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“Another Second Chance”: Rethinking Rehabilitation through the Lens of California’s Prison Fire Camps

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Many scholars and practitioners treat rehabilitation as a black box that, if working, necessarily outputs low(er) recidivism rates. In contrast, this article proposes a constructionist view that asks how those on the front lines of the “carceral archipelago” actually think about, and experience, rehabilitation. Here I examine California’s prison fire camps, atypical carceral settings in which state prisoners work as wildland firefighters. The camps present a puzzle: how is it that there exists in California—routinely considered an extreme case in the shift toward warehouse prisons—a penal setting in which rehabilitation not only survives, but affects many aspects of everyday life for prisoners, staff, and administrators alike? The answer, I argue, is that despite some important historical continuities—especially around work and the twin impulses to reform and punish (cf. Garland 1985; Hutchinson 2006)—rehabilitation has evolved considerably. This includes a focus on an abstract notion of work ethic not dependent on the learning of concrete work skills, as well as a neoliberal discourse about personal responsibility. In sum, rehabilitation exists in the fire camps not in spite of the “punitive turn,” but in many ways precisely because of it. Implications include: (1) rehabilitation can be (and perhaps always is) more malleable and multifaceted than is often recognized; (2) the fire camps are simultaneously prisons and nonprisons, and those in them both inmates and heroes; and (3) punishment is a messy, variegated phenomenon in which the relationships between larger discourses and social structures and practices on the ground are dynamic and varied. Keywords: rehabilitation; neoliberal punishment; prison fire camps; responsabilization; punitiveness.

“I see myself as somebody waiting their turn for another second chance.”

– Reggie (prisoner, fire camp in central California)

“No one but an academic simpleton will even use the world ‘rehabilitation’ without apprehension.”

– Richard Korn (1992:4; quoted in Ward and Maruna 2007:1)

California’s prison system is routinely castigated as the poster child of the “punitive turn”—ground zero, so to speak, of a late twentieth century move away from rehabilitation and toward retribution, incapacitation, and actuarial justice (see, for example, Campbell 2009; Gilmore 2007; Hunt et al. 1993; Irwin 2005; Page 2011; Petersilia 2006; Stateman 2009). A popular view among criminologists and sociologists is that rehabilitation grew in importance as an organizing principle in American punishment through early- and mid-twentieth century, reaching its peak in the 1950s and 1960s as *the* dominant penological paradigm. According to the same popular view, during the last quarter of the twentieth century rehabilitation was replaced by a more conservative position emphasizing a visceral, emotive form of punishment predicated on concerns about safety, responsibility, and a seemingly unquenchable drive to incapacitate (e.g., Allen 1981; Garland 2001; Irwin 1980; Pratt et al. 2005; Rafter and Stanley 1999; Rotman 1995; Simon 1993). Exacerbating

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Social Problems, Vol. 59, Issue 4, pp. 437–458, ISSN 0037-7791, electronic ISSN 1533-8533. © 2012 by Society for the Study of Social Problems, Inc. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Rights and Permissions website at www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp. DOI: 10.1525/sp.2012.59.4.437.

the situation in California is a correctional bureaucracy that is, at best, seen as woefully under-resourced and ill equipped to handle an increasingly intertwined set of thorny problems (and, at worst, morally bankrupt and hopelessly inept). California's prison system is routinely described as being on the brink of permanent crisis (Gilmore 2007; Little Hoover Commission 2007; Office of the Inspector General 2007; Stateman 2009; Steptoe 2007; Sterngold 2008), a condition forcefully demonstrated in the U.S. Supreme Court's 2011 decision in *Brown v. Plata* (09-1233, Slip Opinion), which demanded the state reduce overcrowding by nearly 40,000 inmates in order to remedy prison medical conditions that were so abysmal as to be clearly unconstitutional.¹

Yet within this highly dysfunctional prison system, in what is seen as Exhibit A in America's "punitive turn," is a carceral setting that looks, jarringly, like a radically different way of doing punishment: California's prison fire camps. Correctional administrators, politicians, and the media all celebrate the camps as efficient, positive, and productive places with the potential to transform criminals into responsible citizens (e.g., Bunton 2012; California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2007b; Current 2008; Fox News 2008; Kelleher 1994; Rogers 2009). In these fire camps, prisoners convicted of a variety of crimes ranging from drug possession to armed robbery are housed in open settings (i.e., no secure fence) and put to work doing manual labor projects and fighting on the frontlines of California's many wildfires. In stark contrast with many of California's walled prisons—with their comparatively low rates of program participation and disproportionate warehousing of people in ultra-maximum security units (Petersilia 2006; Reiter forthcoming)—the fire camps are infused with messages of rehabilitation. It is one of the central axes around which everyday life unfolds in the prison fire camps. How can such prison camps survive, even flourish, within a larger penal environment that appears in so many ways hostile to a rehabilitative, comparatively less austere, imprisonment approach?

Answering this question requires taking a step back to ask just what we consider rehabilitation to be. Often, it is simply conceived as the polar opposite of retribution and incapacitation. Thus when rehabilitation reigns, as it is said by many to have in U.S. prisons during the 1950s and 1960s, impulses toward retribution and incapacitation are thought to have been low. Likewise, efforts by criminologists to "save rehabilitation" and findings that the public may (still) support rehabilitation (at least for some offenders) are often portrayed as a bulwark against, and corrective to, the most egregious aspects of the punitive turn (e.g., Cullen 2005; Cullen and Gilbert 1982; Moon et al. 2000; Sundt et al. 1998).

Viewed through this lens, one plausible answer for why rehabilitation dominates in California's prison fire camps is that the camps are the proverbial exceptions that prove the rule. This makes it tempting to conceptualize the camps as rehabilitative islands in a sea of punitive warehouse prisons. Indeed, there is some evidence that those who live and work in the fire camps think of them as exceptional spaces: from race to rehabilitation to work, those in the camps make sense of certain aspects of their lives against the foil of walled prisons (see also Goodman 2010, 2012).

But there are at least two sets of problems (or limitations) with thinking about rehabilitation as simply the polar opposite of retributivism. First, there is a small but influential literature suggesting that rehabilitation often evolves *within* the punishment field, rather than apart from it. Whether studying Europe or North America, diverse scholars have demonstrated that rehabilitation can be a malleable, adaptive framework (see, for example, Appleton 2010; Hannah-Moffat 2001; Robinson 2008). This is certainly true in California, at least in the fire camps: inmates and frontline staff view rehabilitation as something that happens if (and *only* if) people want it to happen—essentially, individuals are considered responsible for their own rehabilitation. The understanding of rehabilitation in the camps is, then, largely compatible with the neoliberal penalty

1. Appended to the decision are three photographs meant to capture the horrific conditions in some California prisons. As Simon (2011) notes in an editorial reflecting on the case, "Like the pictures from Abu Ghraib, these photos locate California's penal practices in a place of inhumanity, degradation, and torture that cannot be tolerated (even by judges disciplined by decades of punitive populism and crime fear)" (p. 253).

embodied in California's walled prison complex (and, conversely, largely incompatible with the sociomedical model of the '50s and '60s in which prisoners were seen as "sick" and in need of treatment). Seen in this light, rehabilitation exists in the camps not in spite of the punitive turn, but in many ways precisely because of it (cf. O'Malley 1999; Zedner 2011).

A second danger comes from ignoring the ways in which rehabilitation as a discourse has evolved considerably over the past century (and especially since the sociomedical model of treatment peaked during the middle decades of the twentieth century). Indeed, whether called rehabilitation, reform, treatment, or something else, efforts to change people have long been central to the state project of punishment, albeit in ways that vary greatly across time and place (see, for example, Garland 1985; Hannah-Moffat 2001; Ignatieff 1978; McLennan 2008; Meranze 1996; Rothman 1971, 1980; Simon 1993). This is especially clear in my discussion of California fire camps' focus on productive labor as a mechanism for creating responsible citizens (or, more precisely, for giving inmates a tool with which to reform themselves).

