to avoid or associate with others, and relationships between prisoners and officers” (page 1004). Such work on interior prison space has attempted to move beyond the panopticon, as it were, in understanding the varying capacities of prisoners to influence their environments for their own ends; that is, as opposed to simply being subjected to a universal power regime from the center (eg, Van Hoven and Sibley, 2008). In the next section I turn to the spatial tactics of the Lewisburg SMU, which has, among other things, shifted punishment from isolated lockdown to spatially crowded lockdown—an approach that guarantees additional violence as the unique ‘contribution’ to this late-modern state of exception (see Gaes, 1985; Martel, 2006, pages 602–603).

‘Camp’ Lewisburg:⁽⁵⁾ the (latest) late-modern prison

In 2008 USP Lewisburg began accepting men into its SMU program from the 117 federal institutions across the country, retrofitting nine of its eleven cellblocks to do so (prior to this, only one cellblock was considered maximum security). Community spaces such as exercise yards, sports courts, the communal dining room, the library, and, it goes without saying, the theater, have been virtually emptied. With an annual budget of \$64.3 million, the prison today employs 560 people, 360 of whom are corrections officers—one of the largest staffs in the country. Although prison officials declined to be interviewed for this paper, they did allow a group of local reporters a first-hand look at the SMU operation, and supplied their newspapers with propaganda and photographs (Walker, 2010).

⁽⁵⁾The term ‘camp’ used throughout this essay is based on Agamben’s use of it, and does not refer to the low-security prison camp of the same name that sits adjacent to the Lewisburg penitentiary.

Evidence of conditions at USP Lewisburg can be drawn from a number of sources. They include first-hand accounts from inmates [see footnote (3) above]; from attorneys and paralegals who have worked with these inmates (eg, Sprout, personal communication, 2011); from journalists and newspaper accounts, including *The Wall Street Journal* (Emschwiller, 2011; Finnerty, 2011; Moore, 2010); from BOP documents, handbooks, and statistics (eg, Lappin, 2008); from Lewisburg guards; from a former Lewisburg inmate and others who have published works on their experiences of incarceration at related supermax facilities (eg, Levasseur, 2005); and from a broad range of scholars and professionals who have studied supermax prison space and disciplinary logics of punishment.

The Lewisburg SMU program is built on progressive levels of punishment. It is in a number of ways similar to programs and conditions at other control unit and supermax facilities throughout the country, such as those formerly in place at Marion and currently at the federal ADX prison in Florence, Colorado; but it extends or departs from them as well. The Lewisburg SMU curriculum involves a four-step program that inmates are to complete over a two-year period, ‘earning’ their way back to a general prison population elsewhere. The BOP program statement describes it as ‘nonpunitive’, and outlines the (remarkably) general criteria upon which a federal inmate might qualify: for instance, anyone who has “participated in any . . . misconduct that adversely affected the orderly operation of a correctional facility” (Lappin, 2008, page 2). Movement through the levels is completely at the discretion of the warden and staff. An inmate enters at Level One with virtually no personal possessions, in total lockdown except for three showers per week (for those whose cells do not already contain them) and five hours per week for recreation (in an 8 × 10 foot cage within which he is to exercise with six to eight other men). Once every two weeks the inmate may be escorted to the ‘law library’—a closet located in C block that features a computer enclosed in a metal protective cage and a green plastic chair.

By Level Two inmates are allowed to speak to family and visitors through video monitors. The BOP program statement describes the curriculum at Level Two as targeting “treatment readiness skills (eg, basic empathy, attending, responding, respect, genuineness, etc.)” and the ability of the prisoner to demonstrate “positive community interaction skills” (Lappin, 2008, page 10). The statement emphasizes that “inmates who fail to make satisfactory progress may be returned to a previous level” (Lappin, 2008, page 9). In the fall of 2010, a local newspaper reported that there were 352 inmates in Level One, 401 in Level Two, 225 in Level Three, and 11 in Level Four (Walker, 2010). By December of 2011, a prison official maintained that 613 men had completed the program, although successful movement through these steps is difficult to verify, as an inmate could be moved into any level at any time; moreover, this spokesperson claimed the institution did not have data about how many inmates went through the SMU only to return (Finnerty, 2011).

