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Carceral Citizenship in Latin America and the Caribbean

In-prison university programs in Argentina: Building citizenship

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Abstract

In Argentina, more than half of the public universities carry out some kind of academic activity inside prisons. Together with their remarkable extension, these heterogeneous programs have emerged in a context that could be considered adverse: alarming increases in incarceration rates, overcrowding, budget cuts and a wider socio-political climate prone to hardening penal responses. This article focuses on three programmes and their potential to build academic communities and alternative modalities of citizenship – both inside prison and post-release, through diverse collective social, political, productive and/or cultural projects. In so doing, it engages in dialogue with the notion of carceral citizenship, which originated in the United States. In Argentina, I contend, this modality of citizenship is not defined so much by top-down formal processes of subjectivation and exclusion, but rather constructed from below and from the outside-in, through the work of in-prison university programmes and their students. *Keywords:* Citizenship, prison, university, Argentina.

Resumen: Programas universitarios en las prisiones argentinas: Constuyendo ciudadanía

La mitad de las universidades públicas en Argentina desarrolla algún tipo de actividad académica dentro de las prisiones. Junto a su notable extensión, estos programas heterogéneos surgieron en contextos adversos: entre el alarmante incremento en las tasas de encarcelamiento, el hacinamiento, los recortes presupuestarios y el clima sociopolítico proclive al endurecimiento de las respuestas penales. Este artículo se centra en tres programas concretos y su potencial para construir comunidades académicas y ejercicios de ciudadanía – tanto dentro de la prisión como a través de proyectos colectivos sociales, políticos, productivos y culturales una vez recuperada la libertad. A través de una descripción de estas experiencias, se busca dialogar con la noción de ciudadanía carcelaria, construida originalmente en Estados Unidos. En Argentina, demuestro, esta modalidad de ciudadanía no se define tanto por procesos de subjetivación y exclusión formales, impuestos desde arriba, sino que se ejerce y define “desde abajo” por los estudiantes privados de libertad y “desde afuera” por la labor de los programas académicos dentro de la prisión. *Palabras clave:* Ciudadanía, prisión, universidad, Argentina.

Introduction

In Argentina, an explosion of in-prison university programs emerged in tandem with the country's overreliance on incarceration, repressive penal reforms, and overcrowded conditions. So much so that thirty-four out of Argentina's seventy public universities regularly enter prisons to conduct research, offer undergraduate programs, and facilitate cultural workshops to incarcerated people. Twenty-three of these programs were created in the last fifteen years (Gual et al., 2022). In most of these cases, authorities allocated a specific area within the prison for the programs (classrooms or university centers), which are managed by incarcerated students with high, albeit varied, levels of autonomy. There are recorded instances where, arising from these university centers, efforts have been made to influence the creation of public policies to improve the living conditions of the entire prison population. Programs have also led to positive experiences from their alumni once students regained their freedom, participating in and triggering social, cultural, work-related and political impact in their communities.

This article intends to describe and compare three in-prison university programs, focusing on their capacity to build academic communities: the CUD of the UBA XXII Program (University of Buenos Aires), the CUSAM (National University of San Martin), and the PEUP (National University of Litoral). I am particularly interested in observing the impact these programs have on the construction of citizenship by and for the imprisoned people participating in them, influencing both their living conditions in prison and their individual and collective projects once their freedom is regained. For this reason, I engage here with academic scholarship developed in the Global North around the notion of *carceral citizenship* – an analytical tool used to describe the specific place in social and communal life afforded to (formerly) incarcerated individuals as a result of the web of exclusions, stigmas, and formal and informal sanctions to which they are exposed on the basis of their (formerly) incarcerated condition (Miller & Alexander, 2016; Miller & Stuart, 2020). This status, which the state and private entities negatively define, shapes their daily interactions. However, this identity is also a way in which (formerly) incarcerated people can resist stigmas associated with incarceration and empower themselves as privileged voices to critically study the penal system, discuss public policies, and build new forms of citizen engagement (Smith & Kinzel, 2021). My dialogue with this notion is conceived from a Southern Criminological perspective (Carrington et al., 2016), in order to avoid the traditional dependency and subordination of narratives and knowledge production to those created in the Global North, while recognizing their potential utility in understanding local experiences in their true dimension (Ávila & Sozzo, 2021, pp. 4-5; Navarro & Sozzo, 2020, p. 215). As such I explore the possibilities and limitations of thinking through carceral citizenship as I analyze the impact that university programs have on the subjectivities of their incarcerated students and their capacity to build collective strategies to confront the difficulties of life in prison and upon returning to their communities.

