Article

The making of an evangelical prison: Study on Neo-Pentecostalism and its leadership processes in the Argentine penitentiary system

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse the origin and development of 'prison Pentecostalism' in the Penitentiary System of Buenos Aires, Argentina. The article is divided into three parts. In the first, we briefly describe the current situation in prisons, focusing on their crisis of governance, how the religious phenomenon is involved in this context and the discussions posed by researchers on this new topic. In the second, we will explore, through the trajectory of its initiators, the different strategies of evangelism that led to the emergence of Unit 25, the first prison-church. Finally, we will characterize the processes of intramural leadership and the profiles of inmates who govern the daily life of the evangelical cellblocks.

Résumé

Cet article interroge l'origine et le développement du « pentecôtisme carcéral » dans le système pénitentiaire de Buenos Aires en Argentine. Le travail est divisé en trois parties. Dans la première, nous proposons de décrire brièvement la situation actuelle des prisons, en abordant la crise de gouvernance qu'elles traversent, la manière dont

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le phénomène religieux intervient dans ce contexte et les débats développés par les premières recherches sur le sujet. Dans la seconde, nous explorons, à travers la trajectoire de ses initiateurs, les différentes stratégies d'évangélisation qui ont conduit à l'émergence de l'Unité 25, la première église-prison au pays. Finalement, nous caractérisons les processus de leadership intra-muros et les profils des détenus qui gouvernent quotidiennement les pavillons évangéliques.

Mots-clés

Argentine, gouvernement, leadership, néo-pentecôtisme, système pénitentiaire

Introduction

The study of the Evangelical phenomenon in confinement conditions affords the opportunity to analyse in an amplified context – almost like in a laboratory – the three main dimensions of the relationship between religion and penitentiary system in many Latin American countries (Lenita Scheligas, 2000; Ordoñez Vargas, 2005; Segato, 2001; Marín Alarcón, 2015; 2016; Da Costa, 2016). The first one comprises the competition strategies displayed by Catholics and Evangelicals over the spiritual leadership in public institutions. The second refers to the complex, flexible and adaptable evangelization dynamics enacted by Neo-Pentecostalism. This includes the way in which pastors and leaders tactically project themselves from the margins of an institution to its power centres. The third dimension consists of the many-times ignored flexibility of behaviour and communal living rules that govern prisons. Overall, these analysis factors offer the theoretical opportunity of reconsidering the widespread thesis, regarding religious deinstitutionalization and the related processes of individuation and rise of communitarism (Hervieu-Léger, 2004; Mallimaci and Giménez Béliveau, 2007; De la Torre, 2012). The imprisonment environment allows us to assess to what extent Evangelical actions – far from strengthening the logics of deregulation of belief – are powerful vectors of institutional reinvention that stretch and defy the State domains and its historical bonds with Catholicism.

Following these considerations, the aim of this article is to reconstruct the origin and development of Neo-Pentecostalism in the Penitentiary System of the Province of Buenos Aires (Sistema Penitenciario Bonaerense, SPB) in Argentina. Our purpose is to identify the processes and types of individuals who took the 'Gospel' to penal institutions, thus shaping different modes of internal projection. This article is divided into three parts: (a) The first one seeks to briefly characterize the present status of the SPB. We describe the institutional crisis facing Argentine prisons, the role of the religious phenomenon in this context, and the different approaches and interpretations proposed by the experts in this area. (b) In the second part, we will tackle the origins of 'Unidad 25' (Unit 25 or U25), an establishment that was completely organized according to Neo-Pentecostal precepts and communal living rules, by analysing the backgrounds and evangelization approaches of its founders. (c) Finally, in the third part we will explore

who governs these spaces in the daily living, analysing the internal leadership processes and the profile of the inmates who inhabit them.

It should be noted that the results presented in this article were taken from research led by Rodolfo Brardinelli at the Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, Argentina. Under a qualitative data production and analysis approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals that are in confined or under the Parole System, officers of different ranks at the Penitentiary Structure, former officers, and Catholic and Evangelical chaplains and pastors actively involved in evangelization activities. The fieldwork was mainly focused on Unit 25 and on different units (9, 24, and 42) of the penitentiary complex, located in the outskirts of the City of Buenos Aires. This research includes non-participating observation during group activities at prison blocks, and the analysis of documents regarding the present status of the institution and the exercise of chaplaincy.