The BOP retrofitted USP Lewisburg into an SMU block by block. Because many of the cellblocks already accommodated two inmates per cell (although only for sleeping at night), few major structural changes were made. Those that were made included (but were not limited to): adding steel reinforcements in cells and doors, and an elongation of the window of each cell door; the construction of new recreation cages featuring separate spaces for cuffing and uncuffing; new video communication equipment; the removal of lockers and shelves in the cells and replacement of porcelain toilets with steel ones; and the construction of holding cages in units and reconstruction in the showers.⁽⁶⁾ Each cell has only a bunk bed, desk-seat, and toilet.

⁽⁶⁾This information came at my request from a former USP Lewisburg inmate who witnessed these changes firsthand, in cellblocks B, C, and D.

In addition to the staged progression of ‘liberties’ in the program, another defining feature of the SMU—and one that is far more insidious—is the double ceiling of inmates in spaces so small that only one of them may walk within the cell at any given time. Inmates attempt to endure, for 23 or 24 hours per day, existence in double-occupied cells that range in size from 61 to 90 square feet. The BOP makes clear that this double ceiling practice is not a necessity due to overcrowding [although federal prisons now house 40% more prisoners than they were designed to hold (Emschwiler, 2011)]; rather it carries a penological intent. Interviewed by *The Wall Street Journal*, a BOP spokeswoman said that the Lewisburg inmates are deliberately housed in pairs to teach them how to “coexist with others” (Emschwiler, 2011), despite the fact that the same attempt to double-cell inmates at the Marion prison led to its eventual closure. When the BOP decided to reinstate the Marion plan at Lewisburg, it did so with the added requirement that at no time would an inmate be outside his cell unrestrained.

Though prison officials claim that known rivals will never be placed together in a cell or recreation cage, documentary evidence shows that in fact guards have deliberately placed enemies together in order to provoke violence (Sprout, personal communication, 2011). Yet other guards—and indeed the local guards’ union—have publicly acknowledged how unsafe the prison has become under the SMU regime (Morton, 2008), and one corrections officer spoke publicly about how inmates are “not getting any sleep and they’re on edge” (Moore, 2010).

Violence is almost a certainty within this social–spatial nightmare. While the Lewisburg warden declares (without evidence) that the SMU has provided a system-wide drop in violence, reasoning that “inmates elsewhere in the system simply do not want to end up in Lewisburg” (Finnerty, 2011), the facts speak otherwise. In addition to the five deaths since the SMU began operation, 478 officially documented serious assaults also occurred to mid-2011 (American Federation of Government Employees, 2011). Inmates have been writing with increased frequency to the LPP about these conditions, sending an astonishing 2378 letters from 2008 until mid-2011 (168 in 2008, 514 in 2009, 1139 in 2010, and 562 in the first few months of 2011). Many of the inmates’ letters address more than one issue, but the constant fear and threat of violence or disfigurement, double-ceiling and cellmate brutality, staff brutality and harassment, and excessive use of restraints account for most of the complaints. One inmate, ‘Ray’ (letter dated 23 May 2011)⁽⁷⁾ wrote that,

“[they] put me in a cell with one of my enemies. They noticed we were about to fight and still walked away from the cell after they unhandcuffed us both. Then me and the guy tried to figure out how to get one of us moved before we got into a fight and got into more trouble.”

