Cut the rights short: Reflecting about suicides in Italian prisons and punitivism

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on the relation between the high rate of suicides and the condition of detention inside Italian prisons, showing that the gap between the prescription of Article 27 of the Italian Constitution, namely "punishment must work for the rehabilitation of the condemned persons," and reality is yet to be filled. The deterioration of prison conditions as a major cause of suicides is analysed under three aspects: overcrowding; zero tolerance politics and the culture of control; and the nature of prison as a "total institution," annihilating any quest for dignity, decent life, or implementation of detainees' rights. The present theoretical discussion is endorsed by some interviews with a lawyer and three ex-inmates, who share in detail their experiences of the discriminatory and stigmatising nature of prisons. Concluding remarks emphasise the need to reduce to the minimum the use of prisons to avoid the degradation of life conditions and suicides therein.*

Keywords: *Italy; prisons; suicides; securitarianism; total institutions.*

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1. Introduction

The issue of suicides in Italian prisons has been at stake in recent years. The figures provided by the *Associazione Antigone* (Associazione Antigone n.d.; Antonelli 2025) emphasise how more and more inmates take their lives while under detention. Many more suicide attempts turn out to be unsuccessful, whereas, on the other hands, many suicides turn out to be the tragic consequence of the purpose to draw the attention of prison staff (Anastasia 2022, 48). Suicides are by this token an extreme, dramatic tool inmates use to communicate their unease to put up with the inhuman condition they face.

This paper focuses on the relation between the high rate of suicides and the condition of detention inside Italian prisons, showing that the gap between the prescription of Article 27 of the Italian Constitution, namely "punishment must work for the rehabilitation of the condemned persons," and reality is yet to be filled. The deterioration of prison conditions as major cause of suicides is analysed under three aspects. The first relates to overcrowding. Italian punishment structures currently host over 60,000 inmates, against a supposed capacity of 42,000 inmates (Ministero della Giustizia 2025). Overcrowding has led the Italian Government to be sentenced twice by the European Court of Human Rights in 2013 (*Torreggiani and Others v. Italy*; *Suleimanovic v. Italy*). Despite this, Italian prisons keep being overcrowded, because of the law-and-order policies that have been enforced throughout the "Western World" since the 1980s, which replace the welfare State with the penal/carceral State (De Giorgi 2001, 32; Wacquant 2007, 26), as well as to manage the conflicts that take place within post-industrial societies (De Giorgi 2002, 79).

Secondly, "zero tolerance politics" (Wacquant 2007, 57) march hand in glove with the so-called "culture of control" (Garland 2003, 123) that has spread across contemporary society in recent times. The public, under an increasingly technocratic turn of political institutions of neoliberalism (D'Eramo 2020, 81), considers more and more the penal sphere as the place to express its will (Pavarini 2015, 52), through the dynamics of the "community of accomplices" (Baumann, 2006) which consists of the individuation of scapegoats. Consequently, prisons are no longer the places deputed to carry out rehabilitation but rather places of exclusion where individual suffering must be taken to the extreme. Following such a path, suicides reassure a more and more cynical public opinion that sees inmates as a cost or as a problem.

Thirdly, suicides are doubtless connected to the nature of prisons as "total institutions" (Goffman 1961, 13) that de-humanise individuals and subjects them to a regime of full dependency from the staff of the institution, thus depriving them of their rights. Prison has "in-material" consequences on the life of inmates (Ruggiero and Gallo 1986, 34),

changing their way of perceiving reality and of interacting with other people. Suicides, attempted suicides, and self-injuries are a reaction to this mechanism of subjugation and dependency.

Suicides are analysed below under these three theoretical lenses, also using interviews done by the author to ex-inmates and to a lawyer. Concluding remarks address the dilemma between the policy options of decriminalisation or the improvement of prison conditions.