Current studies: The question about the function and the origin

The research on religion and confinement represents a recent course of study in Argentina, with origins in early 21st century. Among its controversies and debates, there is a tendency to reproduce a common divergence that also prevails in academic discussions in other countries, especially in those where the question about religious social life in penitentiary system plays an increasingly important role. We refer, for example, to Catholic experiences (Lenita Scheligas, 2000; 2005; Ordoñez Vargas, 2005), but mainly to the presence of Evangelicals in Latin American prisons (Segato, 2001; Boarccaech, 2009; Marín Alarcón, 2015; 2016; Da Costa, 2016) and the growing number of Islamic inmates in several European penal institutions (Khosrokhavar, 2004; Beckford, 2005; Rostaing, 2006; Beckford et al., 2007; Becci, 2011; Rhazzali, 2012; 2017; Martínez-Ariño et al., 2015; Venel and Ducloux, 2016; Beraud et al., 2016). Scholars define their approach criteria based on their perspective and the aspect of the study object they prioritise in their analysis.

The viewpoints on the phenomenon of religion in prisons vary widely – in terms of methodological approach, analytical priorities and findings – according to the specialization field of the expert. This is evident in the studies on Neo-Pentecostalism in Argentina. The research specialized in the sociology of crime and delinquency often subsumes the main characteristics of the activity of Evangelicals to the issues they resolve, i.e. the joint-governability strategies and devices they design or adapt in collaboration with institutional authorities. This explains the interest on governability and, especially, on the role of faith in the creation of an order within prison walls as the core subject matter of these studies (Daroqui, 2014; Bouilly, 2011; Manchado, 2014). The aim is to understand how the Penitentiary System outsources or delegates the daily control and the microscopic exercise of power in an Evangelical regime that redefines subjectivity at the levels of the language, the emotions and the body of inmates. The main contribution of this approach resides in the understanding of the surveillance and follow-up mechanisms exerted by pastors and spiritual leaders as a substitute for

penitentiary power. Nevertheless, under a strong Foucaultian perspective, these interpretations usually explain religions as a mere epiphenomenon of imprisonment.

On the contrary, the analyses based on religion's social science, or influenced by these disciplines (Miguez, 2000; 2012; Brardinelli, 2012; Brardinelli and Algranti, 2013; Algranti, 2011; Vallejos, 2016; 2017; Rodríguez and Viegas, 2015; Manchado, 2016), recognize the relative autonomy of Evangelical processes. The qualitative methods lead them to focus on both symbolical and identitarian aspects of religious life – including routines, rules and regulations in prison blocks – and on the conflictive nature of social relationships as well as the competition over power and prestige. In principle, the crux of the matter is not exclusively focused on the repressive role of the phenomenon, but also on the way in which these hybrid environments of social production of beliefs are created, inhabited and eventually disarticulated. This article seeks to contribute to this course of studies by discussing the origin of this phenomenon, namely the genesis and the dynamics of the Evangelical projection in Argentine penitentiaries. To an extent, it is necessary to reconstruct the general situation of the SPB and its unstable operating conditions.

A collapsed system: Overcrowding, de-pacification, generation clash

Today, and beyond their discrepancies, Argentine scholars usually agree on the same diagnosis: the penitentiary system of the Province of Buenos Aires is collapsed in two ways. The first is the overpopulation of cellblocks and the subsequent overcrowding caused by an increasing number of convicts. Indeed, nowadays, the number of inmates doubles the institutional contention and control capacities in terms of building infrastructure, medical care, nutrition and follow-up, which leads to critical confinement conditions. The second comprises de-pacification processes and the mutation in the communal living code governing daily life in prison. Crowding enhances generation clashes among the older, long-imprisoned inmates and the younger convicts or 'new arrivals'. During the disputes between these groups, different logics behind the use of physical violence come into play. In this context, based on the reports of Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS), the intervention strategies of penitentiary authorities tend to become more repressive (in the form of searches, transfers, punishment cells and even torture).

Based on these characteristics, we may describe prisons as collapsed institutions, which – to a certain extent – are in crisis. The crisis does not refer to a loss of the correctional role that they never had, but to the diminishment of their inner governability. This impairs formal management, leads to an increasing loss of autonomy, and stretches the internal and external limits of the SPB. Consequently, the confinement situation is a case of co-government, in which the whole authorities' chain of command depends on the systems of communal living and control created by the inmates. This takes place under the influence of different subcultures that express the diversity of the jail populations. Penitentiary power monopolize the legitimate use of physical force, but would not be able to guarantee the operation of the entire establishment without the emerging control methods recreated by the convicts themselves in the daily administration of the blocks. As taught by Max Weber (1998 :43), the probability that a mandate would