What we need, then, is a way of thinking about rehabilitation that, taking a cue from the larger social problems constructionist literature, views it foremost as an *emergent phenomenon*, grounded in people's lives and particular social interactions. This helps us understand how prisoners and staff (those closest to the practice of penal governance) conceive and make sense of individual change. In this article I define rehabilitation as a rhetorical shell filled with, at any given time and in any given social context, myriad (and sometimes competing) ideas about offenders and their capacity for change, as well as the proper role, if any, of the state in contributing to and/or mandating such "change projects."

Viewing rehabilitation as a vessel rather than an *a priori* defined set of beliefs and relationships reframes the question from *why* rehabilitation exists in the camps (and not elsewhere in the California prison system) to *how* rehabilitation is lived in the camps. This conception also makes it easier to ask what we can learn from this study about rehabilitation, punishment, and the fire camps more generally. The answer, I suggest, is that rehabilitation, like punishment more generally, is both variegated and pixelated, and considerably messier than many contemporary scholarly accounts allow. From a broad vantage point, to make sense of rehabilitation in the fire camps is to recognize that these contexts are simultaneously understood as camps and prisons; that the work performed by inmates is seen as heroic, rehabilitation-oriented labor as well as exploitation; and that those incarcerated in the fire camps view themselves (and are often viewed by others) as *both* heroes and prisoners. In this sense, rehabilitation becomes a window through which to view larger trends in punishment, social change, and dynamic relationships between offenders and the state.

Theorizing Rehabilitation

The Mainstream Narrative

The mainstream view of rehabilitation among sociologists, criminologists, and other students of punishment is nicely summarized by David Garland in his opus *The Culture of Control* (2001):

But today, rehabilitation programmes no longer claim to express the overarching ideology of the system, nor even to be the leading purpose of any penal measure. Sentencing law is no longer shaped by correctional concerns such as indeterminacy and early release. And the rehabilitative possibilities of criminal justice measures are routinely subordinated to other penal goals, particularly retribution, incapacitation, and the management of risk (p. 8).²

2. It should be noted that Garland is careful to qualify in *The Culture of Control* (2001) that "'rehabilitative' programmes do continue to operate in prisons and elsewhere . . ." (p. 8). Similarly, throughout the book he cautions that his goal is to identify broad strokes, sometimes at the expense of paying less attention to policies and practices that were either subordinate or simply lost out in the competitive policy arena (see also Garland 2004).

This seismic shift in penology and penalty—away from rehabilitation and toward retribution—is said to have swept (virtually) every state in the United States (albeit with important state-level variation) and much of the industrialized world (e.g., Irwin 2005; Pratt et al. 2005; Wacquant 2009a; Western 2006). Many scholars making the case for a “punitive turn” certainly recognize that academics and policy makers continue to advocate for—and sometimes secure—rehabilitative programming inside and outside prisons; likewise, it is often noted that rehabilitation appears to be making somewhat of a recovery or resurgence. Nonetheless, it remains true that rehabilitation is typically described as something that is either dead, on life support, or, at minimum, unfashionable (for some sense of this range, see, for example, Allen 1981; Comfort 2008; Cullen 2005; Lewis 2005; Petersilia 2003; Ward and Maruna 2007).

This parceling out of rehabilitative and punitive “periods” is often accompanied by a particular way of defining and measuring rehabilitation. While this article is not the place for a full recounting of all the ways the term has been defined and/or understood (starting points for those interested in the topic include Raynor and Robinson 2005; Ward and Maruna 2007), three points bear special mention. First, in much of the criminological and clinical scholarship on rehabilitation, recidivism is taken as the only outcome worth measuring. Exactly what recidivism is assumed to reflect and why it is the best (or even sole) measure often goes unstated (e.g., Andrews et al. 1990; Krebs et al. 2006; Wilson and Davis 2006). Also unclear is whether researchers see rehabilitation as a set of behaviors, an individual-level sociopsychological construct, or some combination of the two (for a related [and trenchant] critique, see Maruna 2012). In one transparent, but theoretically terse, statement, Joan Petersilia (one of today’s most politically influential criminologists) noted in a 2007 interview that rehabilitation “is simply the absence of new criminal behavior” (Shaughnessy 2007).

Second, among those who have tried to explore the meaning of rehabilitation in some detail, there is a tendency to focus on individual-level cognitive and attitudinal changes, especially in terms of how people view and situate themselves vis-à-vis others (Maruna 2001, 2004; Maruna and Immergeon 2004; Raynor and Robinson 2005; Veysey, Christian, and Martinez 2009). This cognitive and attitudinal view of rehabilitation (while not identical) comes much closer to the understanding that dominates in the fire camps.

Third, it is increasingly common for students of punishment to avoid using the term rehabilitation altogether, substituting terminology such as “reentry,” “reintegration,” and “resettlement.” But discerning where rehabilitation ends and these terms begin is difficult—perhaps impossible (see also Raynor and Robinson 2005:2; Ward and Maruna 2007:3–5). As Tony Ward and Shadd Maruna (2007:1–5) note, simply substituting a term with less political baggage obscures more than it reveals; this is especially the case in the present research project because, in the camps, the term “rehabilitation” is the one widely used by administrators, staff, and inmates alike. Substituting a new term erroneously suggests a clean break from the past; here I argue that rehabilitation is evolving in ways that are, at the same time, modern and rooted in the past.

A Counter Narrative

There is a small but growing chorus of scholars who have tried to complicate the picture of the changing nature of punishment during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Garland acknowledged in a 2004 reflection that he had underplayed “the place of ongoing conflict and contestation.” By focusing on “outcomes rather than processes,” and successful policies rather than failed ones, Garland risked “misrepresent[ing] the real nature of the field” (p. 167–8).³ Pat O’Malley (1999) goes a step further, describing punishment as “volatile and contradictory,” shaped by New Right

3. What is more, these omissions constrained the power of what Garland (2004) refers to as “counter-doxic” struggles—opposition moves by actors and groups occupying a subordinate position that nonetheless have a significant force in shaping the field—to reveal possibilities for change.

politics in its privileging of both social authoritarianism and free market principles. Similarly, Steven Hutchinson (2006) argues modern penality is braided, always consisting of—but not always in equal parts—both punishment and reform.

Turning to rehabilitation in particular, three more sustained accounts are especially useful for thinking about the fire camps: Mona Lynch’s (1998, 2000) research on parole officers in California, Gwen Robinson’s (2008) analyses of the evolving nature of punishment in late-modern England and Wales, and Kelly Hannah-Moffat’s (2001) work on women’s imprisonment in Canada. Reading across these admittedly disparate pieces, two themes emerge. First, each demonstrates the importance of local context. Something that appears at a macro level to be a straightforward example of sweeping change might, upon closer analysis, reveal itself to contain internal contradictions and/or to be an amalgamation of myriad forces, some competing and others complementary. Related, these works teach us that macro-level trends do not necessarily translate uniformly to the lived experiences of individuals enmeshed in the carceral apparatus. For example, Robinson (2008) demonstrates how rehabilitation enjoys legitimacy in the Anglo-Welsh context because of a “successive appeal to three dominant ‘late modern’ penal narratives: utilitarian, managerial, and expressive” (p. 430). But to understand, for instance, how and why rehabilitation is expressive, one must first understand in some detail the nature and impact of late-twentieth century neo-conservative politics in England and Wales.

