

Sanjana Liliah

Dr. Villalon

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Comparative Essay - Goffman and Bourdieu

**Summary**

My impression after reading the article, *The Q100 bus to Rikers can be a lifeline for families with loved ones inside the jail*, by Jasmine Garsd from NPR, is that the Q100 bus is a vital communication system that connects incarcerated individuals in the prison system to their loved ones outside of it. As expressed multiple times throughout the article, conditions within the prison industrial complex are often cause for concern. The conditions create a hostile environment which encroaches on the stability of an individual's mind and the wellbeing of their body. I thought that centering the article around the Q100 was a really interesting way of presenting the inhumane conditions that exist in prisons. Due to these inhabitable conditions, feelings of helplessness fester and the lack of effort to restructure the prison system is blatantly exhibited. Reformation should exist in a way that genuinely and effectively supports the rehabilitation and successful reintegration of incarcerated individuals back into society. I value that NPR chose to utilize an empathetic approach to the portrayal of abuse in the prison system. By compiling touching reports about the experiences their loved ones endured, it offers an approach that lets us see directly through prison walls and behind the scenes.

## Erving Goffman

The prison industrial complex serves more purposes than being a center for rehabilitation. What it claims to prioritize is not actually reflected and this is represented by Erving Goffman's theory of **Dramaturgy** which expresses how life is separated between what we show to others (front stage) and what we hide from the world (back stage). This not only applies to how individuals live their daily lives but to how society operates on a whole. On the outside, society is a relation of social interactions that aim to keep order and safety in the world so that individuals can exist without the occurrence of constant violence. On the inside however, at least in the current socio-economic status of the US' society, it is more driven by showing preference to what will most efficiently produce money. Problems or struggles of which the majority of individuals experience on the day to day, do not take priority in being addressed by the government.

There are a multitude of problems that contribute to mass incarceration of marginalized individuals. One of these problems is the way in which incarcerated individuals, whether current or former, are viewed by society as a whole. Another one of Goffman's principles portrays the idea that **one may construct their self image and identity only by how others perceive them**. I think that as much as this definitely holds weight, it could also fall short once an individual gains self awareness of how they see themselves and how others see them. However, I do think that it is very apparent in relation to the prison industrial complex. Incarcerated individuals are incredibly ostracized and removed from society. They are seen as criminals, dangerous individuals, and often deserving of less rights than any other citizen.

A prominent example of how this disconnect exists is that so many applications, which would grant individuals beneficial resources, ask individuals to fill out if they have been

previously incarcerated. Yes, the law states that employers are unable to discriminate against previously incarcerated individuals and that they are unable to ask about the presence of a criminal record up until a certain point, but that doesn't mean that discrimination doesn't occur. If individuals are unable to acquire an occupation, they are unable to generate revenue and sustain themselves. Therefore, they will be likely to resort to other ways to generate a constant income, which may be illegal and lead them back to the prison system.

Furthermore, Goffman described the concept of a **Total Institution** which perfectly encapsulates the integration of individuals into the prison system. The textbook *Classical and Contemporary Sociological Theory* by Scott Appelrouth and Laura Desfor Edles (ADE), expresses that, "As a result, they are subjected to the mortification of self: the process of 'killing off' the multiple selves possessed prior to one's entrance into the total institution and replacing them with one totalizing identity over which the person exercises little, if any, control." (1065, ADE). As soon as you step into a prison or jail, you are forced to assimilate into a group of people devoid of individualistic characteristics. You lose so many of your freedoms—the freedom to privacy, to eat when and what you want, to go where you want, and so much more. You relinquish your control over your own life. Most importantly you relinquish the freedom to adequate medical attention and that is most distressing.

### **Pierre Bourdieu**

When applying Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theories to the prison industrial complex, I believe that it is important to first address his concept of **Habitus**. This concept expresses how one is able to ascertain their place in society. Essentially, it is the compilation of one individual's specific perceptions about the world into their identity. More specifically, their understanding of

their life and the specific instances they experience due to the societal aspects that affect them.

After understanding that Bourdieu believes that how you live life is dependent on the self image you individually create for yourself, we can address what aspects exactly affect individuals.

Bourdieu expresses different types of capital which represent the amount of agency an individual holds. For instance, “This is crucial because the distribution of capital, in defining the space of positions, defines the space of possible position-takings,” (ADE, 1289). The amount of capital that you personally hold and are in control of, dictates the power you hold and the breadth of your ability to actually do what you want. The more capital, the more power you have. Most importantly in relation to the prison system, we have **economic capital**, or money or items used to barter. In the capitalist society in which the US exists, its driving force is money and the generation of more in order to perpetuate society. While in the prison system, your access to economic capital is strained. Individuals have to rely on others outside the system to send them money. So, if your loved ones also don’t have an adequate amount of capital, they are unable to send much help. Additionally, working in the prison system does not generate any sort of living wage. Often incarcerated individuals will rely on exchanges other than money, such as material goods, acts, or the expectancy of trust/loyalty.