be fulfilled depends on the legitimacy and the acceptance of those who are dominated. In this sense, two of the most relevant criteria of authority are in firstly, the 'Tumbera'[1] subculture generally associated with the codes, social life and moral rules of the criminal world (Miguez, 2008: 105–129), and, secondly, the various religious subcultures, in which beliefs and popular saints of Catholic origin co-exist with Afro-Brazilian and Jewish faiths, plus the Neo-Hinduism meditation techniques introduced by *The art of living*. This is where the activity of Evangelicals operates with special force and effectiveness. It should be noted that, like other public institutions, such as hospitals, military quarters and airports, the Penitentiary System pays and assigns a rank to Catholic chaplains, thus giving rise to a structural asymmetry with the rest of the religious groups, which are placed at a subordinate level (Esquivel, 2009: 41–50). Despite the institutional dominance of Catholicism, the projects proposed by Evangelicals have had a higher impact among the inmates.

Periodization: From the first prison blocks to Unit 25

The evangelization process adopted its most systematic and continuous version since the 1980's. Two emerging movements coincide and are mutually linked. On the one hand, as stated above, the governability crisis of the life in confinement conditions. On the other hand, at a strictly religious level, this is a time of strong expansion of Neo-Pentecostalism in the Argentine society, through public campaigns (Wynarczyk, 2009: 261–323), the proliferation of small churches (Semán, 2010: 26–32) and others that would eventually turn into megachurches (Algranti, 2012: 61–65), their outreach activities to youth (Mosqueira, 2014: 33–63), and their territorial policy (Carbonelli, 2012: 90–122). The growth of Evangelicals was statistically recorded in 2008 as approximately 9% of the Argentine population in the context of a Catholic majority (76.5%), and a share who are indifferent to religious ideas (11.3%) (Mallimaci et al., 2015: 255–260). The zeitgeist of the era thus accompanies the evangelization effort of the first pastors who, during their visits to congregation members or to the families of convicts, found in the penitentiary setting a novel place to preach.

Their recurring presence in penal institutions is the result of an evangelization strategy started by different leaders in a reticulate and unfocused way. As we will discuss in this article, this is a process that underwent several stages: (1) the model of the visiting pastor who gave spiritual assistance to inmates from outside the prison; (2) the emergence of the first Christian officers who organized evangelization spaces within the penitentiary; (3) the development and proliferation of Christian blocks organized according to religious criteria; and (4) the unique experience of Unit 25.

Regarding the last two stages, it should be noted that Evangelical blocks are completely inhabited by inmates who have converted or, at least, who identify themselves with Neo-Pentecostalism. They are managed by a group leader who acts as a pastor, under the supervision of external authorities who guide, train and support him with basic resources. In formal terms, these spaces function as miniature churches, which are relatively autonomous, with a systematic organization of time through routines, activities, moments of prayer and leisure (Brardinelli, 2012: 22–25; Manchado, 2014: 90–95). Not all Evangelical blocks are the same. Some are run with an extremely stringent regime of

belonging, while others keep a more flexible and distant relationship with the guidelines and proposal of pastors.

The usefulness of these environments for the economics of power within prison entails the pacification of many internal areas, which are ruled by a religion-based system of behaviour and control. As such, they contribute to the governability of a collapsed institution. Christian blocks account for 30–40% of the 39 units of the SPB which housed – up to December 2016 – almost 33,698 convicts in Buenos Aires providence, out of a total number of 76,261 inmates, considering national scale.[2]

One of the most important milestones in the penitentiary system was the creation in 2002 – that existed until 2010 – of a prison entirely inhabited, governed and guarded by Evangelicals: the so-called Unit 25. During its years of operation, this space housed more than two hundred religious inmates, a limited population with twenty guards and several directors – all of them with both penitentiary and pastoral careers. The unit received convicts irrespective of the crime for which they had been condemned, i.e. individuals accused of or sentenced for theft or robbery, murder, fraud or rape lived in the same environment governed by a religious leadership. In no time, this establishment gained fame as a model unit in terms of confinement conditions (nutrition, cleaning, and living space) and in terms of safety and inmate behaviour. In brief, for a few years, this experience successfully created an alternative definition of the prison reality, some sort of institution within another institution. Now then, which were the genesis and the dynamics behind this process? Who were its pioneers and to which evangelization strategies did they resort in order to have access to the prison?

Professional convergences

In terms of growth and expansion, the Evangelical phenomenon made a qualitative leap when it affected the internal authority structures of the SPB. As determined by Brardinelli (2012: 8–11) and Vallejos (2016: 75–103), the change occurred at the precise moment when high-rank officers used their own professional resources for the first time to offer new spaces to Protestant pastors and churches.