This article combines insights gained as an in-prison university program teacher and as a part of my doctoral research project, for which I conducted participant observation at five university centers in prisons, as well as at spaces outside of prisons where students and alumni continued their activities once they were released. Between 2022 and 2023, I conducted seventy interviews with students, former students, graduates, professors, and university officials. These observations included attending classes, social events, and various academic activities inside prison; and, in the case of programs that extend their interventions after incarceration, observations and interviews were also conducted at cultural centers, university spaces, and work cooperatives outside of the prison.¹

An extensive experience

University programs in Argentinean prisons are relatively well established compared with the rest of South America. This may be an outgrowth of the context of local social activism and the free public university system in Argentina. It is also possibly a consequence of the *permeability* (Cunha, 2014) of the prison walls, as connections between the inside and outside of prison are generally extensive. A collective investigation carried out during 2021 and 2022 made it possible to identify that thirty-four out of the seventy public universities (49 per cent) were carrying out some type of academic activity in seventeen out of the twenty-four penitentiary jurisdictions in the country (71 per cent). Twenty-three programs (68 per cent) had started in the last fifteen years (Gual et al., 2022). The three distinguishing features of in-prison university programs tend to be their remarkable extension, heterogeneity, and capacity to emerge even in penitentiary contexts that could be considered adverse, including amid the alarming increase in incarceration rates, overcrowding, budget cuts, and social climates prone to the toughening of penal responses. Within this national panorama, I focus here on three programs: the UBA XXII Program of the University of Buenos Aires, particularly its headquarters in Devoto prison (CUD); San Martín's University Center (CUSAM), run by the National University of San Martín; and the National University of Litoral's University Education Program in Prisons (PEUP). Throughout this article, I will refer to them by their acronyms: CUD, CUSAM, and PEUP.

The CUD is comprised of the UBA XXII Program, which is the oldest in-prison university program in the country. It began in 1985 in the wake of the recent return to democracy in Argentina, following the fall of the military dictatorship (1976-1983). With its foundational location in Devoto prison in Buenos Aires, it has extended its intervention to other federal prisons near the capital city. From its inception, it has prioritized offering weekly in-person classes in seven degree programs that allow students to obtain the same degree as those studying outside of prison (Laferriere, 2006). In 2008, the National University of San Martín launched an in-person program known as CUSAM within Unit No. 48 of the Buenos Aires Penitentiary. This decision was part of a more

extended university policy that strengthens ties with surrounding communities, many marked by high levels of vulnerability. The program is characterized by an extensive coexistence between formal educational activities and art workshops, as well as opportunities for incarcerated men and women, and prison officers to study together (Nogueira, 2022). The PEUP develops virtual activities in prisons in the central north of the province of Santa Fe. In a local context of reformist penitentiary policy, classrooms equipped with computers and internet access were created in three prisons. From there, students are incorporated into the virtual education program that the university offers to non-incarcerated students. The program is supported by a group of coordinators who attend the prisons weekly and assist students in overcoming administrative, technical, and educational difficulties, as well as maintaining daily interaction with penitentiary authorities (Sozzo, 2012).

To analyze their impact on the production of citizen subjectivities, I will describe and compare these programs based on two central dimensions: the way in which they build academic communities within prisons and the subsequent *ejercicios de ciudadanía* (exercises of citizenship) attempted by their alumni upon release. Here, I define “citizen subjectivities” through incarcerated people’s participation in political, social, cultural, and productive collective projects – both during their incarceration and upon returning to their communities. Following the description of the construction and maintenance of prison-based academic communities and post-release exercises of citizenship, I discuss what these mean for a Southern understanding of carceral citizenship “from below” – that is, from the bottom-up, rather than only as per the legal and formal restrictions imposed on (formerly) incarcerated individuals.

Academic communities in prison

Despite their different contexts of origin, the three university programs share two important commonalities: they were initiated independently from the prison systems’ correctional regime, and incarcerated people made the decision to become students thus co-founding the programs. This way, these programs were both created *from below* and *from the outside* of the penitentiary structures, which is both a result of and speaks to the permeability of the Argentinean prison system noted above. Marta² is the founding director of UBA XXII Program, whose main headquarters is the CUD at Devoto Federal Facility. She joined the administration of the University of Buenos Aires at the moment it was reorganizing its academic life with the return to democracy. One afternoon, as she was leaving the rectorate building, a woman asked her for assistance to help her son study. The peculiar situation was that he was incarcerated. This encounter led to an initial meeting with Marta and the group of incarcerated people who would become the first students inside Devoto prison (Laferriere, 2006). Máximo, director and founder of PEUP, recalls a group of incarcerated students who were taking law courses and were granted permission to take exams outside of prison

at the National University of Litoral. He remembers one of them “played a very important role, [and was] a true leader among the prisoners in general and within that group in particular.” In addition to describing him as a “very intelligent person, who knew how to manage the relationship with the prison officers and the prisoners very well, he was a key figure in creating the momentum to say: ‘given that there is interest [among the prisoners] in studying, why don’t we try something more solid than what currently exists?’”