Most ‘services’ that prisoners receive are delivered to them through the small hole in the cell door. The cells in each of the SMU units feature metal doors with windows for guards to peer in through, and slots for meals to be passed through and for men to back into for handcuffing prior to movement. When two cellmates are returned to their shared cell, one inmate inserts his hands through a slot in the locked cell door to have his cuffs removed, while the other waits with his hands still locked in the cuffs. Most assaults have occurred during the momentary opportunity for action when one cellmate was handcuffed and the other was not. Thus we can observe that double ceiling itself is a spatial torture enacted upon inmates by the BOP, but that the inmates themselves share in the ‘delivery’ of the violence upon one another. Indeed, as Levasseur (2005, page 52) presciently suggests, “if we cannot counter the administration’s strategy of dangling each prisoner from his or her own rope, they will turn us into our own worst enemies.” In that the BOP appears to have been successful.

⁽⁷⁾Nine current USP Lewisburg inmates granted me permission to quote from their letters; in fact they encouraged me to do so. The names used are pseudonyms.

‘George’ (letter dated 14 March 2011) wrote to LPP describing being stabbed repeatedly by his cellmate while cuffed behind his back, when he was returned from a shower. “I really don’t know what to do at this moment. But I fear for my life that this will happen again, I’m paranoid out of my mind. Please help ... security here is not safe.”

Inmates are well aware of the danger and violence that the SMU creates—which will be either inflicted by them or upon them—and document in their letters their mostly unsuccessful attempts to find their own remedies. ‘John’ (letter dated 14 June 2010) describes the “SMU staff’s policy of refusing to intervene in cell fights and assaults by one cellmate on another cellmate. I was assaulted by [name withheld].” ‘Louis’ (letter dated 10 February 2011) described being denied an urgent request for a single cell, citing prison officials’ observation that he did not need one. Louis rhetorically asked, “what would indicate the need ... [my] having to inflict serious injury or kill someone?” Another inmate, ‘Joe’ (letter dated 6 July 2010), described the brutal stabbings he received from another inmate from whom he clearly should have been separated. In a later letter (dated 19 January 2011) he ominously wrote that, “at least you’ll have this letter to show I sought help in the event someone is assaulted and charges are filed against me Please check into this before it is too late.”

Even if cellmates are compatible—and we must ask, who would be or could be compatible under these oppressive conditions?—the system is designed to create tension and violence. Housing two inmates per cell “leav[es] them locked in with nothing to do but hate each other and plot” all day (Moore, 2010). Many of the inmates write about cell size and the mental strain of overcrowding. ‘Don’ (letter dated 6 January 2011) wrote that

“there are no duress buttons in the cells like other penitentiaries. Numerous acts of violence occur because people are frustrated by living in doubles [and] fights, assaults, suicides, and murders [result]. Staff respond by tear gassing the occupants and then place them in hard restraints for prolonged periods Psychology is purposely ignoring the emotional distressed [sic] caused, and even medical are in league with the officer’s [sic] here ... I’ve been on two hunger strikes just to be alone for a few days.”

‘Ed’ (undated letter) writes about oppressive cell size, as does ‘Ray’ (letter dated 23 May 2011): “the prison provides only 55½ square feet for two grown men to live and be locked down in for 18 to 24 months straight These are all single man cells that they force two people into ... I drew you a picture” (see figure 4).

Inmates describe myriad forms of physical as well as psychological torture employed by officers and guards, from refusing to unshackle an inmate who needed to use the toilet to bypassing inmates for showers for reasons unapparent to the inmate. Many inmates document promises that are made but not kept, and relate correctional staff routinely manipulating the ‘truth’ of events, aware that inmates have almost no leverage in providing their side of a story without fear of retaliation. Prisoners also face a constant threat that they will be returned to a lower level or even ‘day one’ of the program (‘Ray’, letter dated 23 May 2011; Lappin, 2008). Many inmate letters quote guards and administrators who declare, “we make our own rules here” (eg, ‘Ray’, letter dated 29 April 2011). The camp, to be sure.