Second, this body of scholarship demonstrates the need to pay attention to actors, agency, and how individuals and programs are situated within the penal field at a particular time. Hannah-Moffat (2001), for instance, demonstrates the powerful influence of Elizabeth Fry (and her supporters) in generating and shaping the evangelical and maternal logics of punishment in Europe and North America, and Lynch (2000) highlights the ways in which parole officers translate managerial rhetoric in a way that allows rehabilitation to remain “central to the parole image . . . in part by allowing the control side to subsume rehabilitation without erasing it as a rhetorical tool” (p. 58). The contribution of these accounts is not simply to demonstrate the continued importance of rehabilitation—although they certainly do that—but to demonstrate how case studies can be used to think about the complexities of rehabilitation in a particular place and time and what those particularities can tell us about punishment more generally.

A Case Study: California Prison Fire Camps

The Research Sites

Since California opened its first prison forestry camp (or fire camp, as they are called today) in 1946, the camps have always been, on some level, a place to do punishment differently. This is clear in the contemporary context: California’s 42 adult fire camps seem, at least at first glance, like strange bedfellows for California’s 33 massive, walled prisons.⁴ Visit a “standard” state prison in California today and you are likely to be struck by the electrified fences, looming guard towers, and scores of officers and staff who work among thousands of prisoners. Visit a fire camp and you may notice the camp’s comparatively small size (most house between 100 to 125 male or female inmates), the lack of perimeter security, the greenery and attractive landscaping, and the comparatively cheerful staff who will most likely greet you upon entry. Similarly, visitors who eat a meal at a fire camp will typically find that infamously bad prison fare (cf. Ugelvik 2011) has been replaced by comparatively wholesome and tasty food; observers accustomed to walled prisons may

4. While California is not the only state with prison fire camps, its program is the largest and best known in the nation, with more than four thousand prisoners spread across the state. The closest competitor to California in terms of scope and size of the program seems to be Nevada, with nine Conservation Camps and a total capacity of about 1,700 inmates (Nevada Department of Corrections 2011).

also be surprised to learn that camp prisoners generally have considerable freedom of movement, so long as they stay within camp boundaries and report to work on time and ready to work.

While conditions are much less austere in the camps than in most of California's walled prisons, the camps bear little resemblance to the media-fueled myth of "Club Fed" prisons: sleeping barracks, chow halls, and so forth resemble well-kept army outposts, not resorts for the wealthy. Inmates in the camps are subject to considerable (if sporadic) surveillance by officers, and infractions (such as positive urinalysis tests for drugs or alcohol) may result in significant punishments, from "extra duty" work around the camp to time added to their sentence. Some offenses (and some repeat offenders) are considered egregious enough—including, tellingly, refusing to work—that the camp prisoner may be sent back to a walled prison.

Camp prisoners work on crews doing the physically arduous and dangerous work of fighting wildfires, using power and hand tools to create fuel breaks to stop wildfires from expanding. When they are not fighting fires, inmates perform hard manual labor for various local, county, and state agencies. For their work fighting fires, prisoners are paid a dollar an hour; for nonfire-fighting work, inmates typically earn less than two dollars a day. Thus prisoners in the fire camps work hard and are paid little (though more than most people in walled prisons earn). Many view the more desirable camp conditions as being "purchased" at the price of hard, and as many inmates see it, exploitative, labor (for a more detailed examination of work in the camps, see Goodman 2012).

At the end of January 2012, there were just over 4,000 people incarcerated in California fire camps, of whom about 297 were women (in three female-only fire camps, all located in southern California) (CDCR 2012a, 2012b).⁵ Technically, prisoners must be "nonviolent" offenders to be eligible for the camp program, but that term is sometimes interpreted liberally in order to include offenders convicted of crimes such as armed robbery. According to one retired correctional administrator I interviewed, this is because, when there are open beds in the camps, forestry officials informally lobby corrections to send more prisoners—they need trained firefighters on the fire lines, and may care less about the person's commitment offense than do their correctional counterparts.⁶ Using 2006 data, common offenses included drug crimes and property crimes (37.4 percent and 31.7 percent, respectively), but fully 23 percent were categorized as those convicted of crimes against persons (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2006). Each camp is comanaged by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and one of two forestry agencies (either the state agency, CAL FIRE, or the Los Angeles County Fire Department). Lastly, it is worth noting that inmates are not sentenced to fire camps, but must typically go first to a prison reception center and then to one of three walled prisons that serve as pipelines and training centers for the camps. By the time most prisoners end up at a fire camp, they have spent at least a year of their lives in walled prisons (and often considerably more in the case of repeat offenders). Thus the move from a walled prison to a fire camp is both a privilege and a burden—a chance for wider freedoms and a more favorable environment, yet accompanied by the requirement of hard, dangerous labor.

5. The CDCR does not publish (that I am aware of) data on the racial and ethnic composition of the fire camps, making accurate comparisons to walled prisons impossible. Based on my fieldwork I would estimate the racial and ethnic demographics of camps are roughly similar to the overall state prison population. As in California's prison system more generally, the main groupings are typically defined as "Hispanic," "black," "white," and "other" (see also Goodman 2008).

6. A series of recent articles published in *The Record Searchlight* (a local newspaper based out of Redding, a city about 220 miles north of San Francisco) suggests this practice of housing some people convicted of "serious" and "violent" offenses in the fire camps is both alarming and increasing in prevalence of late (e.g., Sabalow 2011, 2012). Yet there is no systematic evidence that those convicted of crimes labeled serious or violent are, on average, any more (or less) likely to accrue an infraction, escape, or commit some other untoward act while housed in a fire camp. Likewise, attention to small fluctuations in the proportion of people in the camps convicted of "violent" crimes ignores that California has been in the practice of housing people convicted of serious crimes in outdoor penal labor camps for nearly a century. Indeed, as recently as 1968, 6.2 percent of those housed in forestry camps in California were convicted of homicide (compared to 9.5 percent of the total California prison population) (Thorpe 1972:136). Seen in this light, the long-term historical trajectory has actually been to move gradually (albeit not consistently) away from housing those convicted of serious crimes in outdoor penal labor camps in California.

Methodological Approach

The data for this article come from a larger project examining California's prison fire camps (see Goodman 2010). That project consists of three methodological approaches: archival analysis of the history of outdoor penal labor in California, more than a hundred hours of ethnographic field work and visits to ten fire camps, and 71 semistructured interviews with inmates, corrections and forestry staff, and program administrators. This article draws foremost on the interview data, but is informed by my fieldwork as well.

Interview participants were recruited from six prison fire camps (five primary camps and one camp at which I "pilot tested" interviews). These were selected via a stratified random sample designed to ensure variation by geography (northern, central, and southern California), sex (men's camps and women's camps), and the fire agency responsible for comanagement. At each camp, potential participants were randomly selected from rosters of all camp prisoners and staff. The vast majority of interviews were audio-recorded, and all interviews were conducted in a private space such as an office or an all-purpose room not otherwise in use.

In total, I interviewed 71 people: 45 inmates, 12 officers, 6 forestry crew leaders, 6 correctional supervisors (sergeants and lieutenants), and 2 administrators (one of whom was retired). The overall participation rate (93.4 percent⁷) was excellent, especially when compared to other scholars' descriptions of the inherent challenges of conducting research in prison settings (Jacob Arriola 2006; Jenness et al. 2010; Waldram 2009). My interviews consisted of wide-ranging discussions on a variety of topics from background characteristics to what people thought about grade work and firefighting to what they would change about the camps if they were to become head camp administrator. Interview transcripts were made from the audio recordings (when available) and analyzed using qualitative coding software, with special attention paid to narratives around work, race and ethnicity, and rehabilitation.