Waldemar is one of the first sociology graduates from CUSAM. There too, the motivation of incarcerated people to become university students came before the will of the University. The Penitentiary Unit No. 48 of José León Suarez was reopened in 2006 after overcoming corruption allegations, but with only the basic services needed to run the prison: food and security. Even though school classrooms had been built, there was no elementary or high school education in place. In that new but abandoned sector, the future students began by self-organizing workshops for drawing, computing, and poetry. Waldemar took on the coordination of the workshops, served as a teacher on the reading course, and established the school library with donated books. “In that world,” he recalls, “we began to think about the demand for university education.” This strategy was supported by social actors from the vulnerable neighbourhoods nearby, a central fact to understand the link between the University of San Martín and the community, and between CUSAM’s alumni and their neighbourhoods once they are released.

The beginning of all three university programs was thus characterized by a profound determination on the part of prisoners to become students and help set up the in-prison university programs. Marta recalls how quickly the borrowed classroom, where the first university classes were taught in Devoto prison, became too small. It was the students who, with their own money and labour, effectively built the CUD. “They lived at the construction site. There are scenes that are remarkable. One person preparing *mate*, another knocking down a wall and another reading aloud a Law textbook,” she reminisces. Carlos was Dean of the University of San Martín when he received a letter from the prison direction seeking to strengthen the bond between the university, the community, and the prisoners that had started up the educational workshops a few months earlier. Before the end of their first meeting, he committed to support them with the university’s presence in the prison. He recalls the central role of the initial students, “because they understood that what they had in their hands was very valuable and that it needed to be taken care of and pursued with determination.”

Due to this initial determination and their combined origin *from below* (the prisoner-students) and *from the outside* (the university), these university centers were established as durable spaces within the prison, but independent from its correctional logics. Students and professors instead perceive them as “embassies,” “sanctuaries,” or “oases” within the prison. This is based on four key issues that can be observed across the programs, albeit with some variation. These include 1) the self-government of the university centers by the incarcerated

students (with minimal intervention from prison officers); 2) the development of an educational paradigm that differs from the correctional logic of the prison; 3) the continuous involvement of external actors (i.e. university staff) in daily prison life; and 4) the broader aim to leverage the academic experience to influence prison conditions. This way, the programs constitute an academic experience developed *within* the prison, but at the same time, *in spite of* the prison.

The self-government of prison-university spaces can take on different forms, but generally leads to a sense of joint ownership and empowerment. Mataderos, for instance, entered Devoto prison without a high school diploma. Upon learning about the existence of CUD, he decided to complete his studies to become a university student. In the meantime, he accessed the university center as a collaborator, working without receiving any payment for it. He painted CUD and using a knife as a screwdriver, he put the doors back on the broken bathroom stalls. “The policy was ‘the guard on one side, us on the other’ – if it breaks, we fix it. It’s *autogobierno* (self-government). It’s ours.” From its inception, the students at CUD established their own organization, with elected authorities, through voting and assembly meetings. Its formalization, under the name of the “Devoto University Group” (GUD by its acronym in Spanish), promoted student participation in political life based on self-government, self-discipline, ideological plurality and responsible resource management. Requirements for membership, rights, and obligations were established and formalized in the Statute of the Devoto University Group (available in Laferriere, 2006, p. 281).

The students at CUSAM began a similar organization. Marcos, the university director of CUSAM, notes that one of the outstanding features of the program, from his perspective, is that the students themselves “manage the spaces with increased recognition; they manage the library space, the radio, the ceramics workshop, the kitchen.” Likewise, a timid attempt to organize within the university classrooms of PEUP was beginning to take shape. In this case, it is more university-led. Carolina has been the coordinator of PEUP at Las Flores facility for four years. From her first time in the university classroom, she remembers the students who managed to stay there for the entire day. They were the ones who welcomed university members and “managed everything that happened within the classroom.” Students and faculty encouraged the self-government initiative. Currently, the program even aims to formalize the paid appointment of advanced students as mentors for their newly enrolled peers.