Those who refuse a cellmate—typically because he is a known enemy (from a rival gang), a pedophile, or a “snitch” (Sprout, personal communication, 2011)—do so by refusing to be handcuffed in order that the cell door can be opened to allow the new cellmate to enter or a returning cellmate to reenter. When this happens the officer threatens the arrival of five or six helmeted, heavily armored guards in a Special Operations Response Team (SORT); if the refusal persists, the team enters the cell, removes the inmate to an isolated area to be shackled and placed in ambulatory restraints—shackling his legs, cuffing his hands, and connecting those cuffs to a chain around his torso—for an indefinite period of time. If resistance becomes physical, the SORT team will first teargas the cell and remove the

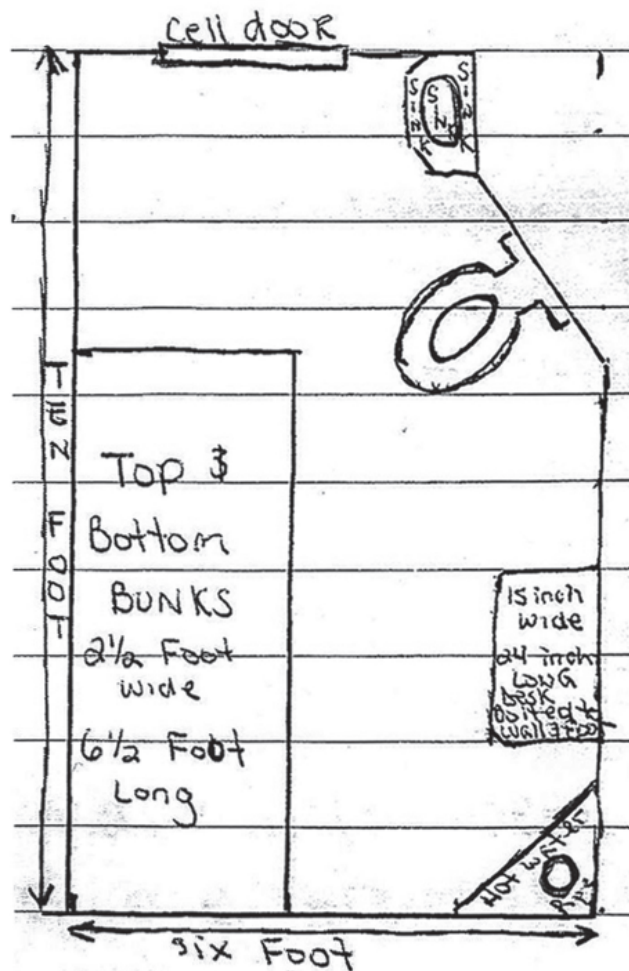


Figure 4. Inmate's drawing of double-occupancy SMU cell at USP Lewisburg today (used with permission).

inmate to a basement location where he can be 'four-pointed' in the prison's newly acquired restraint bed called 'the cross'. As Morris (2000, pages 100–103) and Haney (2008, page 971) argue, these threats, heavy shackles, and SORT guards "dressed like Darth Vader" all foster relationships of hostility and the potential for "custodial overkill" is great. One Lewisburg inmate who refused a cellmate was four-pointed for two days, and then placed in ambulatory restraints for a month. [The first of the lawsuits filed by LPP and its parent organization, the Pennsylvania Institute Law Project, was on his behalf; Emschwiler (2011); Finnerty (2011).] Need it be noted that ambulatory restraints make it difficult to breathe, walk, fully extend the body, and of course can interfere with the daily activities of eating, drinking, and cleaning oneself after using the toilet?