Administrative versus On-the-Ground Discourses about Rehabilitation

The Administrative Discourse: Rehabilitation Front and Center

California is remarkably consistent in its message about its prison fire camps: one of the central aims, if not *the* central aim, of the program is the rehabilitation of state prisoners housed in the camps' wall-less boundaries and put to work as wildland firefighters.⁸ Three examples serve to demonstrate the main facets of this official discourse. First, Chapter Five of the CDCR's Department Operations Manual (DOM), sometimes informally referred to as the "bible" of California corrections, includes the following in a list delineating administrative responsibilities for the camps: "Direct and supervise all camp activities so that the camp shall operate for the benefit of the State and the rehabilitation of the inmates" (§51130.6, Operations Administration). Despite its legalese, in this sentence, the DOM publically and officially declares the CDCR's deep commitment to the camps as places in which rehabilitation will (hopefully) occur.

Second, and with a much larger target audience, Richard Subia—at the time associate director of the CDCR—declared in a nationally televised 2008 interview with Fox News that "We believe

7. Participation rates by group were as follows: prisoners (97.8 percent), correctional officers (85.7 percent), forestry crew leaders (85.7 percent), corrections supervisors (85.7 percent), and camp administrators (100 percent).

8. There have been important historical shifts in how rehabilitation—especially in terms of its relationship to work—has been understood vis-à-vis outdoor penal labor camps in California since the state opened the first prison highway camp in 1915. Indeed, the highway camps were mostly understood in terms of labor for labor's sake (i.e., as an intrinsic good, rather than as a vehicle for rehabilitation). In contrast, during the 1980s and 1990s, correctional administrators focused more on the fire camps as a form of public service, rather than for what they might do to (or for) those housed in them (see Goodman 2010, especially pp. 59–150).

that [the fire camp program] is one of our best rehabilitative programs, where the inmates can get out there, give back to the community, and be ready to enter society" (Fox News 2008). Third, in its press releases the CDCR often positions the camps as a mechanism for rehabilitating offenders. For example, in a May 2008 press release then-Secretary James Tilton (the department's lead executive) is quoted declaring:

In these tough budget times, it is noteworthy that there is a program that provides so many benefits. The Conservation Camp Program provides the state with a fully trained workforce able to immediately respond to fires and other emergencies. The program saves tax dollars. We are able to enjoy the beauty of California at our parks and beaches. Our highways are clean. And inmates are better prepared to return to their communities when they are released to parole, enhancing public safety (CDCR 2008b).

Tilton's comments indicate the department's position (shared, as we will see, by many prisoners and staff) that the fire camps are a "win-win-win": the camps help the state by saving it money, help the CDCR by improving its public image (as implied, but not stated outright, by Tilton), and help inmates by better preparing them for release (a form of rehabilitation).

As these examples suggest, the conceptualization of rehabilitation expressed in the official discourse is poorly fleshed out; little mechanism is specified beyond an amorphous notion of preparing people for release. When talking about the prison fire camps, administrators draw instead on the intrinsic seductiveness and practicality of the idea of prisoners as firefighters. In doing so, they allude to how different the lives of those incarcerated in the fire camps are from how the vast majority of inmates in California spend their time (namely, short work days at institutional jobs, boredom, unstructured recreation, and so forth).

Another theme that emerges from a review of the official CDCR discourse about the fire camps pertains to what is conspicuously absent: attention to recidivism rates. Indeed, the CDCR has been strikingly disinterested⁹ in a systematic comparison of the recidivism rates of camp and noncamp prisoners (for a partial exception, see CDCR 2010:35). This is surprising because recidivism rates, as noted above, are so often a preoccupation of correctional administrators and scholars alike. As part of the CDCR's 2005 reorganization, it added the word "rehabilitation" to its name and top administrators repeated a mantra that corrections in California was to become "evidence based." To that end, some effort went toward at least thinking about how the department might reform systems and programs with the goal of lowering rates of reoffending (see, for example, CDCR 2007a, 2007c, 2008a, 2009a). Unlike many other programs and settings in the California prison system, however, the success of the camp program has not (yet) been measured by recidivism rates, and there is no presumption that recidivism would be the appropriate measure of program success (on the presumption of recidivism rates as a marker of program success in the wider California context, see, for example, CDCR 2009b; Jannetta 2008; Office of the Inspector General 2007).

What explains this lack of attention to recidivism? Part of the answer is that (as we will see), those imprisoned in the camps are considered (and consider themselves) responsible for their own behavior, good or bad. Thus inmates, staff, and administrators alike reject recidivism as a viable and sensible assessment of whether the fire camp program is successful. Instead, they view the camp program as an enabler of change for those inclined to engage in self-transformation. The primary focus is therefore on moral, as opposed to actuarial, reform.¹⁰

9. There is a caveat here: a colleague and I requested (and received) data from the CDCR to conduct an analysis of recidivism rates for camp versus noncamp inmates. As far as I can tell, the CDCR did so out of a mixture of generosity and a desire to be helpful, rather than an intrinsic interest in the question of recidivism rates for fire camp prisoners.

10. The two are not, of course, mutually exclusive: one might expect that responsible citizens would also be less likely to be recidivists. This might explain why some inmates, staff, and administrators, when I pushed them to opine, speculated that camp prisoners might have somewhat lower recidivism rates.

The On-the-Ground Discourse: Rehabilitation as Present, Positive, and Significant

There are a number of reasons to predict that men and women imprisoned in California's prison fire camps would be deeply skeptical, if not altogether hostile, toward an official discourse that describes the camps as a true (if not particularly well-defined) form of "rehabilitation." One reason is that those in the fire camps routinely articulate sophisticated critiques of the program at large, especially surrounding issues of work, coercion, identity, and racialized interactions. This is particularly true of grade work (the projects prisoner crews perform when not fighting fires). Many inmates describe grade work as, at best, partially exploitative and, at worst (according to a small, but vocal, minority), nothing short of "modern day slavery" (see also Goodman 2012).

Further, if fire camp prisoners understood rehabilitation in the same manner as many scholars, we might also expect skepticism insofar as there is a scarcity of the sorts of programs and opportunities described in the criminological literature on rehabilitation and "offender treatment."¹¹ Doris MacKenzie, for example, identifies seven categories of effective rehabilitation programs in her book *What Works in Corrections* (2006); of the five programs not specific to sex offenders, only two are available in the fire camps: educational and vocational education programs. Even these opportunities are modest. In terms of vocational opportunities, the CDCR is cited in a 2009 article in *Corrections Forum* (a trade publication) claiming that "roughly 3 to 5 percent of released inmate firefighters get jobs with CAL FIRE, the Forest Service, or private crews" (Rogers 2009:56). No indication is given as to the source of this estimate and, despite the fact that the author suggests this is an impressive figure, it might as easily be read as evidence that very few people get wildland firefighting jobs after release.¹² There is also reason to speculate (and, again, data is scarce) that many camp inmates would likely have equal (if not better) access to educational programs inside walled prisons.¹³

But fire camp prisoners do not understand rehabilitation in the same way as many researchers evaluating correctional programs, and inmates' critiques of other aspects of the fire camp program tend not to extend to rehabilitation. So, despite reasons to expect hostility, rehabilitation as a concept and as a cultural script is virtually omnipresent in camp prisoners' lives. It is central to how people talk about their experiences in the camps. With no discernable differences (at least not detectable in my sample) along racial, ethnic, and class lines (gender is discussed below), the vast majority of study participants were emphatic in their belief that the fire camps provide excellent opportunities for rehabilitation. Indeed, many said rehabilitation is at the very heart of what makes the camps different—and makes them one of the best places to "do time" in California. More precisely, of the 67 people I interviewed at length about rehabilitation, only half a dozen (8.9 percent) declared the camps provide no rehabilitation at all. Equally telling, among the ten people most critical of the fire camp program in general (those who defined grade work as slavery), seven still believed the camps provide rehabilitation.