2. The roots of suicides: Overcrowding in prisons

The relation between suicides, physical restraints, and poor life conditions within prisons, can explain only in part the soaring suicide rates within Italian prisons. On the one hand, prisons, since their birth in the late eighteenth century (Santoro 1997, 26), are places designed for inmates to live through hardships and sufferings. Moral (loss of liberty) and material deprivation combine to make sure that, under the retributionist approach, inmates repay society of their debts. Punishment, following the utilitarianist approach, is supposed to balance pleasure and pain, and prison is the place where suffering will pay for the pleasure the offender has had in excess.

On the other hand, prisons make up an important part of disciplinary dispositives (Foucault 1976, 21; Melossi and Pavarini 1977, 16) that aim to discipline "dangerous" classes, such as workers, migrants, and the unemployed, for them to assimilate the production-oriented values of capitalist society. Imprisonment, by this token, is not supposed to physically deteriorate inmates, but, as Michel Foucault stated, "to educate the body through the soul." The body is not to be suppressed, but rather to be converted to productive purposes. Suicides refute this approach, as dead bodies obviously cannot be productive. Moreover, for this reason, since its foundations prisons have employed sanitary staff, both to constantly monitor (along with wardens) inmates and to make sure their physical and mental conditions do not deteriorate.

The difference between prisons and asylums (Basaglia 1978, 19) concerns the fact that the former are supposed to re-shape the way of thinking and acting of inmates, whereas the latter aim at their permanent exclusion from society. Even though both asylums and prisons share the status of "total institutions" (Goffman 1961, 33), the de-personalising, repressive, and authoritarian aspects of prisons are supposed to work just for temporary amounts of time, as their role is that of re-shaping the identity and the behaviour of inmates. Discipline was soon to be connected to the positivist-rooted idea of rehabilitation, that became re-socialisation after the reformist stances of the 1970s. The idea that punishment was finalised to re-integrate offenders in society underpinned all the main penal policies that Western Governments implemented in the 1960s and 1970s.

Alongside with the humanisation of punishment, the idea of alternative punishment, namely a range of penal sentences to be served in society in order not to sever the links between society and offenders, was actively enforced. The idea of a more human prison marched hand in glove with that of a fairer and more equal society.

The neo-punitivist way that spread in the United States since the 1980s, relying on the theories of *just desert*, spared Italy for at least ten years. Even though the figures of the detained population skyrocketed from 25,000 in 1990 to 50,000 in 1995, due to the anti-drugs law *Jervolino-Vassalli* (L No. 162/1990) and, eventually, to immigration laws, some reforms aiming at the improvement of detention conditions (Anastasia and Palma 2001, 72) as well as trying to reduce the number of inmates were undertaken. They include the law *Bindi* (DL No. 229/1999) that recognised the right to health assistance to inmates, the law *Smuraglia* (L No. 193/2000) providing fiscal advantages to the cooperatives that hire prisoners, and the law *Simeone-Saraceni* (L No. 165/1998) allowing the suspension of penal execution for the sentences of up to three years of conviction.

Such reforms could have been effective if the securitarian context had not become hegemonic in the Italian society. The demand for restrictive policies, to be tough on crime and enforce hard punishment, inspired by the law-and-order approach, has brought about not only a further growth of the number of inmates, but also the idea that prisons should be a permanent and degrading punishment. Life in prison has gotten by this token worse, providing the ground for the growth of suicides.

3. "Let's lock them away and throw the key": The consequences of zero tolerance

Zero tolerance policies, inaugurated in 1994 by the then major of New York and former magistrate Rudolph Giuliani, have played a capital role in shaping the securitarian approach to crimes which has caused overincarceration and deterioration of inmates' life, insofar as rehabilitation aims are ruled away and hard punishment has become the solution. Since Wilson and Kelling (1982, 33) published their essay about the theory of broken windows, shifting the responsibility of crimes and disorders from the social fabric to individual choices, lower class and marginal social groups have been more and more targeted as those "dangerous classes" (Chevallier 1977, 27) to be either controlled or expelled from society. By this token, prisons have turned out to be a place where social conflicts are stowed away, and inmates represent a population in excess, to be kept under degrading conditions for the longest time as possible. The "naked lives" (Agamben 1993, 8) of migrants, unemployed, Roma, refugees, sex workers, and LGBTQIA+ swell the ranks of prisoners, at complete disposal of power, with few possibilities to claim the respect of their fundamental rights. More in depth, a naked life, when in the hands of power, is very

likely to be deemed unworthy to live, unless the sovereign does not decide the other way.