Through the created separation between university centers and prison structures, the members of the academic community (incarcerated students, faculty, and university members) build an experience that distances itself from the correctional spirit that permeates the prisons. Interestingly, they also seek to move away from the ways in which other incarcerated people interact to survive prison. A striking sign greets visitors as they enter CUSAM: “no *berretines*³ allowed my friend.” Under this motto, student leaders inform (and warn) their peers that roles and dynamics for interacting in the prison (individualistic, distrustful, even extortive and occasionally violent) will not be tolerated within the

university center (Maduri, 2015; Nogueira, 2017). There are two other equally symbolic signs: one that emphasizes “the university statute rules here” (Tejerina, 2021, p. 66) and one indicating that CUSAM space “was provided by SPB (Buenos Aires Penitentiary Service) in agreement with the National University of San Martín” (depicted in Nogueira, 2017, p. 48). While the prohibition of bringing in *berretines* (loosely, nonsense) serves as a warning for prisoners who choose to assume the role of students, the reminder of the space being provided and ruled through the university statute seeks to reinforce toward the prison officers the line separating the logics of the prison from those of the university. In effect, “three logics shared the same space,” Isidro recalls. Isidro is a sociologist who graduated from CUSAM and now works at the university. He continues, “the logic of the penitentiary agency, the prison logic of different wings, and the university logic.”

In this space for the exercise of university autonomy within the prison, it is possible to anticipate that many of the actors identify a breeding ground for the emergence of new subjectivities, which incarcerated students themselves also explained. For example, one of Mataderos’s motivations for becoming a university student at CUD was to prevent the prison from “damaging my mind to the point where I would no longer be good for anything, where I can’t put two words together. What I always tried to do was not to be contaminated by the argot in here. I struggle every day to hurt myself as little as possible.” Comas was incarcerated in several Argentine prisons for almost two decades. He finally settled in Coronda prison and gained access to PEUP. For him going to the university classroom was “an act of rebellion” that he constructed as a mandate for his life. He recalled: “When you’re born poor, the greatest act of rebellion you can commit is to study [...] Being able to exercise an act of rebellion not through violence but through argument. Studying the logical and normative structures was fascinating because (the prison officers) had no answers for that, you put them in check.”

The university centers also manage to be a space of otherness to the prison by involving the outside academic community – students, teachers, and other university actors – in daily interactions inside prison, expanding the exclusivity of custodian-inmate relations in the classic *total institution* (Goffman, 2001). Regardless of the activities proposed, the programs are sustained by the constant presence of external actors within the educational spaces in the prison. For example, just for the law degree, more than twenty professors enter CUD to teach every week. Urquiza completed his law degree at CUD. After serving his sentence, he joined the graduation ceremony along with the graduates who had studied outside prison. In the ceremony hall at the Law School, he posed for photographs with signs expressing his gratitude to his classmates, faculty, and program coordinators. “The relationship with the professors is something very positive. That’s why in the graduation ceremony I put up a sign that said: ‘thanks teachers, coordinators, and others’ because there is a relationship that you never forget when they educate you.” Juan Pablo has been the coordinator of the

Philosophy and Literature School at CUD, in addition to other centers of the UBA XXII Program, for two decades. He remembers his first experience inside similarly to those of other professors beginning to teach inside prisons: “I was very comfortable from the beginning. You already know the culture and respect students show towards faculty.”

PEUP is the only in-prison university program offering virtual classes. In their case, it is only occasionally that professors teach classes inside the prison. This model is complemented by a few art workshops that do meet in-person. Still, the physical presence of the program is guaranteed by a key actor: the coordinators, a role mainly played by advanced students and recent graduates in the fields of sociology, social work, and law. Guillermina, a former coordinator of the program at Las Flores prison, defines her function as “to carry out the program, make it work, sustain it, and make it grow.” She explains that to fulfill their role, coordinators had to establish the “links between the classroom and the university, the classroom and officers, and the university and officers.” Without restrictions from prison officers, the coordinators enroll new applicants, carry out administrative procedures to ensure their continuity in the program, resolve concerns about operating virtually, and of bibliographic content. They deliver course materials, carry out the written evaluations scheduled by faculty, and process complaints about WiFi issues and the operation of the computers. “What I take from there are the relationships,” Comas clarifies. “The classroom is a building of the prison, it has bars, there are computers that you don’t have in your pavilion. Anyway, my best memory is feeling completely overwhelmed, arriving and finding a smile, a *mate* from the girls (the coordinators), affection, someone to listen to you.”

As a consequence of this otherness to the prison, the university programs can also propose to influence the prison conditions. “Against degradation,” is the title of an article written by Sozzo (2012), director of PEUP, aimed at describing that university experience. Since its inception, they have seen the program as an “application of the principle of ‘harm reduction’.” Given that the penal system is in itself a device for generating harm in the life trajectory of the people who become the object of its operation, the program aims to embrace a ‘partisan’ attitude that actively engages in the task of reducing harm as much as possible and by whatever means necessary (Sozzo, 2012, p. 41). A similar ethical and political position can be observed from the early days of CUSAM. In its founding document of 2008, they define educational and cultural practices “as an instance of problematizing the surrounding reality, collective construction of knowledge, and as a means of humanization” (Nogueira, 2022, p. 12). Alex actively participated in the creation of the program due to his management positions at the university and his accumulated territorial experience in San Martín. “CUSAM assumed from the beginning a class perspective,” he states, “the goal was to modify the prison institution and not just denounce it.” The founding documents of CUD do not contain a similar class consciousness in their declaration of principles, but their practices have included from the beginning

different interventions aimed at substantially modifying prison living conditions, especially at Devoto prison. Projects for legislative reforms, collective legal actions, and strikes run through its history.

