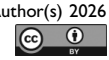
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Words against walls: Prisoners' letters, lay penology and exceptional confinement

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Abstract

This article argues that exceptional detention functions as an epistemic regime that governs punishment by restricting prisoners' capacity to interpret, communicate and contest the conditions and justification of their confinement. Drawing on letters written by political prisoners held in Italian special detention facilities between 1975 and 1986, the study treats correspondence as epistemic artefacts in which testimony becomes a form of analytical reasoning, showing how incarcerated individuals diagnose and theorise the rationalities of punishment under censorship and isolation, both individually and collectively through correspondence. By foregrounding the epistemic dimensions of punishment, the analysis reframes exceptional detention as a struggle over interpretation and credibility, with implications for understanding contemporary forms of emergency penality (the use of exceptional legal measures to govern crime and political dissent) in democratic legal orders.

Keywords

prisoners' correspondence, socio-legal reasoning, punishment, epistemic injustice, lay penology

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Writing under exception: Knowledge, punishment and prisoners' letters

Exceptional detention regimes do more than restrict prisoners' bodies and movements: they reshape the conditions under which punishment can be known, interpreted and contested. By imposing censorship, isolation and differentiated confinement, these regimes systematically constrain prisoners' capacity to communicate, sustain shared understandings and be recognised as credible interpreters of their own condition. This study argues that exceptional detention functions as an epistemic regime: a system of governance that structures not only coercion but the production, circulation and contestation of knowledge about punishment itself.

In this context, prisoners' correspondence emerges as a distinctive form of lay penology, through which they reconstruct and contest the normative terms of punishment from within exclusion. Letters function as epistemic artefacts through which testimony acquires analytical force: incarcerated individuals collectively generate causal explanations, normative evaluations and institutional diagnoses of penal power. The testimonial character of correspondence is not a limitation to be overcome but the very medium through which penal knowledge is produced. Reading correspondence in this way challenges socio-legal assumptions about who produces legal knowledge, how penal rationalities are understood and how emergency regimes materialise and are maintained within ostensibly democratic orders.

The material analysed in this paper comes from a historically specific moment in the Italian penal system. Prison reforms in the 1970s (notably the 1975 reform of the Penal Enforcement Act, or *Ordinamento Penitenziario*, Law no. 354/1975) expanded formal rights, treatment and oversight, creating spaces for legal and social scrutiny. At the same time, the escalation of political violence during the Years of Lead prompted emergency measures that suspended these guarantees for politically organised prisoners (De Vito, 2009; Della Porta, 1995: ch. 6). Recast as internal enemies, such prisoners were subjected to isolation, censorship and differentiated control (Santorso, 2016: 50–51). Within this tension between reformist legality and emergency governance, correspondence acquired a distinct epistemic function: letters mobilised the language of rights, proportionality and treatment not to affirm reformist legality but to render visible the penal rationalities that persist under juridical suspension and bodily exposure. Crucially, using the language of rights, proportionality and treatment did not signal adherence to a reformist approach or acceptance of confinement as such. Rather, prisoners strategically mobilised the normative vocabulary available to them to expose contradictions within the stated rationales of punishment and to contest the conditions and legitimacy of their confinement.

Taken together, these contributions establish a unified argument: punishment can be understood not only as coercion but as a struggle over meaning, interpretation and credibility. The article's original contribution to carceral studies is to show that this struggle is not incidental to punishment but one of its central mechanisms: exceptional detention governs by managing what can be known, said and believed; prisoners' correspondence offers rare direct evidence of how that management is contested from within. While

grounded in the Italian case, the analysis illuminates broader patterns of emergency penality, where coercion and epistemic restriction operate in tandem, and demonstrates that the normative meaning and legitimacy of punishment are not only imposed from above but actively shaped, constrained and contested through the regulation of knowledge itself.