Only those lives which are deemed worthy to be lived are saved, that is, under the bio-political contemporary power, those lives which are functional to a consumerism-oriented economy (Foucault 2001, 76; Zizek 2003, 15). In such a contextual frame, where power makes live and let die, suicides in prison are considered with indifference and relief, as one less "problematic" case to deal with is one less threat to society and one less cost for the State. Policies such as the "three strikes and you are out" approach, enforced in the United States since the 1990s (Simon 2008, 68), result in an embitterment of detention that is more and more associated to the idea of a permanent removal from society (Wacquant 2017, 44).

In the case of Italy, migrants account for one-third of the total prison population, although inside Northern Italian prisons they often account for most of the persons held under custody (Pavarini 2015, 39). Along with them, Italian prisoners are often from the South (Verdolini 2023, 56), keeping up with the reproduction of a trend that has been going on since the country became independent (Pavarini 1997, 83). Economic and social marginality are often overlapped with health problems (Sarzotti 1996, 45), as one-third of migrants are drug addicts and one-quarter of them suffer from serious pathologies (La Società della Ragione 2020).

Moral panic in relation to migrants living under precarious life conditions has spread across Italian society since the late 1980s. The collapse of Italy's "First-Republic," due to the so-called *Tangentopoli* corruption scandal (Dal Lago 1998, 98), left the legacy of more restrictive criteria for the Parliament to approve an amnesty, thus contributing to the overcrowding of prisons. More than that, social fragmentation, coupled with the end of mass participation through political parties, resulted into a boost in prejudices against migrants, Roma, and LGBTQIA+, who are often associated with street crimes (Verdolini 2023, 76).

Moral panic about migration and drugs has been fuelled by the representations provided both by the media and by scholars (Barbagli 1998, 12). Talk shows, entertainment shows, and TV serials have focused massively on the issue of crimes, always portraying migrants, Roma, and, recently, young people as a potential danger for individual safety, and advocating the enforcement of harsh punishment as both a preventive and a repressive means to fight crimes.

The importance of media in relation to crimes reached its peak in March 2020, when, during a TV Sunday show, the anchorman Massimo Giletti put on stage a live protest for the prison release of a Camorra boss who was at the final stage of his lethal disease. The then Minister of Justice took him seriously (Scalia 2022, 171), immediately dismissing the Director of the

penitentiary administration concerned. Shows such as *Striscia la Notizia* and *Le Iene,* which are supposed to entertain their audience, have found it more convenient to draw on a "blood and tears" approach for the sake of success also in this context. Along with shows, many popular fictions, focusing on crime, are regularly shown on Italian TV channels, always focusing on the representation of criminals as rational, merciless rogues, often with a migrant, Roma, or Southern Italian background, threating the lives of honest citizens, that handsome police officers will block, thus reassuring the attendance at home.

Popular culture marches hand in glove with academia, as the works of some scholars endorse the "fear" of the public about immigration and urban disorder through the publication of studies showing that migrants are more delinquent than Italians are (Barbagli 1998, 49; Anastasia 2022, 17). Such studies draw on an approximate use of empirical data, as they neglect aspects like the production of deviance as a selective process. Notably, police forces usually patrol the areas "at risk," which are marginal areas where migrants live, and so they are more likely to stop and search more migrants than Italians. Secondly, police forces are also influenced by the dominating prejudices against migrants (Palidda 2001, 65), so they are more likely to focus their work on non-Italian citizens. Thirdly, migrants are more visible (Goffman 1963, 31), not only because of their physical appearance, but also because of the kind of cars they drive (often second-hand cars, bought for their cheap prices), the way they dress, and their accents. Finally, once they have ended up in the penal system of the country, migrants can hardly rely on a proper defence, and their declarations are not always translated properly. M.M., a solicitor in Bologna interviewed by the author, shared the story of a group of migrants he managed to get acquitted from the accuse of terrorism in 2002:

They were eavesdropped in San Petronio, the translator of the Questura, took a comment on a painting as if they were advocating a terrorist action by Bin Laden. They were immediately arrested and put on trial. I was appointed by the court as their public defender, and immediately found out they were Berberians not Moroccans, so they spoke a language that is different from the standard Arabic. I have worked in the past with a Berberian translator. I hired her, and her translation proved successful. They were all acquitted. They were lucky, but it's a kind of luck that happens so often… (M.M., interviewed on 27 March 2024).

It is worth highlighting that media and the penal system reflect the uncertainties and the lack of identity for a more and more anomic society (Durkheim 2000), which needs one or more scapegoat to make up for its lack of mutual trust and shared values. Moreover, in a more and more globalised society, where super-national institutions make crucial decisions about economics and military matters, the national penal system has remained the only domain where citizens feel, more than think, that

they can actively participate in the decision-making process (Pavarini 2015, 26). "Patibular democracy" or "penal populism" (Anastasia 2022, 38) are the most appropriate definitions of contemporary age. The penal system of a country is deputed to govern all the social contradictions of the present age, conveying the frustration and the dissatisfaction with present life towards an extreme use of incarceration and punishment. The end of metanarratives, ruling out all the chances of radical transformations, combines with precariousness (Baumann 2002, 44) and neo-liberal competition, which rejects marginality and advocates a binary logic based on inclusion and exclusion, which requires the penal system to permanently exclude those who do not fit in the picture of global consumerism or are perceived as competitors. Prisons turn into the place of permanent exclusion, where inmates must experience extreme sufferings.

Political forces, on both sides of the left/right spectrum, use "penal populism" to gain political consent (Tarchi 2020). In 2018, one-third of the Italian voters chose to vote for the *Movimento 5 Stelle*, a political party that has based its identity on the anti-political rage (Mete 2022, 97), inspired by the alleged mass corruption affecting the political caste, to be regulated by a massive use of "legality," namely a massive use of penal measures. In the view of *Movimento 5 Stelle*, the respect of laws spreads from the bottom to the top, so that a strict repression of petty crimes will discourage potential offenders from violating the law.

On the other side, the Italian centre-right forces such as the members of the current Government coalition regard legality as a measure to tackle migration-related issues and "eccentric" behaviours (such as those allegedly related to ravers and LGBTQIA+ people). Migrants are seen as responsible for public disorders, and these forces' solution lies in the embitterment of anti-migration laws (as the *Cutro* Decree (DL No. 20/2023) shows) as well as in the approval and enforcement of laws deputed to repress political dissent and to restrict lifestyles which are not in line with the so called "traditional family" values. The Security Decree (DDL 1660/2024), approved by the Italian Chamber of Deputies on 18 September 2024, marches in this critical direction, whereas overcrowding and suicides are supposed to be solved both by building new prisons and by sending those inmates with 12 months yet to serve in communities where usually drug users stay.

Current governmental forces tend to dodge the problems related to the deterioration of life conditions in prison, as well as not considering the de-humanising aspect of punishment, including the abuses inmates suffer while under custody. The next section copes with these aspects.

4. Life in prisons: Total institutions or abusing institutions?

Erving Goffman (1961) has described and analysed in depth the nature of prisons as part of the circuit of "total institutions." Like asylums,

barracks, and monasteries, prisons are places that require the total surrender of individual wills to the power of the staff deputed to overlook at the inmates. Wardens, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and social care workers, as caring and accurate as they can be, share the expectation that prisoners will accept to be subjugated, and to obey to their recommendations and orders. The legitimacy of their expectations rests upon the authoritative and repressive nature of penal institutions: inmates are in prison because a court, a judge, decided so. Consequently, they are obliged to accept a pattern of relations relying on subjugation.