With the birth of CUD, a free legal advisory service was created to assist incarcerated people in Devoto prison with their judicial proceedings. In an office located within the university center, those incarcerated lawyers meet with prisoners, read the communication they receive together, explain the general situation of their case, advise, and occasionally help fellow prisoners draft their own submissions. Urquiza learned about the possibility of studying law in prison thanks to that legal advisory service, which he joined himself many years later. “I went for a consultation about my judicial case. I arrived, and said to myself: ‘this place is good.’ In the meantime, I was going to high school and I became more involved.”

As a self-governed space, CUD also provides a refuge for other collective experiences from outside the university that seek to impact prison living conditions. This is the case, for example, of the first union of prison workers founded in Argentina, SUTPLA. Established in 2012, during its years of greatest activity it managed to influence prison labour policies, expanding access to work, improving wages and the safety and hygiene conditions of the prison workshops. Soldati joined the union shortly after his arrival at Devoto, seeing it as a way to give back to prisoners what he received at the university center. “I have to take advantage of the space, that’s why I love CUD so much. The union was about being able to defend people. Since I wasn’t defended, I dedicated myself to that and I understood that CUD gave me the tools.” The legal advice and the union could not have existed if the university program had not been created. These experiences also help to generate collective cohesion between the prisoners who study within it and those who do not, and serve as an incentive for future students.

An advisory service, a union, strikes, collective legal actions – at first glance, it might seem like the use of the university space toward the modification of the overall prison atmosphere was much more powerful at CUD than other programs. However, this statement needs to be nuanced. Albeit in different ways, other programs resort to specific and concrete strategic responses to complex and diverse scenarios, too. Ceballos (2022) has compared the effects that CUD and CUSAM have had on daily prison life at Devoto and San Martín facilities. In his research, he identified two different strategies to approach the programs’ and their students’ relationship with the prison. While at CUD the fluid circulation of legal concepts allows for the dominance of adversarial logics such as strikes, union claims, or collective legal actions; at CUSAM, less conflictive (but no less effective) articulation measures are adopted, recovered from their training in social sciences. In the midst of the pandemic in 2020, for instance, several protests broke out in Argentine prisons. In the case of San Martín, without delving into the reasons for the protest and the violent subsequent response from prison officers (CUSAM was reduced to ashes), the university center played a

key role in mediating between the different parties to the conflict (prisoners, officers, prison and judicial authorities, and government). For the director of CUSAM, in the negotiations that followed the outbreak, it was clear that “the only valid interlocutors there were the university and the students.” In his view, San Martín prison governance has changed over the years “and today a prison director cannot gratuitously say in a meeting ‘the prison is mine’.” Despite the difference in practices, then, Ceballos proposes a similarity unites both university centers: “they use the approaches and tools that the university provides them when designing their strategies of resistance and political intervention in prison management” (2022, p. 185).

It has long been the prison’s main aim for prisoners to endure prison stoically, without interfering with the way others carry out their sentences or taking advantage of their needs (Sykes & Messinger, 2020, pp. 51-52). This idea of serving time alienated from others invites the construction of individual responses to overcome the pains caused by the imprisonment and contributes to the emergence of arbitrary and coercive prison interactions. The university centers largely disrupt this culture of individualism. Their high levels of autonomy, the relaxation of penitentiary control within them, and the alteration of this classic principle of prison culture, together enable the emergence of an alternative carceral subjectivity that allows for the experience of new, collective ways of facing prison and returning to the community. As I will explore later on, this feeds into the way carceral citizenship is produced and contested in Argentina. Incarcerated people identify the university as one of the few spaces where it is possible to build a different, collective logic within the prison, largely associated with the co-construction of an academic community between prisoners (without *berretines*) and external actors who engage with them without a correctional gaze.

