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Stephen A. Toth, *Mettray: A History of France's Most Venerated Carceral Institution.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. xii + 263 pp. Figures, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. $43.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781501740183; $28.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781501740190 (pdf).

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For contemporary observers and later scholars, Mettray, the agricultural colony for juvenile delinquents established near Tours in 1840, has been hailed as exemplary. For its founder, Parisian jurist and philanthropist Frédéric-Auguste Demetz, Mettray represented the perfect tool for the regeneration of unruly youths. For Michel Foucault, who placed the institution center stage in *Surveiller et punir*, Mettray's exemplarity resided in how its rigid timetabling embodied the discipline of the modern penal system (and society more broadly) in its purest form.[1] Despite Mettray's prominence, however, there have been few in-depth historical studies devoted to it. In 2005, an edited volume was published in French, drawing on the *colonie*'s archives which became available to researchers that same year.[2] Stephen A. Toth's *Mettray: A History of France's Most Venerated Carceral Institution* is the first monograph in English to tackle at length the history of this pivotal establishment.

As is the case for all the existing work on Mettray, the ghost of Foucault haunts this book. But rather than taking Foucault as a point of departure for his analysis, as much of the existing literature does, Toth engages in a critique. In line with scholars like David Garland, Toth takes particular aim at Foucault's apparent indifference to questions of agency and resistance, and his neglect of the everyday realities on the ground within the institution.[3] Adopting an interdisciplinary approach to the study of penality, Toth reveals how in its day-to-day operations Mettray was not the well-oiled, effective machine Foucault presented it to be. Mettray's internal records chart inmates' attempts to undermine authority and disciplinary power, which, Toth argues, indicate an agency underappreciated by Foucault.

In chapter one, Toth traces Mettray's origins within the broader movement for prison reform in the first half of the nineteenth century. Concerned about the vulnerability of urban waifs, reformers like Demetz sought measures tailored to the rising problem of juvenile delinquency. Under France's penal code, until 1850, although juveniles were shielded from incurring the harshest punishments, there was little by way of distinct institutional infrastructure and programs for them. While Mettray would become the preeminent model of juvenile establishments in the western world, it was itself bound up in a wider network of reform. Toth demonstrates Mettray's own indebtedness to prisons in North America and agricultural colonies for delinquent youth in Europe. Commissioned by the government to retrace Tocqueville and

Beaumont's famous pilgrimage to U.S. penitentiaries, Demetz became convinced of the benefits, primarily for religious reasons, of the Pennsylvania system's constant and total isolation of prisoners. Returning to France, Demetz promptly took off on another tour, this time under the aegis of a Parisian philanthropic organization, scouting for alternative forms of detention for juvenile delinquents. Visiting various sites, Demetz observed youths being cultivated in the art of agricultural labor in order to steer them away from a life of immorality and crime. Demetz was particularly inspired by Rauhes Haus, located just outside of Hamburg. This small Protestant reform school was not a prison, but a commune of youths living in a series of cottages, each one overseen by a "father" responsible for the boys' moral and religious education. Demetz took from this Prussian institution its emphasis on religion, the retreat from urban society and the familial structure to found Mettray.

Mettray was a "complex institutional hybrid" (p. 41), combining the communal idyll of Rauhes Haus with the penitentiary systems observed in the United States. *Colonies agricoles* like Mettray were ambiguous as sites of confinement. Absent any perimeter wall, just low green hedges, Mettray did not present as a place of restraint and segregation as did a prison. This gave detainees an impression of freedom. But although Mettray lacked the central tower of the panopticon prison, constant surveillance was engaged. Toth takes issue with Foucault for ignoring the reality that sites of incarceration did not just instill self-surveillance through discipline, but actually had to maintain constant observation. Mettray's bell tower was both a disciplinary tool for marking time and a mechanism for surveillance, bearing a guard keeping watch. And this constant surveillance extended into each cottage, with workshops, refectories, and sleeping quarters under constant surveillance by the *chefs de famille*.

Interwoven with Mettray's familial structure was a strong emphasis on masculine martial culture, values, and training. Toth explores these in chapter two, along with other elements of the institution's regime. Consistent with Foucault, Toth emphasizes the regulation of time as an instrument of power. At Mettray, two-thirds of a boy's day was spent at work, mostly manual labor, with a small component of basic schooling. While Demetz presented work as a mechanism for moral uplift, republican critics alleged that the young detainees' labor was being exploited for profit. Whether such allegations only extended to privately-run institutions like Mettray or also to the state-run institutions, which emerged from 1860, is unclear.