It should be highlighted that this process is not the work of a single person or of a master plan previously arranged, but the consequence – often sought and sometimes unforeseen – of the individual efforts of religious leaders who pursued their shared goals through different means. These are ongoing processes whose direction, effects and scope are generally unknown, even for the leaders themselves (Elias, 1990: 82–83). Social processes may not be exclusively reduced to the epic or heroic intent of their founders; neither may they be attributed to external forces governing the fate of mankind. The intermediate role of religious man-officer allows us to outline – *grosso modo* – this hybrid process of institutional transformation, while exploring how this position significantly contributed to the spread of the 'Gospel' within the SPB.

The work of pioneers: Four institution-wide strategies

Reverend Juan was not the first pastor to visit prisons; however, he was the first to successfully combine his religious and professional aspirations with the strategic

development of his career as guard within the penitentiary system. His explicit goal was to evangelize the institution from the inside, namely by playing a double role since 1984: one formal position related to his official surveillance duties and another informal role in which his pastoral identity prevailed. The specificity of this pioneer and mentor of the 'Gospel' in confinement lies in his active effort to adjust to the logic of the Penitentiary System, first, in order to access inmate populations, and then, to transform institutional structures – gaining followers, creating its own spaces, managing resources and promoting guarantees. In this section, we present a schematic view of four different moments that represented four turning points in his evangelization strategy.

(1)   The first moment is characterized by the visiting pastor dynamic. Reverend Juan contacted the SPB in 1984 through a member of the church who worked at the Olmos Prison Complex. Initially the restrictive access rules, as well as the internal requirements of the institution, significantly impaired the religious work for those who belonged to non-Catholic churches. Only brief two-hour visits were authorized with a maximum of five inmates. In this restricted-opportunities landscape, there was no chance for a large-scale evangelization strategy to construct alternative definitions – with their own system of rules, authority model and communal living rules – within existing blocks, as would be the case later in history. In any case, Christian environments represented an institutional achievement that was attained some time later, when the growth of Evangelicals and their social visibility allowed pastors to negotiate better confinement conditions, i.e. their own spaces and resources in return for governability and pacification of daily-life within penal context. In this first stage, the visiting pastor model represented an initial approach, which was structurally weak and dependent on the management of the SPB.

In the founders' opinion, the effectiveness of the 'Gospel' is inseparable from the occurrence of collective events in which devotional forms of faith and preaching are involved. It was necessary to replicate the Evangelical scheme of public campaigns – which were extremely successful in the 1980s – within the limits of confinement institutions.

(2)   The second stage represents a radical change of approach in the trajectory of Reverend Juan. The turning point started with the beginning of an internal career as a non-commissioned officer, always under religious motives and goals. These oriented his instruction as officer towards a specific purpose: to create evangelization spaces within the SPB. He then developed a strategy aimed at occupying positions of authority within the penitentiary, i.e. to shape new intervention forms under the role of pastor-officer. Of course this meant tensions and conflicts between moral codes that – in principle – are mutually exclusive, namely the ones prevailing among guards and the values governing pastoral work. Undercover evangelization implies breaching the formal mandates of the institution, which ban all indoctrination – political, ideological, religious, etc. – of inmates, further altering the expectations and daily duties proper of prison staff.

I developed a new approach. The people of my congregation, i.e. outsiders, started to enter the prison to preach. I would permit their access and choose the inmates that I believed we could train, acceptable guys, who would not approach you to get something from you, but who were guys who wanted to change and who had the potential to change others … who were leaders. […] We thought, okay, we will run Evangelical campaigns as we do outside, in the streets, but within the prison. You know that these places are inhabited by thieves, murderers, those convicted of sexual crimes, who cannot come together because there are codes among them, and they would kill each other; each of them has their own code and social status and one must respect them. I proposed not to respect them by running a campaign. (Reverend Juan)

The intermediate position of pastor-officer enables and commits. It grants access to decision-making spaces inconceivable to visiting reverends, such as the effective possibility to propose, bargain and redefine religious activities in collaboration with the institution's director, or the preferred access to members of one's congregation to enter and contact the inmates that are best predisposed within each block. Nevertheless, this role represents a commitment by the one exercising it, on the grounds that he is the main liable party for any problems that may arise, at the same time that the success of his efforts goes hand-in-hand with a debt towards the administration that supports such endeavours. Consequently, in practice, the proposal of Reverend Juan means an agreement with the management of the SPB. This approach gave a religious answer to issues affecting the governability and pacification in prison. In return for this, he requested access to collective evangelization spaces, initially by running campaigns, and some time later, by managing entire Christian blocks in order to guarantee permanent sociabilities.