Among those who see the camps as offering at least some rehabilitation, perspectives vary. At one pole is the view that California's prison fire camps are among the very best opportunities in California's massive carceral archipelago—a veritable blessing for those fortunate enough to secure placement in a camp. At the other pole is the view that fire camps offer moderate opportunities for rehabilitation, qualitatively and quantitatively akin to other programs found in various pockets

11. This is not unique to the fire camps, but rather is true across the California prison system, which tends to have lower rates of program participation than many other states (Comfort 2008:253; Petersilia 2006:39–44).

12. Those I interviewed, including forestry crew leaders, generally offered estimates closer to 1 percent.

13. I am unaware of any systematic comparison of program participation (including educational opportunities) comparing camp prisoners to similarly situated inmates housed in walled prisons. According to a report by the California Legislative Analyst's Office (2008), across the state approximately 31 percent of prisoners were enrolled in an educational program (p. 7). In contrast, at the five camps where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, I estimate the proportion of camp inmates who decided to add school work to their already quite full schedules was no more than 10 percent (except at the women's prison fire camp, where it may have been as high as one in four prisoners).

throughout the California prison system. Respondents leaning toward this pole cited a motley crew of vocational, educational, and drug treatment programs they believe cover similar terrain as the camps. Perhaps not surprisingly, most people espouse views in the middle, including Betsy, who was serving a sentence at a women's camp in southern California, and Dana, a female officer at a men's camp in northern California. The following excerpts are representative of the views of many of their compatriots:

Betsy: I mean this is rehabilitation here.

Phil: In what way?

Betsy: In what way—because the thing is that you know you're still connected with the community . . . you deal with people on the outside.

Phil: How do you think that rehabilitates people?

Betsy: Mentally, they feel that they're still wanted. That what they're doing in fire camp is on behalf of the community. We're helping the community in a way because we're fighting these fires. In return, you have people waving at you [while working] on a fire . . . and it made us feel good knowing that you know what? Hey, even though I'm incarcerated, I am doing something good. Not only for myself, that makes me feel good, but I'm helping the community at the same time . . . It's like okay, well, I'm a criminal. They're going to treat me like a criminal for the rest of my life so why would I care? But here in camp, it's a little bit different because you get acknowledged. You get acknowledged for every little good thing that you do, whether or not it's in camp or whether or not it's out in the community. It makes you feel, hey, you did something wrong, you move on, things will be okay.

And from my interview with Dana:

Dana: I believe [fire camp] does help teach them work ethic. And then also, one of the things I like that I see different, although it's still pretty, it's still a big deal but at least on fires when they all go out together they seem to be all a team and out together and it doesn't matter what color of skin you have. You know, so at least on the fire line and when they're out doing it that way, that doesn't seem to be an issue. When they're on grade projects and then maybe inside here, it seems to still be an issue and they segregate themselves on their own. But I still, like I said, think it's a win-win situation and a little bit of rehabilitation for them too in the sense that it does help them with work ethics and working as a team and having to deal with other personalities and getting along with others as you're trying to accomplish a job and what a job is really all about.

Although Betsy and Dana both describe how fire camps can lead to altered life trajectories, they cast the role of the camps in quite different ways. Betsy spoke extensively about how the camps provide opportunities to, as she put it elsewhere in our interview, "make a better life." And while Betsy focuses on the public recognition camp inmates receive as the primary engine of reform, most of her compatriots (as the next section makes clear) see public recognition as important, but secondary to the primary motivator: teaching camp prisoners a strong work ethic. Officer Dana mentions both work ethic and interracial and interethnic cooperation on the fire lines, but is more restrained in her endorsement of the camp program. Overall, though, both Dana and Betsy clearly think the fire camp program is benefiting people.

Smaller in number, but equally revealing, are the six people who rejected outright the idea that the fire camps provide rehabilitation. Several criticized the fire camps for failing to provide significant (clinical) drug treatment and/or for not offering sufficient vocational opportunities. Paul touches on both:

Paul: And there's really a limited opportunity to become a firefighter when you're a felon. So [inaudible]. I wouldn't consider it totally unnecessary knowledge or experience, but what are you going to do with it? Really. Are you offering us employment? Guaranteed job placement after this term is over? Then I could see the rehabilitation or possible rehabilitation. But [it's not rehabilitation

if it’s] just: come in here, help put back some of the community together, some projects and see you later. Here’s your little 45 cents an hour.

Phil: . . . What would be a true rehabilitation program?

Paul: I think a true rehabilitation would be a program that offers like SAP [Substance Abuse Program]. For example, I’m hearing this SAP thing, if you’re in a SAP program, they’re offering you placement outside to get your life together. To save money and to teach you job skills. As opposed to this, in contrast here, here you work your ass off, you made a little money, goodbye. We’re not going to hire you as a firefighter. We’re going to give you a certificate that’s a credential that you’re not ever going to be able to use. What are you really going to do with it, you know?

The majority of camp inmates adopt the postwelfarist or neoliberal interpretation of rehabilitation in which (as I argue in more detail below) prisoners are seen as responsible for their own rehabilitation. Paul and a few others, though, espouse a vision of rehabilitation that more closely resembles the popular scholarly view, in which the state should provide inmates with programs targeting their “criminogenic needs” (a view that often draws upon the sociomedical model of the mid-twentieth century). Given these dissenters’ use of an alternative yardstick, it is easy to see why they reject the idea that the camps provide rehabilitation, especially given the lack of programs and the paucity of structured treatment opportunities. In summary, the fact that some camp prisoners think the camps provide no rehabilitation whatsoever—precisely because they have an alternative view of what rehabilitation is—offers support for an emergent, grounded theory of rehabilitation.

Rehabilitation as Work Ethic: Learning Work Ethic as Rehabilitation

There is remarkable consensus among prisoners, staff, and administrators about how rehabilitation is facilitated in the prison fire camps: the learning of a strong “work ethic.” Indeed, nearly everyone I interviewed offered some vision of a “hard day’s work” as central to how the fire camps allow people to transform their lives. While a few other mechanisms were cited (e.g., *ad hoc* skills picked up during grade work, an overall more “laid-back” camp atmosphere, education courses, public recognition of camp inmates’ hard work, etc.), they were almost always deemed secondary.

The most common version of rehabilitation via work ethic is the mantra that those imprisoned in the camps benefit from having to get up at a certain time every morning, without fail, as well as being required to get ready for work and arrive on time (and respond quickly to fire calls when on duty). I was told scores of times that putting your boots on in the morning will teach you to be a better worker (and, by implication, a better citizen); implicit is the idea that this will keep you out of trouble (and prison) in the future. Sergeant Mark, a corrections supervisor at a fire camp in southern California, typifies this view:

I think that those work programs are teaching a lot of individuals, a lot of inmates here, good work ethic. Rise and shine, at 08:00 you will be here, at 08:30 you will do this, at 09:00 we drive away, at 09:30 we train, at 10:00 we start our job . . . You may have a construction crew, I think it teaches them, a lot of these younger inmates may not be electricians, they’re out there learning a trade, they’re learning how to mix concrete, they’re learning things they’ve probably never learned before. Not to mention they’ve probably never held a job that requires them to be here at a certain time, report, then work for a full day—take a lunch break and then at the end of the day come home. So I think it instills stability and good work ethic. Rehabilitation, definitely.

