

Book Title: *The Cage of Days: Time & Temporal Experience in Prison*

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Prisons do not simply confine bodies, they confiscate time. In a system holding more than 1.2 million people in federal and state prisons (Mueller, 2023), punishment unfolds minute by minute, through schedules, delays, disappointments, and the slow erosion of autonomy. Therefore, to understand imprisonment is to understand time itself. In *The Cage of Days: Time & Temporal Experience in Prison*, K.C. Carceral and Michael C. Flaherty examine how incarcerated individuals view, tolerate, and sometimes resist the passage of time while living under total institutional control. The authors draw from mail correspondence with prisoners and personal reflections from Carceral's decades of incarceration, which is paired with Flaherty's sociological expertise, to provide a deeply textured exploration of how correctional institutions govern not just bodies, but minutes, hours, and futures. This collaboration between an academic and someone with lived experience effectively situates time as the ultimate form of control, transforming duration into a mechanism of punishment.

The Cage of Days is presented across an introduction and eight proceeding chapters, each of which address a different aspect of temporal life behind bars. Chapter 1 discusses the emergence of prison routines and the time structures that shape daily existence. It shows how schedules, logs, and mandated rhythms form the basis through which time is regimented. The analysis offers a persuasive account of how institutional structures shape temporal oppression, yet it omits comparative angles that could enrich the discussion. Research on variation in prison management, including Irwin's (2005) work on different control strategies across institutions (e.g., maximum- versus minimum-security facilities, warehouse prisons, and treatment-oriented institutions), shows that temporal regimes can differ substantially by custody level and organizational model. Incorporation of this contrast would have sharpened the authors' account of temporal governance.

Chapters 2 and 3 extend this groundwork by examining how the built environment and daily micromanagement reinforce temporal control. In Chapter 2, the authors argue that the monotonous and decaying architecture of many prisons amplifies the slow, grinding perception of time. They illustrate how spatial confinement and temporal stagnation merge into *temporal captivity*—a world in which every minute is owned by the institution. Chapter 3 turns into the scripted nature of daily life, from education schedules to laundry rotations, noting that, “[t]he micromanagement of time in prison complicates the flow of action and, consequently, slows the perceived pace of temporal experience to a crawl” (p. 97). Here, time becomes not only regulated but painfully expropriated, that is, taken from those who live within prison.

Chapter 4 expands this analysis of temporal control through engagement with Michel Foucault (1975), Megan Comfort (2008), and other researchers, and contrasting the historical spectacle of physical punishment with the modern state's normalized form of suffering. As the authors write,

“the sentence is an artifact of public indignation, state-sponsored vengeance, prejudice and discrimination, personal competence, legal representation, plea bargaining, and other extraneous matters” (p. 130). In this shift, punishment migrates from the physical infliction of pain to the mind and time itself. The chapter suggests that the governance of time is also a racialized, gendered, and classed process, one in which different groups encounter institutional duration in markedly unequal ways. As compelling as it is, Chapter 4’s discussion of time’s slowness begins to feel repetitive and drawn-out in the absence of additional empirical support beyond Carceral’s material that advances the argument. The repetition stems not from the weakness of the argument itself but from the limited range of evidence. Incorporating additional narratives, comparative data, or institutional variation could have sustained analytic momentum and demonstrated the broader applicability of the authors’ claims.

Chapter 5 examines how confinement weakens one’s sense of the future and reduces daily life to repetitive cycles. Carceral and Flaherty vividly show how this monotony shapes social life in antisocial ways. As they note, “with no future in sight, there is little at stake... except the monotonous repetition of yesterday;” the lack of future orientation would lead to physical fights in efforts to interrupt the tedium (p. 157). Their insight into the link between monotony and violence is especially compelling given the high levels of violence in prison (Wolf & Shi, 2009), suggesting that aggression often functions as a disruption of boredom rather than purely interpersonal conflict.

Chapter 6 continues this exploration of temporal survival, illustrating how incarcerated people craft personal routines and small rituals to structure time. Examples include marking days, counting repetitions, or creating micro-goals to carve meaning out of monotony. These practices offer modest forms of resistance by transforming monotony into a coping strategy. However, the authors’ do not offer clarity into whether such routines foster meaningful agency or simply help individuals endure ongoing constraint.

The final chapter returns to the question of temporal autonomy and the ways individuals seek to assert control over how time is felt, measured, and endured. For some, this involves suppressing awareness of passing days or avoiding countdowns altogether. Others cope by consciously letting go of any attempt to control their time and preserving emotional energy. Still others work to discipline their expectations by crafting personal schedules, setting incremental goals, or developing small rituals to create a sense of self-directed temporal flow. However, even these efforts to reclaim temporal autonomy are fragile and last only briefly (p. 243). This reflection underscores the paradox of imprisonment: to endure is to suffer time itself. And by diagnosing temporal suffering with such clarity, the book gestures toward a question the authors ultimately leave unexplored, what would a more just temporal order in confinement require? While the authors convincingly illuminate the mechanics of temporal deprivation, they stop short of outlining potential reforms that might meaningfully reshape how time is experienced behind bars. Such reforms could include expanded autonomy over daily rhythms, reductions in forced idleness, or alternative models of temporal governance.

Carceral and Flaherty’s *The Cage of Days* succeeds in weaving sociological insight with deeply human experience, offering a textured account of how institutions shape the meaning and passage of time. Its strength lies in the authors’ ability to translate temporal theory (e.g.,

discipline, routinization, governance) into lived experience without sacrificing emotional clarity. At the same time, the book's heavy reliance on Carceral's autobiographical perspective raises important questions about how representative these temporal dynamics are across other facilities and populations. The intensely personal framing is powerful, yet it narrows the analytic lens, making it difficult to discern whether certain patterns reflect broader structural forces or individual circumstance. This tension becomes readily apparent when considering how temporal regimes vary across custody levels, gendered institutions, and racialized carceral experiences; differences that remain largely outside the book's field of view. With no comparative accounts or triangulating narratives, the reader is left to wonder where Carceral's experience illuminates systemic patterns and where it reflects the particularities of one man's trajectory through prison.

The work offers a compelling contribution to the corrections literature by demonstrating that punishment unfolds not only through spatial confinement but through the reconfiguration of one's temporal world. In doing so, *The Cage of Days* invites scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to rethink what "time served" truly means.

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