After incarceration

Despite the emergence of distinct carceral subjectivities and experiences of collective responses to imprisonment, the return of university students to society still exposes them to the same pressing demands as the rest of the released prisoners. Just like them, they have to rebuild family relationships, secure housing, and find a job. Centenario, for instance, managed to make progress within Las Flores prison, working on an IT degree through PEUP. But “outside it was a different story. I would go out, look in all directions and think, ‘what’s next now?’ I had nowhere to go.” He started washing cars until he finally got an interview at an IT company. “They tested me for three hours. Repairing a disk, a board, some batteries. What voltage it operates at, how it connects. When they found out I had been incarcerated, their trust vanished.” Belgrano and Congreso faced similar difficulties upon regaining their freedom as students of CUD. In the face of such extreme situations, continuing one’s education post-release hardly appears a priority. For those who do manage to continue, they must adapt to a university bureaucracy that operates differently outside from their previous

experience studying inside prison. The university buildings and its logic prove difficult to assimilate for formerly incarcerated students. “The last time I was released, I was lost,” recalls Congreso. “I wasn’t going to come to Law School because I thought everyone was coming in suits. I was very disoriented.”

After incarceration, CUD students must confront this bureaucracy without clear institutional support. The same is true for PEUP students. In both examples, the continuity of education is left in the hands of program coordinators who are left to navigate these institutional inconsistencies without direction. “Nobody from the University contacted me,” Coghlan complained. “The coordinators took it upon themselves to make the connection with faculty so that I wouldn’t fail my courses.” PEUP students who were released also turn to coordinators to overcome these administrative entanglements. Comas, Centenario and España recall this with gratitude. “It’s just an affectionate bond with the coordinators, nothing more. The university doesn’t have any program specifically designed for post-release support.”

The situation is different at CUSAM. “It often happens that a student is released and within a week they are in our campus office,” Marcos, the director, stated. “I summon them, or they have to come for some paperwork, but it’s about closing a circle. This is part of CUSAM, this is our office, it’s your place too. You can come here to attend classes, we’ll take a tour, let’s have lunch.” A limited number of graduates continue to work at the university. Some do so in the prison program as teachers, even before regaining their freedom. Their integration into the workforce is crucial for Marcos. “It truly implies a transformation for the university. The CUSAM project is truly realized if the employment horizon is also within reach, not for everyone but at least for some.”

The difficulty of finding a job due to having a criminal record is a recurring concern that no university program is capable of erasing. In PEUP and CUD, which offer more academic options than CUSAM, many students choose degrees that would allow them to work as entrepreneur once they are released. Outside of these individual and understandable choices, each university program in prison serves as a breeding ground, in a more or less planned and extended manner, for the generation of collective articulations once freedom is regained. This way, Esquina Libertad Cooperative was created in 2010 as a work project on both sides of the prison wall. Despite the lack of institutional connection with the university, the project originated at CUD and most of its pioneering members were university students. Twelve years later, Paternal continues to remember with great pride his time with the cooperative. “It was born inside Devoto prison. Prisoners created it, we operated as a cooperative. We took it outside and it grew.”

In 2018, as part of a provincial initiative known as Nueva Oportunidad,⁴ a group of PEUP coordinators and workshop leaders found an opportunity to provide training courses within Las Flores prison that included a stipend for incarcerated students’ participation. During the pandemic, some of these students were released while coordinators and workshop leaders were denied access to

the prison. Thus, Cooperativa En Las Flores was born. Its first home was a popular library, recalls Centenario. Then the group moved to a rented house, and finally to El Birri Cultural Center. There, I interviewed Comas one morning while he repaired cell phones in his workshop and taught a technology course. “During the pandemic, when some of the boys started to leave the prison, we started to organize workshops outside. With Santa Fe+ [the new designation of provincial funds] we started a workshop inside [prison] and mirrored [it] outside. An IT workshop inside the prison, an IT workshop outside. A bookbinding workshop inside, a workshop outside.” Despite being an initiative built outside the university’s institutional programming, this Santa Fe cooperative is much more closely linked to the university than Esquina Libertad Cooperative. En Las Flores Collective collaborates in repairing the computers in the prison’s university classroom, provides IT support to students regaining their freedom who wish to continue their studies, and is in negotiations with the university to sign an institutional agreement. For Carolina, one of its founders, En las Flores Collective “arises somewhat from the university, but it ends up branching out post-release, and now we are trying to work together again.”

Collective and supportive experiences after incarceration find their most comprehensive institutional refuge in CUSAM. This university project cannot be thought of without the close link with the prison and surrounding territories, which has been in place since the university’s inception. Lalo has been a major figure in San Martín since the 1990s. He was part of the movement of recovered factories during the economic crisis in Argentina. Today, he is the Territorial Development Program Director at the university. He was in the process of shaping Bella Flor Cooperative, initially created to provide employment for those released from San Martín prison, when Eco Mayo Cooperative, which brought together *cirujas*⁵ from José León Suarez, encountered difficulties. Since then, the cooperative for *cirujas* and formerly incarcerated people has become one entity. “The cooperative has supported the prison movement since the first day. Sending needed things to prison, whatever can be sent and above all, signing the documents to obtain benefits [early releases].” However, the interactions between university, community, and prison in San Martín are not limited to the cooperative. The outlook is also marked, among other organizations, by a high school, a soup kitchen, and La Carcova Popular Library. In all these experiences, the university’s involvement is much more explicit than in the cases of CUD and PEUP.