Mark directly links “learning” a work ethic with the broader project of rehabilitation, suggesting that a strict schedule will transform prisoners into more disciplined workers. Exactly how this happens is ambiguous. One of the more popular mechanisms cited is that, because the work performed on grade projects and in fighting fires is quite structured and physically arduous, other

jobs ex-prisoners might secure after release will seem “easy” in comparison. Terrance, incarcerated at a fire camp in southern California, explains:

Firefighting, I mean there’s no explaining it, man. It’s wild. You’re fighting fires . . . these are big fires . . . the captains here are pretty experienced. They’re not going to take you to no situation where you ain’t going to be able to come back out. But it’s rough, man. It’s rough work. That’s pretty much all I can say about it. It’s rough work. You’ve got to be in good shape. You’ve got to be hydrated. They feed you good out there though so there’s no reason why—you know what I mean? Construction, you think construction’s rough? Shit. Fighting fires . . .

Historian Volker Janssen (2009) argues that prison forestry camps fell out of favor with prisoners in California in the 1950s and 1960s, in part, because they were perceived as consuming bodies—working in a forestry camp often meant sacrificing one’s physical health and well-being (p. 714). Terrance, and nearly everyone else I interviewed, had a very different view. They described their work in the camps as difficult, certainly, but also as a positive force insofar as it prepares them for release and makes them physically healthier—both described as key facilitators of rehabilitation.

Further unpacking this idea of rehabilitation via work ethic requires contextualizing it within the larger literature on work and punishment. One important point is that prisons and other forms of penal control (such as probation and parole) have always been undergirded by some version of the belief that assiduous toil leads to disciplined bodies and disciplined minds. According to this perspective, prisons are designed to produce compliant (some would say docile) citizens (e.g., De Giorgi 2006; Foucault [1977] 1995; McLennan 2008; Meranze 1996; Rothman 1971; Simon 1993). As Jonathan Simon (1993) so succinctly writes in his classic study of parole in California: “Wherever you look in the development of modernist penalty you will find labor” (p. 39). Furthermore, one can apply each of the three reasons given by Simon for the omnipresence of labor in modern punishment to the specific case of the fire camps: work is seen as *normalizing* camp inmates, who claim their peers (and to a lesser extent themselves) are becoming less slothful and more responsible; prisoners and staff alike view the work as physically arduous and *punitive*, even as it is seen as a heroic social good; and work is “a *potent means of social control*” (p. 40, emphasis added), in that it keeps inmates relatively busy (and out of trouble).

Yet, in other ways, the fire camps do not fit the trajectories described by Simon and other scholars. For instance, studying the parole context, Simon finds that work, hitherto omnipresent, all but disappeared during the last third of the twentieth century; it was replaced, Simon (1993) argues, by a managerial focus on internal “performance parameters” (p. 9). Similarly, much of Loïc Wacquant’s research and thinking about punishment takes as its departure point the argument that the contemporary prison is no longer (principally) about labor, given the sharp decline in the need for the labor of poor and working class blacks in post-Fordist America (see, for example, Wacquant 2000, 2001, 2009a, 2009b). How, then, can we understand the persistence and centrality of work to rehabilitation and the larger project of punishment in the camps?

The answer, I suggest, is twofold. First, as in Simon’s (1995) later work on boot camps, there is a nostalgic element at play in the fire camps—specifically, a hankering for a time in which it is supposed that those with a strong work ethic could get decent, working class jobs, regardless of their past (e.g., despite a criminal record). Today there is a pretending “as if” the work performed while incarcerated in California’s prison fire camps might also help significant numbers of camp prisoners procure and retain employment after release (cf. Carlen 2008b). But like all nostalgia, contemporary reality is not the same as an imagined past: only a very small fraction of those incarcerated in the fire camps will get jobs as wildland firefighters (on the larger issue of the difficulties faced by ex-prisoners in securing employment, see Pager 2007). As mentioned above, even the rosier estimate puts the number at fewer than 1 in 20 (Rogers 2009:56). Nor do staff and prisoners in the fire camps go so far as the staff at the halfway houses studied by Lynne Haney in her book *Offending Women* (2010); at *Visions*, staff encouraged women to, in the absence of wage work, focus on “the work of recovery” as their primary goal. Instead, those imprisoned in fire camps

more typically cling to a belief that they (and/or their peers) have a real chance of getting a coveted job as a wildland firefighter, if they want it (some do not, but nonetheless congratulate and celebrate their peers who do). But in doing so, those in the fire camps share with the staff at *Visions* the notion that good things come (only) to those who engage in personal transformation.

The other half of the answer can be found in the changing construction of the offender as subject. During the mid-twentieth century, those adopting the sociomedical treatment model of rehabilitation viewed the criminal subject as someone whose primary deficits impelling them to commit crime were sociopsychological maladies and/or an inability to “get along” with peers and supervisors (see, for example, Irwin 1980). In contrast, the subject of the offender in the fire camps is constructed as someone who needs to be taught the value (and/or necessity) of hard work—to think and perform as a laborer, not necessarily as an idealized, middle class professional. In addition to foregrounding the broader turn to responsabilization (discussed in the following section), this view is very much in keeping with the larger scholarly literature on punishment, post-Fordism, and deindustrialization (e.g., De Giorgi 2006, 2007; Wacquant 2009a, 2009b).

Pivoting a bit, it is important to recognize that the notion of rehabilitation via work ethic is also grounded in particular ideas about gender and the body. Men and women alike spoke in detail about how becoming physically stronger—or, in some cases, maintaining a high degree of physical fitness—was intrinsically good and also enabled camp inmates to rehabilitate themselves. Strong bodies are disciplined bodies, and disciplined bodies learn work ethic and avoid crime. Yet this focus on the body was much more intense among the women I interviewed than the men (and it was stated in much more provocative ways): female prisoners spoke eloquently about how their lives had been fundamentally transformed by becoming physically—and, in turn, mentally and emotionally—stronger. Lisa and Arlene explain:

I sure didn't expect [to find rehabilitation in the camps]. Like I said, when I came [to camp] it was because I wanted to work hard and get my 35 percent [good time credits]. But I never thought that going through all this physical training and stuff and all the ups and downs and the valleys and all the stuff that I went through during training was going to change me. I didn't know that was going to happen so it's just a trip to look back on that (Lisa).

I think it's important to be physically fit also with rehabilitation because, I don't know. I just think it is because of course when you're on the street and you're on drugs, you're treating your body bad. So when you come here and don't have access to drugs, you're cleansing yourself. You're being physically fit (Arlene).

These narratives are shaped by a larger correctional discourse in which women's imprisonment has long been simultaneously about punishing women for their sins and building their “self-esteem.” A contemporary focus on “empowering” women is perhaps only the latest manifestation (e.g., Hannah-Moffat 2001; Hannah-Moffat and Shaw 2000; Pollack 2009). Regardless of the particular source of the difference in the degree to which men and women focus on the body, it serves as an important reminder that there is no single conception of how rehabilitation unfolds for those imprisoned in the fire camps—and gender is certainly one important dimension along which differences can be mapped. Yet, at the same time, both men and women concur that physical strengthening and conditioning are important facilitators of rehabilitation as experienced in prison fire camps.

It is also difficult to adjudicate whether this focus on physical strength in shaping rehabilitation is best considered old or new. On the one hand, central to the rise of the penitentiary as a dominant mode of punishment were fears that urbanization and mechanization were enervating and emasculating many men and, in turn, increasing crime rates. Historian Michael Meranze (1996) tellingly refers to late eighteenth and early nineteenth century penitentiaries as “laboratories of virtue.” On the other hand, the manner in which women and men I interviewed spoke of taking care of and respecting their bodies, prioritizing their health and safety, seems to reflect a more contemporary cultural obsession with being thin and physically active. Likewise, the focus

on physical fitness contrasts sharply with the discourse popular at the peak of the “rehabilitative era” in which it was prisoners’ minds, not their bodies, that were the supposed target of psychologists and correctional specialists attempting to reform offenders (see especially Foucault [1977] 1995; Irwin 1980).