Recent studies (Ross and Vianello 2024, 82) show that this pattern of asymmetrical power relations accounts for prisoners as the most negative aspect of their carceral experience. Subjugation is worsened also because of other aspects. Firstly, the closed nature of the institution concerned increases the discretionary power of the prison staff. Many aspects of the daily life in prisons, from treatment to the management of conflicts, are often decided on the spot by the prison staff, without respect of existing procedures. The lack of sufficient staff makes this trend more and more current in Italian prisons (Melani 2024, 23). Secondly, the legitimisation of the prison staff's power is reinforced by the prescriptive character of punishment. As prison staff members are vested with legal power, they are entitled to operate in the way they deem necessary, without being accountable for what they have done therein. A warden of a southern Italian prison told the author about the treatment of mentally ill inmates: "We deal with them. We know how to handle critical situations. Doctors? Nurses? Psychiatrists? Are you serious!? If you want me to tell you that here we have a sanitary staff, I will tell you. If you want me to tell you the truth, I will tell you that it is us penitentiary staff that deal with them. How do we deal with them? Let's say it's not a Sunday trip to deal with them…" (Interview, 3 July 2024).

Thirdly, inmates must deal with internal hierarchies between inmates, thus experiencing a further stage of subjugation. The process of de-socialisation they experience once they are restricted becomes by this token re-socialisation, as they must fit themselves into new rules and roles that might be opposite to those they use to follow and play outside. As an ex-inmate says:

You must spend your time with people you wouldn't have hung up with outside. Speak another language, constantly watch over your shoulder, weigh every word you say, hoping you won't harm anybody … You must remember that long term inmates, who have been there before you came and will remain after you finish serve your sentence, must be "respected." Use accurate language with the members of criminal organisations, try to be polite as well, and also hide your pain, because otherwise they will think you are wimpy and will bully you. And don't forget that people are frequently moved from one prison to another, so you haven't enough time

to get used and to create yourself a long-lasting group of friends. Who were you doesn't matter in there. You must invent another yourself, and it is not so easy, because it is an ongoing process (Interview, 3 July 2024).

Such a process of de-socialisation and re-socialisation implies, indeed, a de-personalisation of inmates, who undergo serious identity crises that result in the deterioration of mental health conditions (Corleone 2017, 15). The high number of inmates suffering from mental diseases is the consequence of detention under overcrowded, inhuman conditions. Vincenzo Ruggiero and Ermanno Gallo (1986, 85) argue that imprisonment, besides worsening material conditions, causes an alteration of perception of reality in prisoners, producing what one might call alienation: "Your body is searched at least 10 times a day. You never turn on and off the lights, privacy in toilets is an option, doors are open and closed by others, you share more and more shrinking space with people you don't know and, often, you don't like. When you are released, it takes time before you get used again to the old reality, and it's not sure you manage to do it. Even a pat on your shoulder scares you" (Interview, 3 July 2024).

De-personalisation is also related to the severing of links with the outer world while in custody. Parents are ashamed of having sons or daughters jailed, partners often decide to start a new dating, children are kept away from their fathers, either because of stigmatisation, or because the new life their parents who are not jailed stats forces them away from their jailed parent. Even in those cases that relations remain, the lack of a regular and constant bond ends up slackening them. A female ex-convict states:

My parents kept telling me: you are a junk, a pusher, your son cannot grow with you. Let's hope you'll be sentenced to jail, so that this poor little child can stay with us and lead a regular life. I haven't seen my son for one year. Then they decided to take him to visit me, but … we just didn't know what to tell each other. It was hard and painful. Even now, he still lives with my parents and agrees to see me once a month. I am his mum, but I am no more his mum, if that makes sense… (Interview, 5 November 2023).