Lay penology and the epistemic dimension of punishment

Socio-legal scholarship has extensively analysed punishment as a political technology through which states govern deviance, manage risk and assert authority (Loader and Sparks, 2010; O'Malley, 2012; Valverde, 2009). Within this tradition, punishment is primarily understood as a system of coercion, discipline and regulation, operating through rules, institutional practices and material constraints. Far less attention, however, has been paid to how punishment can be known and contested from the perspective of those subjected to it, and under what conditions their accounts are recognised as credible. This article does not treat prisoners' analyses of punishment as normatively authoritative, politically exemplary or inherently emancipatory; rather, it approaches prison correspondence as a site of situated knowledge production, examining how such knowledge is produced under constraint rather than endorsing the political claims it advances.

This paper approaches exceptional detention as an epistemic regime, a mode of punishment that governs not only conduct and bodies, but also the production, circulation and stabilisation of meaning. Drawing on Foucault's analysis of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980: ch. 2), this perspective highlights how punishment operates through interventions that determine who can speak, what can be known and which interpretations of punishment and its justification are recognised as credible. Under exceptional detention, techniques such as censorship, isolation, spatial fragmentation and differentiated confinement do not merely restrict communication; they restructure the conditions under which interpretations of punishment and its justification are recognised as credible. The literature on epistemic injustice helps illuminate one dimension of this process, particularly the systematic discounting of prisoners as credible knowers (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013: 261–263; 2021: 187–188). The significance of such epistemic injustice extends beyond credibility alone: as Wright (2025) argues, systematic disadvantage in practices of knowing can itself constitute epistemic harm, while also contributing to wider forms of social harm. But the epistemic regime identified here is broader than epistemic injustice: it concerns the organisation of the material and social conditions through which penal knowledge can be produced, circulated and recognised in the first place. In exceptional confinement, prisoners are systematically deprived of the collective and material resources required to produce coherent accounts of their condition. Under exceptional confinement, prisoners' interpretations are rendered suspect and their credibility undermined, while censorship, isolation and the fragmentation of collective life restrict the social and material resources through which shared understandings of their legal condition can be produced and sustained. Epistemic control is therefore not a peripheral effect of punishment but a defining feature of how it operates. From this perspective, exceptional detention governs not only through deprivation and discipline, but also through constraints on prisoners' ability to name harm, attribute responsibility and stabilise shared

understandings of their condition and the legitimacy of the punishment imposed on them, rendering their interpretive practices particularly analytically significant.

If exceptional detention operates as a regime of epistemic control, a key question arises: how do prisoners nonetheless interpret, evaluate and contest punishment? Socio-legal and prison scholarship has often addressed prisoners' perspectives through testimony, ethnography or analyses of adaptation, resistance or suffering (see, for example, Bosworth, 2014; Crewe, 2009; Liebling, 2004; Scraton, 2007; Sykes, 1958; Ugelvik, 2014). While these approaches provide important insights, they rarely treat prisoners as epistemic agents engaged in systematic reasoning about punishment itself, tending instead to mobilise their accounts primarily as experiential data rather than as forms of penal knowledge.

To address this gap, this study extends Nocente's (2023) analysis by introducing the concept of lay penology. Lay penology refers to situated, non-professional forms of reasoning through which people subjected to punishment interpret its purposes, mechanisms, effects and legitimacy. In this article, the concept identifies the causal, institutional and normative explanations of punishment produced through prisoners' correspondence under conditions of exceptional confinement. Through correspondence, prisoners generate explanations, normative evaluations and institutional diagnoses that constitute a form of socio-legal reasoning. The concept draws on socio-legal and science and technology studies scholarship that challenges the monopoly of professional expertise, demonstrating how affected subjects produce analytically meaningful knowledge about the systems that govern them (Epstein, 1995: ch. 6; Wynne, 1996: 44–47). Applied to the penal context, this perspective enables analysis of prisoners' understandings not as anecdotal or merely expressive, but as situated accounts of how punishment operates in practice: its socio-legal rationales, institutional mechanisms and material effects on those who experience it.