Accountability, Responsibilization, and Individualization: A Neoliberal Rehabilitation

In addition to drawing on time-worn ideas of work as transforming criminals into “good” citizens, the discourse around rehabilitation in California prison fire camps is simultaneously embedded in more contemporary, hegemonic ideas about accountability, responsibility, and the role of the individual in effectuating his or her own change project. As novel and unusual as the fire camps may seem, the manner in which rehabilitation is talked about and experienced accords with many of the ways scholars more generally have characterized the changing nature of punishment in the twentieth and twenty-first century, especially as it has unfolded in the United States. For instance, scholars studying a wide range of topics (including probation and parole; specialized courts; crime, deviance, and offending; victimization; and incarceration) argue that neoliberal democracies are increasingly moving toward “responsibilization.” For the purposes of this article, responsibilization can be understood as the processes by which people are deemed arbiters of their own fate and conduct, often in a manner that discounts the impact of micro- and macro-social contexts on what they do and what kind of person they are.

This responsibilization movement, in turn, is linked to the withdrawal of the contemporary liberal state from social welfare commitments and policies (see, for example, Bosworth 2007; Comack and Peter 2005; Garland 1996; Gray 2009; Hannah-Moffat 2001; O’Malley 1992; Rose 2000; Scoular and O’Neill 2007). The result is “governance-at-a-distance,” by which the state simultaneously expands its police and crime control powers while eschewing primary responsibility “as the public’s representative and primary protector” (Garland 1996:454; see also Simon 2007; Wacquant 2009b). As Nikolas Rose (2000) explains “one sees a revitalization of the demand that each person should be obliged to be prudent, responsible for their own destinies, actively calculating about their futures and providing for their own security and that of their families” (p. 324). And while this insistence on being responsible for one’s own destiny—the price of failure being exclusion—is not unique to contemporary neoliberal societies, the degree to which it pervades today’s discourses, as well as the mechanisms used to both enable and punish, is. Not enough scholarly attention has been paid to the ways in which individuals actually experience this phenomenon of responsibilization in the context of punishment (for some exceptions, see Comack and Peter 2005; Hannah-Moffat and Shaw 2000; Silverstein 2005).

Turning to the fire camps, one concrete manifestation of this movement toward responsibilization is the widely held belief that people must be motivated to change. Put differently, rehabilitation is “up to the individual.” It is presumed by inmates and staff alike that prisoners ready and desiring personal change will find prison fire camps useful in their quests for rehabilitation; people who are not motivated to change will return to their “old ways,” irrespective of what occurs during their tenure at camp. Thus motivation is a necessary, but not always sufficient, ingredient for rehabilitation. Consider how Brooklyn—an inmate at a fire camp in southern California—responded to a series of questions I asked her about minor rule breaking:

Phil: Is alcohol similar [here at camp versus at a walled prison]?

Brooklyn: . . . At VSPW [Valley State Prison for Women], yes, people drink every day. Here, [no], period. I’ve yet to see one person under anything. So it’s a good place if, I look at it if you really want to rehabilitate yourself, then come here. But don’t get me wrong; there are people that come back here three times.

Phil: . . . So this is a place you’re saying where rehabilitation can happen, so why do you think sometimes it happens and not other times?

Brooklyn: I think it happens, one, because say for instance—I’m not going to use me for an example. But for the other ladies, they just wanted to change their life. When you’re ready to make that change—I just came to terms there’s some people, they’re not ready to give up the fast life. They’re not ready to give up their alcohol . . . they’re not ready to give up the drugs that brought them here. Or they don’t want to wait on their jobs so they go out and sell drugs for money. They’re just not ready. But then you get, you really get people, first timers such as myself who never thought I would be here, I love the experience but I do not want to be here. I could be a firefighter on the outs any day, but I don’t want to be an inmate. It’s not what I want to do. I’m very uncomfortable here. My family is up north. I don’t want them spending a gang of money to come [down] here and see me so I don’t get any visits. I have two daughters; they’re young. They’re not older, but I am missing a lot of stuff in their lives so . . .

Phil: So you’re saying . . .

Brooklyn: It could be a rehabilitation *if you want it*. You gotta’ want it.

Representative of many of her compatriots, Brooklyn offers a clear temporal order through which rehabilitation is believed to occur: first an individual decides they want to change, second they seek out resources that help make that change happen, and third they become a transformed person. It is in the second step (the searching) that many prisoners, staff, and administrators understand the fire camps as providing a service. Whether people are talking about learning work ethic (dominant) or participating in an educational program or taking advantage of the camps’ overall positive and less austere atmosphere (all secondary), it is widely believed that one must first make a personal commitment to change.

Discussion and Conclusion

The goals of this section are twofold. First, I reiterate and analyze some of the results described above by offering a conceptualization of rehabilitation in the fire camps as pared back yet also expansive (and contextualize these findings vis-à-vis the literature on the “punitive turn”). Second, I argue that the existence of a strong rehabilitation discourse and the focus on responsabilization can be better explained and understood if one recognizes the ways in which California’s fire camps are simultaneously exceptional spaces (and those housed in them exceptional people) and yet still prisons.

Before doing so, however, it may be useful to address a couple of issues that have lurked in the background for much of this article. One is the generalizability of California’s prison fire camps. That is, to what degree is the conceptualization of rehabilitation offered above replicated in other penal settings in California, the United States, and abroad? The short (though perhaps unsatisfying) answer is that, as is so often the case with sociological research on underexamined topics, more research is needed to compare how rehabilitation is lived in a variety of contexts across place and time. What we know from existing scholarship is that, while aspects of California’s prison fire camps are unique, this is far from the only penal setting in which rehabilitation remains an important way of thinking about everyday life in carceral settings (e.g., Appleton 2010; Comfort 2008; Hutchinson 2006; Lynch 1998; Matthews 2005; Phelps 2011; Robinson 2008; Super 2011; Ward and Maruna 2007). It seems likely the theoretical framework developed above—if not necessarily all its empirical details—will be useful, then, in a variety of other contexts.

Another related issue is whether scholars should continue to use the term “rehabilitation” at all. Rehabilitation, as a concept, has enormous currency among fire camp prisoners, staff, and correctional bureaucrats. As with other social constructions (e.g., race), the fact that rehabilitation is fluid, context specific, and historically situated does not mean it is unworthy of study on its own

terms (cf. Omi and Winant 1994). Instead of jettisoning the term, researchers should take care not to adopt, nonreflexively, dominant ways of thinking about offender change as if they were self-evident concepts.¹⁴ Again, the lesson is to view rehabilitation as an emergent phenomenon that shares some commonalities across contexts, yet is only fully understood vis-à-vis its local particularities.

Pared Back, Yet Expansive

Depending on one's perspective, the discourse surrounding rehabilitation in California's prison fire camps may appear either radically pared back or remarkably expansive. It is pared back in the sense that rehabilitation has emerged as independent of the sorts of metrics popular in much of the scholarly literature on program evaluation and correctional treatment. With regard to employment, for instance, there is little systematic effort to measure the proportion of inmates who secure jobs as firefighters postrelease; instead, the very prospect, no matter how remote, of securing such a coveted position is taken as *prima facie* evidence of the camp program's noble goals and, indeed, its "success." In terms of recidivism, although interviewees tended to speculate (when prodded) that camp prisoners may have slightly lower recidivism rates than similarly situated peers, most staff and inmates still think recidivism rates are only tangentially related to rehabilitation. Lastly, the lack of programmatic elements designed to alter people's material and social circumstances postrelease (e.g., formal vocational training, education programs, and mental health treatment) troubled few interviewees, most of whom professed the belief that it was more important that people help themselves by building work ethic.