(3)   The third stage started in 1987 with the successful request for an exclusive block for Evangelicals. The design of this plan is inseparable from Reverend Juan's intermediate position as pastor-officer, which entitled him to negotiate with the administration, who agreed to assume costs, liabilities, and risks. Had Reverend Juan been solely a career officer or an outside pastor, he would have not been able to activate the internal mechanisms of the institution – many of which are informal. Having access to inmates and to management, participating of the clique of prison guards, preaching despite the bans, mediating between his church and the SPB, presenting himself to the internees as a different authority model, requesting workspaces in return for new government and pacification approaches – none of this would have been possible had he not played this hybrid role, in which religious and penitentiary networks intertwine. At every circumstance, he raised his stakes in terms of institutional projection. '[…] Our mission', explains Juan, 'is to have a church within the Evangelical prison and not religious convicts. To create a church, a structure with leaders among the inmates, with convicted pastors, who would be the leaders of the population.' The making of Evangelical environments in confinement conditions represents a turning point not only in terms of quantity but also of quality; the nature of social relations itself is dramatically changed, as evidenced by different studies (Algranti, 2011: 59–68; Manchado, 2016: 43–46; Marín Alarcón, 2016: 570). As miniature churches, these spaces must provide practical responses to issues related to order, hierarchy, and daily life.

(4) The fourth and last stage in this ascending process of institutional involvement was the creation, in 2002, of a renowned case in Argentina: the Unit 25, a prison-church. The relatively successful logic behind the operation of the so called 'little Brother Blocks' was taken to the next step, to the entire organization of a unit. This is the first pilot experience of religious self-management in the context of a semi-open penitentiary regime. The building was designed and the facilities were conditioned thanks to the donations from Christian families and churches. Religious inmates with good disciplinary backgrounds, irrespective of the crime that they had committed, were selected. A pastor with experience in confinement environments was appointed, as well as a group of guards and a director who had converted to Evangelism (Vallejos, 2016: 92–103). General Prefect Daniel was the first chief of Unit 25, and then of the Campus Farm – an Evangelical communal living regime oriented to the social reintegration of convicts that is still in operation. Daniel also played a hybrid role, in which his penitentiary and pastoral careers intertwined with the vision of Neo-Pentecostalism in prisons. This lead to an alternative attitude to inmates and their potential to change.

> Ordinary people usually think: 'He should be killed!' but what do they know of what happened in the self of such a man for him to rape a five-year-old girl? Some inner conflict, something terrible, must lie beneath. When these people go to jail, they take all the dirt they have inside and propose to change their lives. They regret their evil deeds and want to change their lives . . . and they succeed. What happens? As a pastor, I can understand it; people who are not pastors cannot understand it. They want to kill them, to burn them. God does not think that way. Humans are extremely pessimistic; they believe that such a change is not possible, that everything will remain the same. We must give the opportunity to the men who made a mistake to stand up and walk straight. (General Prefect Daniel)

In this context, stigma arises from the social construction of prisoners as individuals who are irredeemable for social life. On the contrary, although it may reinforce the *status quo* of the institution, the 'Gospel' also disrupts the homologation of an individual with the crime he has committed and offers new biographical and identity resources through religious language. Unit 25 represented the highest level of institutionalization and acknowledgment in the history of Pentecostalism in Argentine penitentiaries system.

Analysis of ways of 'bringing the Gospel' in prisons

Evangelization in confinement conditions was the result of the active and innovative work of religious pioneers. Through this path, different 'ways of bringing the Gospel' were shaped, based on dynamic strategies. The most conclusive turning point was associated with the decision to connect religious and penitentiary careers, in order to transform the institution's structures from the inside. This hybrid role was played and reinvented by different individuals in different moments.

Now then, despite the effectiveness that U25 meant for the governance system, the weakening institutional support was revealed in two changes to the original autonomy of the project: (a) the authorities started to intervene in spiritual matters by granting access to new pastors and churches, with the subsequent dispersion of doctrine, and also by

claiming the right to appoint leaders and to propose activities; (b) this intervention was evidenced in a certain loss of the exclusiveness to choose the inmates that would take part of the unit, which led to conflicts due to the incorporation of convicts that did not want to participate completely in the religious life.