Prison is a place for alienation and suffering, which regularly take place under the consent of a public opinion that regards penitentiaries as places to be kept away, possibly for good, from the rest of society. The double stigmatisation, in society and in jail, ends up weakening the detained persons, both physically and, especially, psychologically. Social problems, by this token, become a medical problem, both because health deteriorates, and because prisoners can only use sedative medication in order to forget their conditions of life: "Everybody in prison goes for the trolley. Pills of every kind, to relieve your physical and, especially, your mental pain. Benzodiazepine solves most of the problems of inmates, who are put to sleep and don't mind anymore quarrelling with their cellmate about who

is to stand up, as is impossible to stand all up in cells, or whether TV or radio should be turn on or off. Less work for the staff, no one complains, no violent reaction at all. Well, almost…" (Interview, 5 November 2023).

Finally, inmates suffer from abuse by the prison staff. The case of Asti, in 2012, shed a light about the existence of squads of prison police officers that, in some Italian prisons, engage in the practice of beating inmates, to the extent of torturing them (Scalia 2016, 448). The case of Asti, as well as that of Stefano Cucchi beaten to death while under custody in 2009, have contributed to raise awareness about the issue, boosting the drafting and the approval of an anti-torture bill (Law No. 110/2017) that has been constantly criticised by its political opponents as it is deemed to restrain the work of police forces.

The cited law against torture marches hand in glove with the institution, both on a local and on a national level, of the Prison Ombudsman (of persons deprived of their personal liberty) who is deputed to monitor the conditions of detention. Prisons are supposed to be transparent, both for them to comply with the prescription of Article 27 of the Italian Constitution and to make sure that the links between detention sites and the rest of society are never severed. However, the implementation of such devices to improve the conditions of detention are not at pace with their aims, as Italian prisons continue to be inhuman places where inmates consider the possibility of taking their lives as an alternative to the hard conditions of imprisonment.

Prison overcrowding is one of the reasons. As prisons are crammed with inmates, it becomes almost impossible to deal with the basic needs of every single person living behind the walls of the penitentiary. Moreover, abuses in prison are the consequence of a pattern of relations that are established in prison, as well as of the mindset that takes place within "total institutions." Philip Zimbardo (2005, 18) defines it as "Lucifer effect," that is the relation between being member of a group and respecting the laws. Prison guards are disciplined to behave according to a uniform, shared pattern of values and action, even if this approach implies that their behaviours result into the violation of laws. By this token, prison officers will share the view of their group. They will agree with deeming inmates as a threat to their lives, as "suspended lives" to be dealt with in the cruellest and most inhuman way, as they have violated the laws and were rejected by society. Such mood, feelings, and attitude that shape the prison officers' mindset are endorsed by the hegemonic penal populism, thus legitimising repression and abuses, and creating the paradox of enforcing law through systematic violation of laws. An ex-inmate has said to the present author:

When you are inside, it's an anomaly when you are not insulted, told offences against your family, your wife or the place you come from … their voice is always aggressive, and every little flaw in your behaviour, like

walking too slow (for them) or not saying "signorsì," is an excuse for them to push you, hit your shoulders or your face violently. If they think you are "a rebel," they start with retaliation. For example, they write in their report you behaved unproperly, so you know that you will be denied the possibility to go on furlough to see your family, or to apply for semi-liberty. Isolation, beatings, are for those who are deemed as "very rebel." Usually, slandering, swearing, threating, and light beatings work well enough to maintain discipline (3 July 2024).

This ex-inmate's description refers to three kinds of abuses: verbal, physical, and psychological. The threat of being reported, so that access to alternative measures is put at risk, plays a capital role in shaping power relations, as well as the quality of life, inside prisons. If penitentiaries are overcrowded, inmates will hope to benefit from alternative measures to escape their poor life conditions. The threat posed by the behaviour of prison officers increases tension among inmates, paving the way to the rise of conflicts or misdemeanours that will force prison officers to report about those inmates that did not behave properly, thus creating a vicious circle fuelling mutual resentment both between inmates and between the latter and prison officers. Asymmetrical power relations, combined with poor life conditions, produce a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy consisting of further deterioration of prison life.