If at the level of ideology the SMU program aims to produce inmates who manifest "treatment readiness skills such as empathy, respect ... and positive community interaction skills" (Lappin, 2008, page 10), at the level of practice this outcome is certain to fail since there are no opportunities—or indeed spaces—for cultivating these traits. This contrasts dramatically with the ideals around which USP Lewisburg as a modern prison was originally designed: recall the BOP arguing that "both work and play [are] necessary for rehabilitation" and that, without them, "brooding, plotting, perversions and riots" were bound to occur (Anon, 1939, page 13). The modern prison offered many spaces within which an inmate might actually develop "community interaction skills" if those were indeed a goal, but developing them in the toxic atmosphere of the SMU is a contradiction in terms. The spatial and penological changes

inherent in the late-modern SMU program—to “break” prisoners through isolation (Mears and Reisig, 2006, page 34)—can be reduced to pure retribution and guaranteed violence; in short, the social and spatial conditions that modern reformers sought to counteract.

USP Lewisburg’s spatial tactics of confinement involve idleness in everyday life; rules mean little and are capriciously ignored by staff, and tense, violent bodies are ultimately produced out of the system. This is a place “constantly in crisis”; staff are always on edge and hypervigilant to the tension and rage that permeate the space (Haney, 2008, pages 977, 960). This is a long way from the panoptical “perfected operation of power” Foucault described (1977), in which an increasing number of bodies are controlled by a decreasing number of people who do the controlling. Indeed, the guards themselves have nothing else to do but address violence as it erupts, and calls for even larger numbers of guards (Morton, 2008; Moore, 2010) ensure their own value within the system. ‘Camp’ Lewisburg is a lawless space, removed from the law and judicial process, in which crimes committed against inmates are not considered crimes (Czajka, 2005, pages 123–131; Minca, 2005, page 407); it is characterized by constant fear of assault and a corresponding lack of accountability from prison staff and administration; it is expressive of “an exception that became the rule” (Rhodes, 2009, page 195).

Gaes (1985), Martel (2006), and Baxter et al (2005), among many others, explore the importance of privacy in prison. Leder (in Baxter et al, 2005, pages 209–210) contends that degree of privacy determines not only one’s “sense of self” and autonomy, but also protection from the gaze of others and feelings of safety or danger. Clearly the lack of privacy as a spatial tactic to engender violence at USP Lewisburg constitutes it as the latest of the late-modern prisons in its capacity to instill in inmates a longing and preference for the privacy (and even isolation) of the self-contained single cells at the federal ADX facility in Colorado, where they would be likely sent if too troublesome at Lewisburg (Sprout, personal communication, 2011). At ADX, prisoners are alone in their cells at all times, they recreate alone, and at no time come into contact with another human being, sometimes for years at a time (Dowker and Good, 1992; Vanyur, 1995, page 92). Unlike Lewisburg, every cell at ADX is also equipped with a television, “part of the BOP pacification program . . . to give vicarious social interaction” to otherwise completely isolated men (Levasseur, 2005, pages 48–49). Even the Lewisburg warden admits that inmates who say they cannot live with another inmate “are simply trying to get a solitary cell” (Finnerty, 2011). The pernicious choice offered to inmates—that even the total isolation at ADX (along with the ‘luxury’ of the television) is somehow preferable to the double celling at USP Lewisburg—sheds light on just how debased the late-modern prison and its penal practices have become.

And again we might ask, what does this late modern prison ‘produce’? Foucault’s (1977) premodern prison did not produce anything; it was simply a system of detention, holding, and elimination. The modern prison produced—at least at the level of ideology but also through its ‘community’ spaces of libraries, theaters, farms, and sports teams—potentially rehabilitated and reformed bodies and souls. Though we see threads of each of these at Lewisburg, the late-modern SMU’s spatial tactics and penal philosophy combine to produce something else again: only heightened conditions of violence and terrorizing risk and brutality.