In brief, the management of the SPB granted some freedom of action for the original idea, and provided the means and the necessary conditions to develop it. However, once the project was stable, the authorities did not limit themselves to monitoring the experience, but started to intervene directly in its administration. The reasoning for such involvement was to prevent the development of an internal and consolidated power group that could demand an increasing institutionalization of its achievements. For them, Neo-Pentecostalism in prisons is a governance tool if it is kept in an informal, feeble and changing situation that would not compete with established powers. SPB's *ultima ratio* is the reproduction of its command and authority conditions. Consequently, the functional effectiveness of the Evangelical experience created the risk of building an institution within an institution, thus altering the balance of forces with the penitentiary direction and the Catholic chaplaincy. The strategies analysed above served as powerful leverages for the expansion of the 'Gospel'. In any case, further to the genesis and the dynamics of the phenomenon, it is necessary to explore what types of inmates were in charge of the evangelical environments.

Who leads the evangelical prison blocks?

At first sight, two different assumptions on the inmates who become leaders or collaborate in the prison management prevail in Argentine studies (Algranti, 2011; Manchado, 2014; Daroqui, 2014; Vallejos, 2016).The first is the theory that associates Evangelical referents with a strong man directly linked to old authority positions in the 'Tumbero' environment. These individuals – the so-called Servants – are identified with the descending path of the section leaders who may no longer maintain their status in general population blocks. They are authority figures who, in the context of increasing and deregulating violence, decide to reconvert their resources within the Christian world. It should be taken into account that physical violence – either as a reality or as a threat – entails a fatigue to the body that is not easy to endure in the long run. Under this view, Evangelical settings benefit from the presence of old 'Tumbero' chiefs that are familiar with prison codes due to their lifestyle and history, who at the same time give a paradigmatic testimony of the power of religious conversion.

In turn, the theory of the weak man reinforces the idea of an alternative leadership model, which affords promotion opportunities to the inmates who may not gain core positions by other means. The direct empirical reference in this theory is the marginal or peripheral prisoner in general population blocks; those who, because they were convicted for rape or sexual abuse, or because they have bonds with police authorities, or directly because they do not belong to the criminal world, need to seek the protection of the 'Gospel'. These are the people who, in the confinement setting, are informally labelled 'refugees'. The suspicion of bribery for access to protected spaces falls generally on them. In turn, these environments offer to the 'refugees' the opportunity to gain leadership positions that are only effective in the pacificated context of religious life.

In both cases, the leader is an inmate of the institution whose duties include not only a limited set of pastoral tasks but also the ability to allocate resources and to manage contact networks in two different environments: in the first place, with the churches and external foundations that make contributions of foodstuff, clothing, personal care and cleaning products, medicines, telephone cards, Bibles, Evangelical films, music and books, and, in the second place, with the Penitentiary System, for example, through the possibility of requesting the transfer of convicts who do not abide by communal living rules, or to make queries on the status of the criminal proceedings of the members of their blocks.

In the next section, we aim to show that both perspectives on the strength or the weakness of these leaders are correct to some extent. However, instead of considering them mutually excluding, they should be studied as the opposite ends of a continuum of positions relative to the forms of Christian-prison leadership.

The theory of the weak-man

In principle, the case of Rubén is an example of the weak-man model. It is important to stress that the weakness refers solely to him occupying a subordinate position within the rank system of the 'Tumbero' subculture. To our interviewee, prison is a hostile place for two main reasons: first, he has no previous socialization in the criminal world; he entered the institution at quite an early age, almost as a teenager; secondly, two members of his family – his father and one of his brothers – are police officers, i.e. he bears a name related to public security force. This negative heritage, at least within general population blocks where contacts and origin are valuable, loses force, or is even inverted in Christian environments. In such context there are other leadership models based on alternative behaviour codes, many times close to the life of inmates before their confinement. For example, our interviewee belongs to a household that used to practice the 'Gospel' until all the family members moved away from it. Regarding his case, Rubén was accused of murdering a relative. At a very early age he was charged and sentenced to life imprisonment.

As stated before, his position is structurally weak to live in the periphery of general population blocks. Nevertheless, he has two comparative advantages, whose scope and inherent effectiveness allow him to change his situation dramatically. On the one hand, through his father and brother, he has informal contacts with the police. On the other hand, from his family, he is close to the language, the precepts, the symbols, and the practices of Neo-Pentecostalism. Both factors reinforce themselves and deploy their maximum potential at the religiously-controlled institutional space represented by the prison-church known as Unit 25. Rubén combines the two resources, the corporate relations and the religious social life, intertwined under the form of natural skills, adapted behaviours, and conscious strategies aimed at redefining his place in the institution.