Another seminal aspect about prison abuse concerns the denial of atrocities from inmates (Cohen 2006, 11). Prisons, as independent symbolic frames, set up a pattern of negotiated and shared behaviours and values, which contribute to keep prison as a "dark place," impermeable to external knowledge and influence. Prisoners and staff produce a negotiated truth, that is a narration of events that are influenced both by force relations and by sharing daily life within a closed context, such as that of prison. Following this approach, prison police officers will justify their abusive behaviour because of the aggressive, oppositive, and violent behaviour inmates enact. Other staff, such as physicians, nurses, psychologists, and teachers, will deny any knowledge because they do not know what happens in the rows. Their denial is driven by force relations, as they are afraid that, if they admit to knowing, prison officers could become hostile against them. An ex-inmate has explained: "Prisons directors rotate every three years. Medical staff come from outside. Teachers, social care, can apply to be moved somewhere else outside prison, they don't last for long inside. Police officers remain until they decide they want to go back home. They have a long memory of all the inmates who have come and gone, they know every single little detail about the lives of inmates, so they can blackmail you anytime. Officers are the real governors of a prison…" (Interview, 3 July 2024).

Finally, inmates prefer not to talk about abuses for different reasons. Firstly, their idea of prison is associated with suffering, so, if they protest,

their detention mates could regard them as cowards who broke the code prison that sees *omertà* as a way of surviving inside. Secondly, inmates are afraid they could face retaliations from the staff, both police forces and others. This aspect discourages from reporting, as their life inside the prison could deteriorate more. Thirdly, the public reputation of inmates is limited, so that prosecutors would hardly consider a report made by an inmate. Fourthly, because of their marginal status, inmates cannot afford to put up with legal expenses. Last but not least, those who have suffered serious abuse tend to remove the experience, hoping they will cancel the trauma they suffered.

It is a difficult task to ascertain and prosecute the violation of the human rights of inmates. Outside prisons, a wide part of the public opinion thinks that prison is not a place to claim rights. Inside the walls of a penitentiary, mindsets and codes follow the same path as outside. Despite the mobilisation of activists and the institution of the Prison Ombudsman offices, prisons remain opaque places where extreme sufferings occur and inmates do not see any way out of hardship. Revolts (Manzoli 2020, 9), self-injuries, and suicides become the only tools prisoners have for their demands to be listened to, although such extreme means, resulting in deaths, make their call for help useless. Probably, there is something wrong with prisons.

5. Concluding remarks

Suicides have been the starting point of the present contribution, the thread binding together the three aspects we have discussed: penal policies, punitivist narrations, and life in prison. It has described and analysed how the idea that prisons should be a place of extreme deprivation and hardships, which has been developed over the last 30 years and which has deteriorated prison life, cause a devaluation of the dignity of prisoners as human beings. Consequently, suicides are an extreme form of reaction to a condition of physical, social, and moral deprivation.

Civil society activism, combined with the protests of inmates and the work of newly instituted Prison Ombudsman, might help change the situation, as it is very important for inmates not to consider taking their own lives, and that they grow the awareness of being entitled to human rights despite the fact they are still in prison. Such awareness, though, risks to be useless if not combined with the chance to reintegrate in society again, and not to wallow in marginality and abuses for the rest of their lives. A change within society is necessary for this to happen. The first step to undertake is that of untying the bind between social conflicts and imprisonment. The decriminalisation of immigration and of drug use, as well as the reduction of sentence time, could help emptying prisons and improve life conditions inside, also for the prison staff. In this context, some authors (Whyte 2015, 5) argue that it is useless to criminalise street

crimes, both because it is ineffective and because many street crimes are refunded by private insurances. Other authors (Anastasia and Manconi 2022, 19) argue that it is time to abolish prisons, or to start to introduce a "limited attendance policy," consisting of jailing as much persons as prisons can store. It could be a first step to change. But it would be useless if new prisons were built and, especially, if the public opinion keeps considering that prison will solve every problem by stowing as many people as possible away. Such a way of thinking must change. Or other deaths in prison will follow.

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