

## **Tour de Farce**

*Charles Huckelbury*

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Prison tours are always choreographed performances, but that does not prevent perceptive participants from gaining a little insight into the operation of the physical plant they are visiting. The prison administration and its representatives naturally want to put the best face on an unpleasant situation, striving, in Sarah Palin-esque fashion, to put lipstick on a pit bull. It is therefore imperative for anyone interested in ethnographic studies of the prisoner demographic to look beyond the dog-and-pony show for more subtle indications of what actually transpires before they arrive and after they leave. Those observations, however, hardly qualify as valid full ethnographic studies.

Such investigations are difficult, made even more so by the restrictions placed on members of the tour, often involving the prohibition of any contact, including conversation, with the prisoners. Indeed, some tours are even conducted during lockdowns for count to facilitate this isolation. Such tours can also make prisoners feel like zoo animals before the viewing public. And, of course, those doing the viewing can no more form a coherent schema of what life in prison is like than ethology students can assess an animal's behaviour by watching it pace back and forth in its cage.

Alternatively, tours can be far more constructive when selected prisoners are provided the opportunities to speak, an occasion that can put a human face on what would otherwise be merely a statistic. A caveat to this strategy is the tendency of staff to select prisoners who are not disruptive and will function as little more than shells for the administration. This tactic shifts the discussion from an operational basis to a more favourable personal one, with the chosen exemplar demonstrating the successful transformation from miscreant to citizen.

Another possibility for face-to-face encounters may be created by the administration's desire to showcase a particular program. At the New Hampshire State Prison, for example, until its recent demise, I was part of a program that trained service dogs for physically and emotionally challenged men and women. The dogs lived with their trainers in our cells and were matched with companions upon graduation. All tours that entered the housing unit received introductions to the program and several prisoners were assigned to provide a brief overview. And, of course, the tour members met our dogs, an experience that never failed to break the tension and win

smiles. The tour members saw the cells, showers and common area, but in every case, the emphasis was on the dogs, to the exclusion of their human trainers.

Without such a program, however, the standard tour gets only a cursory look behind the walls, which unfortunately often evokes either a sense of outrage that prisoners are living a leisurely life in a cushy environment or promotes an unrealistic assessment of the carceral experience as a genuinely rehabilitative exercise. One personal incident continues to stand out three decades later.

A tour entered a prison in Florida in the mid-1970s and walked into the cellblock I was living in at the time. I had done a few things to make the cell slightly more comfortable – a little painting, a few pictures on the wall, a small medicine cabinet, radio playing – all of which caused one of the group to take a step inside, look around for a few seconds, and pronounce that “this isn’t so bad”. He was standing in a six-by-ten concrete and steel cage, a ‘home’ smaller than his bathroom, and this man said it wasn’t “too bad”. The meagreness of such an ‘ethnography’ is obvious.

This is not to say that academics and other professionals would draw the same inferences. Obviously, a tour composed of such men and women would appreciate the damage that confinement in a large closet for decades would entail, on both the body and the mind of the prisoner, and could frame the attending arguments in coherent terms. But for the general public, prison tours are a study in superficiality, having no more basis in reality than, say, a tour of the battlefield at Gettysburg, which cannot begin to impart a grasp of the horror that was the Civil War. For prisoners, it is a minor disruption in another boring day.

Can, then, prison tours function as a laboratory for ethnographic studies? Yes, but only very incompletely, and the only with adequate training for observers prior to the tour. For the public in general, a tour of the physical plant led by uniformed guards, and seeing the obvious control of the prisoners inside, remain a nostrum designed to promote an acceptable rationale for the expenditure of their tax dollars and to relieve some anxiety about the predators who are feared to populate their cities. A concomitant to that proposition is the persistent belief in the necessity of such facilities, which, when you think about it, just might be the motivating force behind the organization and availability of such tours.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Charles Huckelbury* was sentenced to life imprisonment – 35 year minimum – at the age of 27 and has spent the last 28 years in prison. Awarded second place in Prison Life’s fiction contest in 1995, he won the PEN American Center first prize for fiction in 2001. A regular contributor to the *JPP* since 1997, Charles joined the Editorial Board in 2001 and is now an Associate Editor. He was one of four featured writers in Shawn Thompson’s *Letters From Prison* (Harper Collins, 2001). His new book of poetry, *Tales From the Purple Penguin* (BleakHouse Publishing, 2008) has received rave reviews from students and academics.

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