His adaptation to the strict religious life of Unit 25 occurred rapidly. Furthermore, within this context of restricted options, the combination of youth, a certain command of Evangelical ways, and the support of public authorities ultimately favoured his subjective orientation to the growth and leadership ways of the 'Gospel'. As reported by the existing

studies (Brardinelli and Algranti, 2013; Vallejos, 2016), Unit 25 had the largest number of hierarchical positions, i.e. opportunities – always religious in nature – to exercise power and different roles (pastors, co-pastors, deacons, ministers, servants, co-servants, workers and cleaners). Because he was socially conditioned and favoured, Rubén followed the leadership trajectory almost as a matter of instinct. The increasing strength of the cultural pattern that evangelicals update in the SPB is not a question of theological nature, of falsehood or truth of their doctrine, dogmas and precepts. Its effectiveness lies in the ability to create frameworks, that is, positive opportunities of action and recognition in which symbolic resources carry in turn material advantages. On the contrary, Catholicism is a poor provider of objective possibilities of development and specialization in confinement.

> If any Catholic block had cared for me as the Christian block did, I would be a priest today. However, I am a Servant because I accept that the Evangelical faith, or the religion, as the Brothers call it, cared for me, and gave me psychological support in all possible senses. (Rubén, inmate)

In analogy with similar trajectories within Islam – for example, in French (Venel and Ducloux, 2016: 73–83) or Italian prisons (Rhazzali, 2017: 276–278) – this case serves as an example of the theory of the weak man, who finds certain leadership and promotion opportunities in the 'Gospel' – chances that would be banned to inmates at general population blocks. The social setting of Unit 25 allowed Rubén to reconvert the disadvantages of his starting point into a projection platform toward other leadership models available in the Evangelical context.

The theory of the strong-man

On the other end, there is an emerging leadership model characterized by the construction of continuities between the dominant positions at general population blocks and the ones proposed by Evangelicals. It is interesting to identify the correspondences and influences that exist between the highest hierarchy of different and even rival frameworks. In a sense, the strongman profile defines a leadership model that gathers elements of both environments: he is familiar with 'Tumbero' codes, which he knows due to his origin and, in many cases, to his primary socialization, and with Christian codes, which he masters by affiliation and pastoral learning.

This is the case of our next participant. Mariano is 38 years old and is one of a ten-member family living in the Western area of the Province of Buenos Aires. His family is formed of four brothers, three sisters, his mother and his deceased father (who was a prison guard). His household origin is linked to Catholicism in a relationship that he qualifies as 'distant', without territorial anchoring or regular practice. Mariano was arrested and imprisoned at Sierra Chica in the late 1990s, when he was 27, for armed robbery. After three and a half years, he was released but eight months later, he was arrested again under similar circumstances. In this case, he was taken to the Penitentiary Complex of Florencio Varela (Province of Buenos Aires) to serve a sentence that will last until 2010.

The years he spent in general population blocks allowed him to grow within the inner hierarchy system until he lead his own section, i.e., he had people in his command, he managed contacts, resources and occupied a leadership position in the 'Tumbero' world. This privileged situation also implies a permanent defence of his authority always exposed to challenges leading to physical attacks, sometimes through third parties and sometimes in a direct way. In one of these struggles among different sections, Mariano was sent to a punishment cell with a 'Brother' inmate, who was confined with him. After this direct contact with the point of view and the religious practices, the possibilities afforded by the Evangelical proposal in prisons progressively became a legitimate project to him, to spend his remaining years of imprisonment. As expected, the Evangelical interpellation and his subsequent request for transfer represented a change in values, codes and behaviours that were experienced as a conflict between different legitimacy systems. In turn, as marginal places within the 'Tumbero' code, Christian blocks carry a double stigma for their inhabitants: they are considered weak individuals, in need of religious protection and they are usually qualified as undesired inmates, because their charges are for crimes that common prisoners tend to refuse, such as rape. Crossing this border entails many dangers, impurities and threats aimed at discouraging the desertion of the peer group. Among the reasons cited by Mariano for leaving from the general population block, he mentioned tiredness, fatigue, stress and violence among the different bands – situations in which he is directly involved as one of the main leaders.