Bourdieu also expresses the concept of **Symbolic Violence**. Symbolic violence is the idea that the relations people hold with each other, the exchanges they partake in, whether that be money or other material forms of an exchange, are examples of violence. These exchanges are seldom equal and therefore that is why they are deemed “violent.” I thought this was especially relevant to the prison system because of how it revolves around exchanges. One example is the overarching exchange of time that a prisoner gives in order to be allowed to return to society. There is no way you can get back that time and however long it is, it greatly impacts your

physical and mental state. Many times people in jail are not even convicted but just awaiting their trial, however, this does not exempt them from the harsh effects of prison life.

One extremely depressing example of the complete unequal exchange of time for reintegration is the instance regarding the “Central Park Five,” now “Exonerated Five.” These five teenagers at the time were wrongfully processed and charged for attempted murder, rape, and assault of a woman only to be found not guilty of the charges after they had already served from six to thirteen plus years of jail time (Harris). Doing time in prison or jail does irreparable damage to your psyche. Being released into society and being allowed to have your freedom again does not offset what you lost inside those walls. That is why Bourdieu’s concept of Symbolic Violence is so apparent in the prison industrial complex.

Going back to the work that individuals do in prisons, one example is their contribution to the potato market, specifically in Idaho. The documentary *13th* dictates, “It’s always been Idaho potatoes. They’re planted, grown, harvested, packed and shipped by inmates,” (DuVernay). We are partaking in an exchange between ourselves and incarcerated individuals by purchasing Idaho potatoes. Their toil and labor results in the potatoes in our grocery stores and in turn we do not often contribute our personal economic capital to the prison system and often openly discriminate against incarcerated individuals. In this situation, they are giving so much of their labor to the exchange and we are taking even more from them. It is in no way equal because the general public does not often care to support bills or laws that may benefit incarcerated individuals in the long run. They do not benefit from this exchange.

## Compare and Contrast

One important distinction I would like to make between Goffman and Bourdieu is that Goffman focuses more on the effect of society's perception of the individual on their life, but Bourdieu's focus is more so on the effect of the individual's perception of society on their life. From Goffman, we can conclude that regarding the prison system, a large aspect of its heavy impact on those in it is because of the societal understanding it has generated. Incarcerated individuals on the whole are not viewed positively by society. So, once integrated into the prison system, one takes on that view of themselves, a view that they are not deserving of equal rights. This mentality is only made worse because of how oppressive the general prison environment is. As expressed in the article by Garsd, "The nurse was busy. The doctor was busy. And he was sitting there bleeding." It's absolutely depressing to see that medical care, which should be a right that everyone has easy access to, is in fact very difficult to attain in prison. This connects to how prisons are more often than not understaffed because the prison environment is a big deterrent to those who may wish to work inside it. If there was more of an effort to restructure the prison system to properly support its people, there would be more staff members to offer their help to incarcerated individuals.

Bourdieu's sociological theories express that it is an individual's personal capital which determines their life route. If one is lacking in economic capital for example, they are unable to efficiently support themselves and therefore will likely end up in the prison system. However, you do not escape the need to have capital in prison or jail. In fact, there is a greater need to procure your own capital because once inside the prison system, you lose the "security blanket" that society offers you. You have to sustain your own safety and this often requires having capital, whether that be the exchange of money, actions, material goods or other items. Usually, all

exchanges will be unequal and therefore exhibit the concept of Symbolic Violence. Bourdieu deems it violent that in an exchange, one side will often be severely taken advantage of and given the very “short straw” of the lot.

It is extremely beneficial to examine the prison system from both of their views because we essentially see the same thing. The priorities of our society are not in accordance to what its inhabitants truly require in order to increase their quality of life. Only the issues which the general population deems important and in need of attention are the ones that receive attention. Those in the prison system are arguably the most oppressed individuals in society. While incarcerated and sometimes afterwards as well, their voting rights are revoked. Without the right to vote, one is not able to enact any change in our democratic society. Furthermore, since the popular opinion of incarcerated individuals is that they are undeserving of equal rights, those who haven't been in the prison industrial complex or involved with it, will likely not understand their struggles and needs and therefore be unable to efficiently cater to them.

### **Conclusion**

After reviewing the viewpoints of both Goffman and Bourdieu, it is easier to see the different elements that surround the prison system and the necessity of the Q100 bus to the quality of life experienced by incarcerated individuals. In order to make change, the most important step is awareness. We are only able to address an issue once we are aware that it exists. Sociology exists to keep track of different social themes across time, what continues to appear and what has changed. Sociologists inspect and critique society as it is so that we can become aware of why we act the way we do. After understanding that a social institution affects individuals in a certain manner or that the general population's view of a group of people affects their quality of life in different ways, we can begin to make the necessary changes.

## References

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