The links between the community library La Carcova and CUSAM date back to its beginnings, for instance. Waldemar was already a university student and the person in charge of the library at CUSAM when, during visits with his aunt, he began to dream of creating a community library in his neighborhood. Upon his release, they decided to set up what would eventually become a library in an abandoned area at the entrance of their neighborhood. “Today, we have this community library because of that management experience [I had] that began at CUSAM.” La Carcova is much more than a space with books. In the library, it

is possible to complete secondary education, workshops are offered for children, youth, and adults, and a significant portion of the neighbourhood's issues are managed. The first time I visited, it was a hot November morning. During the hours I spent in the library, Waldemar went out to collect a food donation, advised a young woman who came asking for help to finish her high school education, helped some formerly incarcerated community members who were looking for social workers from the Patronato de Liberados,⁶ and connected an unemployed young man with another to consider an alternative together. For Waldemar, the library is now "an educational reference and community organization. An educational node for the neighbourhood and the region. There are no libraries in the slum, and we are a possible reference for a locally developed project, replicable in any other neighbourhood."

Through experiences like Waldemar's, the connections between the tools obtained and the subjectivities created within the university centers in prisons and these collective experiences upon returning to the communities become evident. For Juan Pablo, the former coordinator of the Philosophy and Literature School, inside the in-prison university centers, there is "knowledge that is being built and then has an impact on the construction of projects and a sense of the future." For him, the knowledge produced at CUD is always linked to other projects, whether institutional projects of the university, or political projects of a group, a social organization, or a cooperative. This knowledge has organizational processes behind it that end up having a presence on the outside. For Marisol, a member of the legal advisory team at CUD, the training at the university center is not just academic either. She explains "it causes a certain group to unify in such a way and begin to acquire collective defense mechanisms, very different from those the person has had before the university center."

Considering carceral citizenship

As noted in the introduction, Reuben Miller and Amanda Alexander developed the notion of *carceral citizenship* to describe an alternative citizenship trajectory, exclusive to those with criminal records (2016, p. 295). At its core, it is a concept that was developed to debate the consequences of mass incarceration in the United States and the pressing plight faced by released individuals with the stigma of prison experience. As a result, their conceptualization has three key characteristics. Firstly, carceral citizenship is negative. It focuses on the network of formal and informal exclusions and sanctions to which individuals with criminal records are exposed. This stigma is sufficient for an employer, landlord, or government authority to exclude them from employment, housing, state licensing, and even the right to vote. Many of these negative effects extend to (formerly) incarcerated people's families, who suffer the consequences of chronic unemployment, almost insurmountable poverty, and instability in access to housing and physical and mental health care (Miller & Alexander, 2016, pp. 301-302). Second, carceral citizenship is not a novel form of second-class

citizenship, as faced by other groups in the United States as a result of class, race, or gender discrimination. What makes carceral citizenship unique is that their exclusion from access to these rights is legally justified solely based on having a criminal record (Miller & Alexander, 2016, p. 297). Third, Miller and Stuart have emphasized that carceral citizenship is complemented by a set of “perverse benefits” (Miller & Stuart, 2020, p. 542).

People under penal supervision have access to an alternative system of benefits, from housing programs and assistance in obtaining personal documentation to drug treatment or violence prevention programs. However, these programs exist only as a partial and failed response to the much greater and painful legal restrictions imposed by the existence of criminal records. Still, Miller and Stuart highlight how successfully dealing with reintegration into the community can become a valued skill in obtaining employment in the social services sector and in the production of public policies against the most irrational aspects of the penal system, such as solitary confinement or the mass incarceration of individuals convicted of non-violent drug offenses (Miller & Stuart, 2020, p. 3). This argument has been further developed by Smith and Kinzel (2021), who understand carceral citizenship as a strength, and analyze the role of formerly incarcerated people as activists in transforming the penal system. “Despite the wide-reaching structural constraints that accompany the identity of being formerly incarcerated,” they emphasize, “many individuals enact their agency with civic engagement to reshape boundaries around individual and collective identity” (Smith & Kinzel, 2021, p. 93). This potential empowerment of individuals who have gone through the penal system can, therefore, be seen as a fourth aspect of the concept of carceral citizenship.