He started his Evangelical life in 2005, at the age 33. Mariano arrived at Unit 25 with the commitment to have good behaviour within the territory led by the pastor of the Congregation Christ is Coming. In this block, he was able to capitalize his prior experience as he acquired the social routines, practices and language of the Christian life – in this order. His familiarity with the prison world made him a highly qualified candidate to deal with the new arrivals, i.e., the periphery inhabiting the margins of the 'Gospel', who are still closer to the codes of the general population than to religious codes. Now then, before reaching that position, our interviewee performed several different roles. He began by combining the Evangelical time management – with its regular rhythms of prayer, cult, leisure and study of the Bible – with specific daily tasks. Mariano did a great job incorporating new members. The speech logics behind the testimony of 'I was there', 'I experienced the same', 'I know what it is like and I can help you' in the pastoral work with inmates allowed him to climb the internal ranks. To this extent, the theory of the strongman recognizes a principle of homology between the 'Tumbero' and the evangelical leadership; the resources of authority positions may be interchangeable with each other, with a dynamic system of adjustments and adaptations.

According to our fieldwork, the cases analysed represent two dominant tendencies observed in the process of creating new leaders. We may wonder what conditions enable an inmate to project himself as a religious authority in this environment. To answer this question, we must focus on the meeting point between the original position of the internee, on the one hand, and the new order in which he enters on the other. For example, the individuals that are peripheral or marginal at general population blocks have more promotion opportunities in the Evangelical context the closer, hermetic and strictly religious this context is. With its prison-church model, Unit 25 is a paradigmatic case in which the ascent of the first trajectory analysed herein is enhanced. On the contrary, the

chiefs of the different sections of general population blocks have better opportunities to manage themselves and climb the ranks in hybrid contexts, halfway between 'Tumbero' and Christian codes of communal living. As identified in the second trajectory, being a referent within prison walls and being familiar with the codes of the criminal world adds differential value. Both the weak-man and the strong-man theories describe the possibilities and variants observed at Evangelical blocks in terms of creation of emerging leaderships.

Conclusion

The activity of Evangelicals in the Argentine penitentiary system is the result of a convergence of two simultaneous processes that have tended to radicalize since the early 21st century. The first consists of the collapse and the governability crisis of the prison system, because of systematic overcrowding. The institutional situation is inevitably and increasingly more a case of co-government, in which both directors and guards depend on and negotiate with spontaneous power positions that arise among the convicts. The second process, which takes place at the same time, but in the religious world, relates to the expansion of Neo-Pentecostalism and its active projection on public domains, among which we should highlight, for example, hospital settings, social welfare attendance, the treatment of drug addictions and, especially, the evangelization in confinement context.

The historical encounter between a collapsed institution, unable to promote its internal mechanisms of government, and the sustained effort of individuals and churches that seek to intervene in these situations and to provide new definitions of reality, tends to replicate across Latin America. This contributes to the reformulation of the penitentiary system in which the subculture proper of the criminal world starts to live side by side with, and to compete against, other behaviour codes based on spiritual criteria and hierarchies. This gives rise to new opportunities of power, prestige and promotion, thus triggering leadership processes that modify the institutional life.

The genesis and dynamics of this phenomenon do not reside in the implementation of a solid program planned in advance, but on the successive attempts of individual pioneers who, in the context of a structural expansion of Neo-Pentecostalism, start personal evangelization projects that only become collective at a later instance. The dynamic superposition of penitentiary and pastoral careers is the strategic behaviour that enabled these founders to reinvent the institution from the inside: first through individual conversions, and later with collective campaigns, plus the management of their own blocks and, finally, through the unique experience of Unit 25.

The theoretical potential of Neo-Pentecostalism in prisons lies in the possibility of discussing the thesis of the religious deinstitutionalization and the individuation of belief in Latin America. The instituting force of the Evangelical materializes not only in new organizations and in effective forms of social life – such as megachurches or the creation of a material culture of their own – but also expresses itself in the attempt to reformulate public domains through heterodox institutionalization models that explicit and dispute the Catholic prevalence in Argentine society. Far from a spiritual landscape exclusively constructed on the principles of deregulation, autonomy and individual election, the experience in imprisonment centres evidences how organizations that are in crisis may

be the object of religious conflicts and conquests. The decline of the institutions of the first modernity enables, as an unintended consequence, the expansion of subordinate groups that seek to redefine the space of the sacred in society and its power structures.

Funding

Notes

1. For more information on the meaning and the scope of the rules, ranks, taxonomy and changes that form part of the 'tumbera' culture, see Miguez (2008).
2. These figures were taken from the Federal Statistics System on the Execution of Criminal Sentences (Sneep – *Sistema Nacional de Estadísticas sobre Ejecución de la Pena*) published by the Argentine Ministry of Justice.

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