In chapter three, Toth examines inmate strategies to assert some autonomy within Mettray and addresses Foucault's apparent indifference to matters of agency and resistance. The author focuses on inmate unruliness and resistance, acts of violence and--of far greater concern to administrators--intimacy. While there was considerable tolerance for physical conflict, no such indulgence extended to inmates thought or shown to be engaged in homosexuality: they were permanently transferred out of Mettray. Possession of tobacco, a prohibited substance, was similarly harshly treated. For Toth, the most obvious expression of prisoner agency and resistance is escape. Escapes were hard to prevent at Mettray; not so much because of the absence of walls, but because work was often undertaken away from the *colonie*, with only a single guard supervising thirty-odd boys.

Mettray's staff are explored in chapter four. Usually, Toth observes, prison guards are the shadowy, inglorious figures of the carceral apparatus; essential to the imprisonment of inmates, but hardly mentioned in the historical record. Mettray's staff, however, deviate from this standard, consistently held up as morally righteous and indispensable for the effective

functioning of the institution. In Mettray's early decades, Demetz attributed the colony's success to its *école préparatoire* which provided six months of instructional training to future personnel. As Toth explains, however, Mettray's archival record reveals a different picture, with staff flouting rules when it suited them and meting out proscribed punishments.

After a decade in operation, Mettray became important in inspiring legislation acknowledging juveniles as requiring distinct treatment from older offenders. Under the law of 5 August 1850, all juveniles in detention were to receive a moral, religious and professional upbringing and all prisons were to be fitted with a separate section for young prisoners. Young male offenders, who constituted the overwhelming bulk of prosecuted youth in the nineteenth century,[4] and who had been acquitted by a criminal court as not criminally responsible (deemed to have acted "*sans discernement*") but not returned to their parents' charge, were to be placed in a *colonie pénitentiaire*, either public or privately-run, where they would be raised *en commun*, under strict discipline, and would undertake agricultural and ancillary work, with provisions made for basic schooling.

These *colonies* would also take in convicted juveniles sentenced to prison terms of six months to two years. Convicted detainees would spend the first three months of their detention in segregation, undertaking sedentary work as a sort of probation, after which they could be transferred to the regular population. The mixed detention of convicted and acquitted offenders in institutions like Mettray muddied the waters when it came to determining its educative, reformative, protective or punitive functions. Only in 1912, with the passage of the law on juvenile courts which decriminalized offences committed under the age of thirteen and emphasized therapeutic responses to lawbreaking among juveniles, would these contradictions be addressed. By that stage, having glittered so brightly in its early years, Mettray's star gradually faded.

In addition, the 1850 law made the *colonie pénitentiaire* the site of detention for young people incarcerated at parental request (*correction paternelle*). In chapter five, Toth examines the Maison Paternelle, the section of Mettray reserved for boys detained on the request of their parents. He focuses in particular on a prominent case from 1909 in which fifteen-year-old Gaston Contard, the son of a textile factory manager in Marseilles, took his own life, hanging himself in his cell, five days after being committed by his father. Of the 2,251 young men who passed through the Maison Paternelle between 1855 and 1910, Gaston Contard was the only suicide. The boy's death, which aroused sensational coverage in the press, was subjected to a wide-ranging investigation by public prosecutors who charged Mettray's director, Emmanuel Lorenzo, with illegal imprisonment: a serious offence carrying a penalty of twenty years' hard labor. What was at issue was that Gaston's father had not obtained the requisite court order from a local magistrate before committing the boy to Mettray's care. Lorenzo's defense argued, however, that since the Maison Paternelle was not a prison, but rather an educative establishment akin to a boarding school, obtaining the state's authorization was unnecessary.

Boys in the Maison Paternelle, held at both the request and the expense of their own families, emanated from a quite different social class from the boys in the agricultural colony. In appearance, ironically, the Maison Paternelle--a section for boys who had committed no crime--bore many of the trappings of a conventional prison: bars, locks, iron gates and heavy doors. Granted only limited access to fresh air and outdoor exercise, these boys did not socialize with one another. Kept locked alone in their individual, private rooms, the boys' isolation was relieved

only by the regular visits of various academic tutors "in a facility that bore many similarities to a traditional prison" (p. 137). The prosecution mobilized these features during the Contard case.