Each of these is indicative of a conceptualization of rehabilitation that is radically freed from its top-down, "evidence-based" moorings. This may strike some observers and students of punishment as a lowering of the bar, especially among those who advocate for more programming and/or who pine for a return to a 1950s-style rehabilitative era. To others, it may sound like fantasy; the camps, they can assert, do little to change prisoners' material conditions in any measurable, concrete way (cf. Carlen 2008a). But to those who live and work on the frontlines of the fire camp program, rehabilitation in the abstract resonates with how they talk about individual-level change more generally: something that "comes from within" the self and which only a person can will into being (albeit aided along the way by opportunities to engage in more healthy and productive practices). This conceptualization of rehabilitation is equally at home in the popular self-help book *Chicken Soup for the Prisoner's Soul* (Canfield, Hansen, and Lagana 2002) and official CDCR discourse—demonstrating the remarkable degree to which a pared back notion of rehabilitation is in keeping with larger neo-liberal discourses about individual change, accountability, responsibility, and a contempt for those seen as reliant on the state.

Conversely, the concept of rehabilitation in the fire camps is also remarkably expansive. Recall that many staff and prisoners (such as Betsy and Dana) believe that learning a strong work ethic fosters rehabilitation, and that the best environment for learning work ethic is a "positive" camp atmosphere. As a result, many see everything from the fire camps' racial politics (considered more liberal than in most of California's walled prisons) to the comparative amity among inmates (and between prisoners and staff) to the beauty and relative spaciousness of the camps as all aiding in and indicative of "rehabilitation."¹⁵ If learning a strong work ethic is widely seen as the key component and driver of rehabilitation, it is in a manner so broad and diffuse that almost any act (even just putting on one's boots each morning) becomes a means to rehabilitate oneself.

14. Related, researchers should, at minimum, defend their choice of recidivism as the primary (or even sole) measure of rehabilitation.

15. For a fuller catalogue of the ways in which prisoners and staff think about rehabilitation in the camps—including more detailed attention to people's accounts about how more progressive racial and ethnic relations, the camps' physical beauty, and more amicable interactions between staff and inmates all impact rehabilitation—see Goodman 2010.

Once rehabilitation is shorn of its roots in programs designed to address offenders' deficits and criminogenic behaviors, the concept becomes a tent under which everything and anything seen as positive is placed. Thus rehabilitation in the fire camps becomes a generic way of "doing good" (cf. Maruna 2001).

Another lens through which to think about rehabilitation in the camps as expansive is in the intriguing parallels between the research discussed herein and a related literature on contemporary welfare.¹⁶ For example, Joe Soss, Richard Fording, and Sanford Schram (2011) argue that the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have been characterized by what they refer to as "neoliberal paternalism"—an approach toward governing the poor that "brings authoritative direction and supervision together with moral appeals, social supports, tutelary interventions, and incentives in an effort to promote particular paths of personal reform and development" (p. 6). As with neoliberal rehabilitation in the fire camps, one finds both efforts at social control (namely, convincing the poor to take the worst jobs and convincing prisoners to "behave") and efforts aimed at making "better citizens." The state (at least in these two different, but related, contexts) has not been rolled back so much as it has morphed and evolved.

Fire Camps and the Punitive Turn

It is tempting to use these findings about rehabilitation in the fire camps as fuel in the ongoing debate over the "punitive turn." The fact that a discourse about rehabilitation thrives in the camps despite their being located in a state that is supposed to be the very heart of the warehousing movement can be contrasted with the popular image of a swinging pendulum. In the pendulum view, rehabilitation reached its peak in the 1960s, before giving way to a neoconservative turn toward incapacitation and retribution (and an explosion in the U.S. incarceration rate). But to simply treat California's fire camps as outliers running contrary to "the decline of the rehabilitative ideal" (Allen 1981) is to ignore one of the major facets of my argument. Rehabilitation has not evolved *despite* the punitive turn in California, but rather has evolved in a specific way and in this specific context *because* of the push toward neoliberal punishment. Thus, the punitive turn is not necessarily, as Matthews (2005) believes, a "myth." The pendulum analogy is simply inadequate—it overstates the coherence of the poles and it understates the extent to which, at the local level, the same forces may be at work across time and across various penal regimes.

Prisons and Camps, Inmates and Heroes

The existence of a strong rehabilitation discourse and a palpable focus on responsabilization can perhaps be best understood by recognizing the degree to which the fire camps are constructed as distinct spaces (and yet still prisons) and to which those incarcerated in them are constructed as heroic firefighters (and yet still inmates). In terms of the camps as exceptional spaces, we have seen that rehabilitation exists to an extent and in a manner largely unmatched in most areas of California's sprawling carceral archipelago. Certainly, some I interviewed pointed to other programs they believe are qualitatively akin to the fire camps in terms of opportunities offered. Likewise, rehabilitation continues to have a presence in the discourse and practice of women's prisons in California, although in different, and sometimes more muted, ways than in the camps (e.g., Kruttschnitt and Gartner 2005). But, overall, most inmates told me that rehabilitation is more prevalent in the camps than anywhere else they have been in the California prison system.

In a theme highlighted on the CDCR's website and by news reporters, the fire camps are unique places, called out as an oasis of "good" in an otherwise defunct system facing constant crisis. Playing on the popular quip about Las Vegas, more than one fire camp prisoner told me, "What happens in camp, stays in camp." Officers, for their part, described transferring to a fire camp as

16. Admittedly these parallels are (for the most part) beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless I think they are worth alluding to here, even if all too briefly.

a sort of pseudo retirement, a way to unwind and decompress after careers of extraordinarily stressful work conditions in walled prisons. Tellingly, it is a position many officers were proud to have secured—a highly desirable post that is subject to a competitive application process, awarded in many cases only to senior officers with decades of experience in walled prisons. In short, seen through a variety of lenses, fire camps are noteworthy—if for no other reason than in how differently they enact punishment and corrections than do many other penal institutions in California.

And yet, on another level, the fire camps share much with prisons in California and elsewhere. The signs at the entrance to camps declaring it to be a state prison are strikingly different from the massive electrified fences that surround walled prisons, but are not without meaning: they signal that those incarcerated in the camps are state prisoners, convicted offenders, and are not free to leave—beyond that sign, people are subject to the rules and regulations of the CDCR and the fire camp program.¹⁷ Additionally, those incarcerated in the camps share many demographics and social characteristics with the California prison population more generally: if my sample is any indication, camp inmates are disproportionately racial and/or ethnic minorities, were often poor or working class before being sentenced (and may have limited work opportunities postrelease), and often had unstable living conditions (and may well continue to after release). The fire camps are not operating as a pure “mechanism of exclusion and control” (Garland 2001:177), a “vacuum cleaner of social detritus” (Wacquant 2009b:273), or a type of “waste management” (Simon 2007:152), but they *are* enmeshed with the foundational practices of punishment. Fire camps signal a breach of society’s norms as they cajole offenders to engage in hard manual labor; manage supernumerary populations by teaching “work ethic” to those excised from the world of legitimate work; and deliver rehabilitation programming to an “at-risk” population deemed in need of correction (cf. Durkheim [1893] 1997; Foucault [1977] 1995; Wacquant 2009b). That those imprisoned in the camps tend to see the camps—and rehabilitation—in a way that complements (rather than contradicts) the vision proffered by staff and administrators is both remarkable and, perhaps, a striking difference between the fire camps and other forms of imprisonment.

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17. There is also another literal link between the fire camps and the walled prisons, namely that the men and women housed in the camps might be sent back, at any time, to a walled prison. As suggested above, this could occur in light of what is deemed a more serious infraction, or after repeated infractions. But camp prisoners are also sent back to walled prisons for more mundane reasons, including needing medical and dental care above and beyond the limited amount that can be provided in the camps.

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