Caroline Touraut’s book focuses on a minority population within prisons: older people. In October 2018, people over age 50 made up around 12% of the prison population. Touraut draws on 140 interviews conducted in four French penitentiary institutions (remand prisons, detention centres, and high-security prisons), conducted with detained persons (men and women) and prison workers.

The first chapter analyses guards’ management of prisoners and highlights the dilemmas that the former face, such as the tension between ‘watching over’ (veiller sur) and ‘surveillance’ (surveiller) (p. 41). They oscillate between benevolence and suspicion, attitudes corresponding, respectively, to ‘social representations associated with the elderly and [with] those linked to the status of prisoner’ (p. 42). Touraut seeks to understand how these professionals can ‘provide benevolent and protective attention to the oldest prisoners’, while continuing to adhere to the conceptions at ‘the heart of their trade’, namely ensuring the security of the institution and its resident population.

Working conditions also put prison staff in a difficult position. Paying special attention to a vulnerable person means both adding to an already heavy workload and taking responsibility for any consequences associated with giving such attention. Should they view these prisoners through the lens of their age and vulnerability or as people who have broken the law? No single, unified answer emerges.

The second chapter deals with elderly prisoners’ perceptions of the prison experience. Four dimensions of this experience must be considered. The first is a question of understanding how detained persons ‘strive to distinguish themselves in the social space of the prison’ (p. 71). The second emphasizes the vulnerabilities that these people face due to their age. The third more precisely concerns the visibility of older bodies and the inappropriateness of prison facilities for this type of population. Finally, the fourth dimension captures the isolation of older people, notably through their particular ways of occupying spaces of detention and the associated relational issues.

Carceral institutions are largely made up of younger individuals, which makes older prisoners’ difference as ‘others’ more visible. Younger prisoners may master prison social codes, while older prisoners may have a certain ignorance of the rules or may refer to a ‘prison culture that belongs to a mythified past, a code of conduct that promotes respect for other prisoners’ (p. 75). Distinguishing themselves from young people allows older prisoners to assert an established social position that allows them to escape marginalization.

Elderly prisoners feel doubly vulnerable, first through the dominant representations associated with them: the reasons for their incarceration, their fragility, their honesty, and their gullibility. They also experience vulnerability through the body. Elderly prisoners are no longer in a physical condition that allows them to use their bodies affirmatively. Young people regularly instrumentalize...
and subject them ‘to threats and violence to force them to hide prohibited goods or substances in their cells’ (p. 86). They are also targets of extortion. Finally, they experience vulnerability through the trials of advancing age (loss of autonomy, mobility issues, etc.), exacerbated by the unsuitability of the carceral space.

The third chapter analyses three ‘ideal types of the biographical trajectories and prison experiences of older people’ (p. 109). The first ideal type is that of ‘stalled’ trajectories. This category of prisoners arrived late in prison, after an ‘ordinary’ life (work and family). They come from privileged social backgrounds and have been imprisoned for sexual assaults or a serious but isolated act (voluntary or involuntary homicide). They rarely admit guilt. They experience imprisonment as a ‘fall’ (Chantraine, 2004) because in prison they are no longer able to take on the social roles they had outside. Their descriptions of daily life in prison speak of considerable suffering, as they feel completely out of place in this context. While they are concerned about the future, they nonetheless have some resources to count on (financial, social, and family).(1)

Secondly, those with ‘complete’ trajectories are older people over age 65 who see their own lives as having fit with ‘dominant social norms’ (p. 118). These individuals feel they lived a full life before entering prison, and incarceration seems to have less of an effect on their sense of their own life trajectory than those in the previous group. They are confident about life after leaving prison because they expect to enjoy the fruits of past social achievements.

Thirdly, ‘prevented’ trajectories are ‘far from dominant social norms’. These people have spent many years in prison and feel they have ‘missed out on life’ (p. 123). Their stories are marked by a sense of failure, and their material conditions are particularly problematic. Some declare their eagerness to get out in order to try and ‘catch up’ on what they have missed while being afraid that it will be too late. Others have renounced the outside world: they have neither friends and family nor resources beyond the prison; they have adapted to the prison environment and fear the unknown and the isolation that awaits them outside.

Prisoners have a particular, subjective relationship to age. Some describe the harmful effects of incarceration on their bodies and health, but others do not feel old because they have not experienced the life transitions that come with age: ‘life seems to have stopped (with) incarceration’ (p. 129).

Chapter 4 gives a rich account of the paradoxes of prisons as institutions and the moral dilemmas facing those who work in them. The problems posed by prisoners’ loss of autonomy prove to be varied and result in many tasks that, for the most part, are situated at the border between care and surveillance. The presence of older people in prison more generally highlights the lack of care workers in France. Prisons are known for their cumbersome administrative procedures, and the care of elderly prisoners is largely delegated to other prisoners.

Rarely paid and with little training, they take on responsibilities that these institutions do not want to assume. Touraut observes that these relationships of dependency entail risk, in these places where ‘the relational economy carries within it the seeds of relations of domination and of distrust’ (p. 171).

The final chapter looks at ‘older detainees’ access to social rights, sentence reductions, and release on medical grounds’ (p. 226). It questions both the legitimacy of keeping these people in prison and the institution’s capacity to fulfil its mission of supporting prisoners' societal reintegration when the work–housing dyad is no longer suitable. However, while prisons and their structures and processes may struggle to adapt to the needs of elderly inmates, they may also seem to play a protective role in certain respects when no other housing facility is available to accommodate them.

In conclusion, this book offers a glimpse of the challenges associated with the ageing of the prison population and allows us to better understand these prisoners’ life trajectories, their experiences, and how they are treated. Its richness lies in its combination of the perspectives of both those who work in prisons and those detained there, as well as its analyses on three different levels: individual, collective, and structural. This analysis of old age in prison highlights the broader need for reflection on how French society and institutions treat persons who are losing their autonomy.

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Translated by Paul Reeve