Enshrined in the Napoleonic Code, by the 1880s *correction paternelle* was increasingly out of step with wider social understandings of parents' responsibilities for their children's inadequacies, and it became folded into the turn-of-the-century child-saving movement which encouraged a conflation of delinquent and neglected children. The Contard case raised questions about the nature of the Maison Paternelle (was it a prison or was it a school?) and the extent of parental (particularly paternal) powers, which carried implications for determining whose authority was actually engaged (the state's or the father's?) in the exercise of paternal correction. If a prison, it then followed that the state--as the only legitimate arbiter of punishment--should be in control of determining who was detained. If, however, it was a school, the father had the right to determine how his child was to be educated. Ultimately Mettray's director was exonerated, but the Maison Paternelle's reputation was ruined. It closed its doors definitively in 1910.

The *colonie* meanwhile staggered on. Chapter six tracks Mettray's demise, which Toth attributes to administrators' failure to adapt to broader changes in the conceptualization and treatment of youth delinquency. Amid expanding concerns about child protection, by the turn of the century, judicial authorities were encouraged wherever possible to avoid prosecuting juveniles. At the same time, legislative change saw an extension of a presumption of criminal irresponsibility to offenders up to the age of 18, enabling older youths to be acquitted as non-discerning and placed in colonies instead of prisons. This change saw an increase in the proportion of older youths detained at Mettray, which the colony's administrators then held responsible for growing problems of indiscipline and increasingly common escapes. In 1937, following an inspection ordered by the Ministry of Justice, the colony was declared unfit for purpose and all the remaining boys were transferred out. It was a humiliating end for what had been upheld as France's carceral crown jewel only a few decades earlier.

Toth's book provides a compelling portrait of the on-the-ground realities of this influential institution. Toth maintains that "while Foucault claims that an ever-encroaching normative discipline was Mettray's historical dialectic, the archival record indicates otherwise, as inmate activities were frequently focused on finding ways to subvert, thwart, and evade authority and disciplinary power" (p. 104). It is open to question, however, whether young detainees' manifestations of autonomy within the apparently all-encompassing system of control meaningfully undermine Foucault's core argument.

Mettray provides a valuable contribution to broader histories of incarceration, masculinity and youth, tracking the institution's rise and fall. Beyond this broad structure, however, there is often a weak sense of organization, most notably in terms of historical chronology and context. The narrative frequently leaps between historical periods in ways that do not do sufficient justice to the complexity of the political, social and cultural shifts at play. Part of this is to do with how Mettray is situated within the carceral archipelago, however one chooses to define its scope. For instance, there is no substantive discussion of the connections between metropolitan agricultural colonies for juveniles like Mettray and the overseas *bagnes.* Given the author's own expertise in the history of France's penal colonies,[5] this omission is surprising. Although passing references are made to continuities between *colonies agricoles* and the *bagnes d'Outre-mer*, these connections are not substantively explored. Attending to them, however, would have added

greater density to Toth's critique of Foucault. The task remains for other scholars to pursue these entanglements.

Some consideration of the subsequent fates of the more than 17,000 boys incarcerated in Mettray would also have been welcome. Although Toth identifies martial culture as central to Mettray and while he mentions the negative impacts of the First World War on staffing, he offers no discussion of important shifts in military recruitment in the decades before the war which were significant in shaping the response to juvenile offending and which would have had important effects on the composition of Mettray as an institution. Nor does he attempt to explore the post-release military service of incarcerated boys, whether in wartime or peace. Not only would this have deepened our understanding of the longer-term efficacy of the reformatory's disciplinary program, it would also have provided some measure of the significance of the acts of resistance to which Toth draws such attention.

Founded with great fanfare and optimism, Mettray's administrators consistently projected a self-congratulatory discourse of efficacy and achievement. Toth uses the surviving records of the institution's internal archive to tell a different story. Originally functioning as a philanthropic alternative to prison, ultimately Mettray came to adopt a more punitive culture, largely in response to broader changes which saw such institutions utilized primarily for older, less readily corrigible boys. By the end, the state rather than private philanthropy had assumed charge of the discipline, punishment and reform of juvenile delinquents and wayward youths. Behind the apparent simplicity and symmetry of its system and architecture, Toth complicates our understandings of this landmark institution, exposing Mettray as wracked with problems of administration and ambiguities of purpose.

NOTES

[1] Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); English translation, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

[2] Sophie Chassat, Luc Forlivesi and Georges-François Pottier, eds., *Éduquer et punir: La colonie agricole et pénitentiaire de Mettray (1839-1937)* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2005).

[3] David Garland, *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), chapter 7.

[4] Patricia O'Brien, *The Promise of Punishment: Prisons in nineteenth-century France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 112.

[5] Stephen A. Toth, *Beyond Papillon: The French Overseas Penal Colonies, 1854–1952* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

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