Before bringing this concept into dialogue with the Argentinean experience of academic community-building in prison, we recall Ávila and Sozzo’s warning (2021, p. 4) “against the uncritical importation in the Global South of concepts and arguments built around issues and processes related to the criminal question in the Global North as if they were universal, as if they had no time or place.” Following from the impact that university programs have on the subjectivities of their incarcerated students and their capacities to build collective strategies to confront the difficulties of life in prison and upon returning to their communities, as amply described above, it must be acknowledged that the central dimensions of carceral citizenship also permeate this field. Due to their contact with the penal system, incarcerated students in Argentina also suffer several limitations in accessing their rights during confinement as well as upon regaining their freedom. Unlike the work of Miller and Alexander (2016) in the United States, however, in Argentina most of these limitations are not legally justified but develop in the realm of informality, bringing us much closer to the notion of second-class citizenship. In Argentina, formerly incarcerated people maintain their electoral rights for instance, and are not prohibited from obtaining basic licenses, such as a driver’s license. Even when there are limitations to obtaining particular licenses in Argentina, such as professional registration, these can generally be

resolved through administrative or judicial actions. Still, lawyers who graduated at CUD face greater challenges in obtaining their licenses to practice their profession privately. Though not so much related to legal prohibitions, then, the difficulties faced by Congreso, for instance, in obtaining a driver's license, by Belgrano in finding housing, or by Centenario in being accepted for a job all point to the persistent stigma associated with a criminal conviction and class-based discrimination.

Marked differences exist between the United States and Argentina regarding the “perverse benefits” of the conviction however, insofar as these are also associated with a formal, alternative system that includes everything from housing programs and assistance in obtaining personal documentation to drug treatments or violence prevention programs (Miller & Stuart, 2020). In Argentina, such programs are severely underfunded, making them a useless tool for post-release ‘re-integration.’ In this sense, it might be argued that incarcerated people’s access to university programs is an odd exception to the general absence of ‘perverse benefits’. After all, studying in prison allows for a limited number of (formerly) incarcerated people to deploy newly acquired social, political, productive, and community strategies both during their period of incarceration and upon returning to their communities.

Here, the notion of carceral citizenship becomes extremely useful in considering the impact of university programs on the emergence of new subjectivities, both within the prison and as former prison-students return to their communities. In-prison university students undergo a transformation in their ways of exercising citizenship – through self-government, collaboration, and in some cases even by assuming leadership roles in their communities post-release. Though their passage through prison certainly impacts them negatively as a result of a series of informal exclusions and limitations, active participation in in-prison university programs also seems to function as a successful antidote to some of prison’s more nefarious stigma: producing new tools to confront the pains of imprisonment, and in some cases even returning to the community with capacities and relationships that allow for the design of productive, social, and political innovation. Throughout this research, I outlined cases of students and graduates who, upon regaining their freedom, successfully managed to integrate into the job market in their professions. Others remained included in the university community, in some cases with formal employment. Yet others continued to participate in organizations and agencies in the field of public policies committed to the transformation of the penal system. These examples coexist, however, with a significant number of released students who struggle daily to obtain employment, housing and cover their most basic needs. In spite of the examples of self-governed and socially supported positive forms for the exercise of (carceral) citizenship through education in prison, the negative consequences of incarceration for the majority of incarcerated people should not be underestimated.

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Notes

- 1 My faculty experience at CUD granted me access to the University Center in Devoto Prison where I was able to interview thirteen students and arrange interviews outside the prison with five former students, four teachers and four university staff members in charge of managing the program. Having been invited as a professor on several occasions at CUSAM I was allowed to interview nine students and arrange subsequent interviews with three former students, three professors and six members of the management team. Finally, my experience as a PhD student at the National University of Litoral granted me access to the university centers in the women's prison of Santa Fe and the men's prisons of Coronda and Las Flores, where I could interview twelve students and schedule interviews with three former students, two professors and six members of the university team.
- 2 The names of known university staff, like founding directors, are not pseudonymized as they are publicly known. The identities of the students who participate in the programs and remain incarcerated have been pseudonymized with names of neighbourhoods in the City of Buenos Aires in the case of CUD, of Santa Fe in the case of PEUP, and of surrounding areas of San Martín in the case CUSAM.
- 3 *Berretines* are a set of values acquired and consolidated within the prison that allow incarcerated people to survive it and position oneself as a respected member within the prison community.
- 4 This program, and its successor Santa Fe+, is a development initiative with provincial funding aimed at the inclusion and restoration of rights for youth aged 16 to 30. Through professional training courses, it aims to accompany them on a formative and educational journey and provide them with tools for integration into the labor market. In 2018, this experience was replicated in Las Flores prison, where part of the fieldwork for this research was conducted.
- 5 *Cirujas* are people working in the recovery and recycling of waste in the landfill adjacent to the San Martín Prison. See Cubilla, 2015.
- 6 The public institution that carries out the activities of accompaniment and monitoring of individuals who regain their freedom.

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