Concluding reflections

The judge succinctly scolded the clueless Eric Shoemaker (above) for requesting a state prison over a county one because there were more interesting things to do there: “prison is [not] a place you can hang out . . . and play in sports leagues.” In line with this judge’s thinking, and though it may appear otherwise, this research is not intended to make a case for a return to (or development of) more ‘modern’ prisons. As Foucault argued, the prison reform movement, rather than being driven by a humanitarian goal of establishing an equitable

system of punishment, simply offered and perfected new ways in which to punish, and new circuits within which to do it (1977, page 89). In his ruminations about Attica Foucault (1996) made it clear that he was not against fighting for the rights of prisoners (and in fact he was active in such a group himself); only that such rights need to be understood within the larger context of the purpose of a prison in the first place. In *Discipline and Punish* he argued that to lament the failure of prisons (eg, to ‘rehabilitate’) is to miss the point, because failure is part of its very nature. The aim of the prison and the carceral system more generally is to “produce delinquency as a means of structuring and controlling crime” (1977, pages 276–277).

It is helpful to acknowledge, along with Foucault, that the aim of the Lewisburg SMU does not appear to be the stemming of violence and pathology within the American federal penal system, but rather to reproduce it, to *provoke* and perpetuate criminality—in short, to keep prisoners locked up and ‘the machine’ going. This seems especially the case given the context of the SMU and supermax, where the criminality at issue is a product of incarceration practices themselves, created within the prison walls rather than on the outside. The violence self-perpetuates the institution, and indeed signals the need for additional facilities [see footnote (1)]. In essence, the business of creating violence feeds the much larger agenda of the neoliberal security state as outlined by Wacquant (2009), Peck (2003), and Harcourt (2010), as discussed above, such as in the warehousing of minorities otherwise superfluous to capitalist accumulation while creating a boom for the prison industry.

While not a plea for a return to some golden era of modern prison reform, this research does suggest that the shifting historical geography of USP Lewisburg represents something profoundly worth resisting. The late-modern spatial changes brought about at USP Lewisburg and the replacing of ‘spaces of reform’—if we might call them that—with double-celling lockdown represents gross violations of the eighth US constitutional amendment that protects against cruel and unusual punishment. As such, we might question the ability of inmates at USP Lewisburg to resist the spatial enclosure and punitive practices currently in place there—that is, to reject their status as the mute, passive, “bare lives” (Gregory, 2006; Rhodes, 2009). As evidenced by their letters, the men have few such opportunities outside of hunger strikes, refusal of cellmates, and creating violence in order to be relocated to another facility (with the much-preferred single cells), all tactics which ensure retaliation from prison administration. Like the men at the top of the inmate hierarchy who “do their time with dignity and oppose the administration and its rules despite potentially harsh consequences” (King et al, 2008), ‘Frank’ in a letter to LPP (dated 12 June 2010) stated rather ambiguously that “me and my friends here have been responsible for most all the changes for the better in the last 14 months in this program [and] it’s cost us dearly but we’d feel like punks if we accepted this shit.” The other primary strategy employed by Lewisburg inmates is the writing of letters to outsiders, detailing conditions in hopes of initiating civil rights litigation. These letters are important; LPP and other organizations rely on documentary evidence from inmates and on their families to join in their struggle, to expose the dangerous realities of what is going on behind the closed doors of the prison camp and a government operating outside of the rule of law in its declared state of exception on crime, criminals, and ‘safety’ in our communities.

North (2008) meanwhile reports that the Lewisburg SMU will serve as a model for up to 113 other facilities in the federal system that may undergo a similar transition in the future. Yet, the tide is beginning to turn in the other direction, as civil rights lawsuits are piling up that can potentially halt these developments. The American Civil Liberties Union has several class action suits pending against supermax prisons in Illinois, Ohio, and Wisconsin. We may now add Pennsylvania to that list: the first of what could be many lawsuits on behalf of USP Lewisburg inmates was filed in December 2011 in the US Middle District

Court of Pennsylvania. While I acknowledge the fundamental pathology of the prison system as a starting point, it is nonetheless important to continue working against the inhumane supermax and programs such as the SMU. Though Agamben envisions a future freed from the corrupting influence of sovereign law itself (2005, pages 85–87), such suits are also perhaps the most effective and powerful tool of resistance to the BOP, and hence the US Department of Justice’s, grossly unjust penal practices of today.

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