The correspondence analysed here also demonstrates how bodily suffering, illness, hunger strikes and physical deterioration are mobilised as diagnostic evidence of penal rationality. Rather than merely describing harm, prisoners transform embodied experience into analytically meaningful claims linking bodily damage to authorised regimes of confinement. The body becomes a site where the effects of exceptional punishment are accumulated and rendered legible in the absence of institutional recognition, exposing the biopolitical dimensions of detention. By conceptualising writing as a socio-legal practice rather than mere expression, correspondence can be analysed as a form of legal engagement. Letters are neither transparent testimonies nor rhetorical artefacts in isolation; they are sites of epistemic struggle in which punishment is interpreted, theorised and contested under conditions designed to suppress interpretation itself. Writing thus constitutes the material form through which lay penology becomes possible, making visible the epistemic dimensions of punishment that exceptional detention seeks to obscure.

This framework shares with convict criminology (Darke, 2018; Kalica and Santorso, 2018; Ross and Richards, 2003) a commitment to recognising incarcerated individuals as producers rather than merely objects of knowledge about punishment. The two frameworks nonetheless differ in the location and mode of epistemic production they foreground. Convict criminology brings the knowledge generated through experiences of

incarceration into the academic field, where those experiences are translated, developed and articulated through the disciplinary vocabulary and institutional practices of criminology. Lay penology, as developed here, attends to a different register of knowledge production: penal reasoning generated within confinement, in real time, before it is subjected to external academic translation or disciplinary validation. The distinction is therefore not between experiential and analytical knowledge, but between different sites and conditions of epistemic production. Lay penology draws attention to an epistemic register that convict criminology has less directly addressed: the interpretive practices through which prisoners analyse punishment while they remain subject to it and while the institutional conditions of confinement actively constrain their capacity to communicate and develop such interpretations.

A further distinction concerns the form of the epistemic community represented in this archive. The letters analysed here do not simply record individual experiences subsequently transformed into scholarly knowledge; they document a distributed process of interpretation sustained across prisoners, correspondence, institutions and time. Knowledge is negotiated through repeated exchanges, collective political practice and the circulation of shared analytical vocabularies. The archive therefore makes visible a form of collective infrastructure of knowledge production produced within confinement itself, rather than knowledge subsequently reconstructed through academic disciplinary practices.

Methodology

The correspondence analysed in this study consists of prison letters written by politically organised prisoners held under exceptional detention regimes in Italy between 1975 and 1986. The letters were originally collected and published in *Visto Censura: Lettere di prigionieri politici in Italia (1975–1986)* (De Sabbata et al., 2016), a collection bringing together materials recovered and published decades later, including some letters withheld by censorship and never delivered to their intended recipients. While this material has previously been made publicly available, it has not been analysed as a corpus of sociolegal reasoning about punishment. This article reapproaches the letters as an archive through which penal knowledge is produced, circulated and contested under conditions of exception.

The analysis treats the letters as evidence of epistemic practices, understood here as the capacity to interpret, diagnose and theorise the conditions of confinement. The political and organisational background of the letter-writers is not treated here as evidence that their capacity for interpretation is exceptional or inherently more developed; rather, it constitutes part of the conditions under which that capacity becomes particularly explicit and collectively exercised in the archive. This archive does not permit claims about prisoners' epistemic practices generally; its analytical value lies instead in making forms of penal reasoning unusually visible, where collective political experience, sustained writing practice and the shared conditions of exceptional confinement together produce a comparatively articulate record. Their letters do not merely recount experience but engage in sustained interpretation of conditions, institutional practices and the objectives and effects of punishment.

The political and organisational specificity of the letter-writers is therefore treated here not simply as a limiting condition, but also as a methodological asset. The prior experience of collective analysis, ideological debate and sustained writing practice that characterises this group of prisoners is what makes the interpretive operations constitutive of lay penology remarkably legible in this archive. As interpretive socio-legal scholarship has long argued, socio-legal knowledge is not evenly distributed across social positions. Still, it emerges through situated practices of narration, interpretation and claim-making (see Sarat and Kearns, 1995).

The exceptional character of the detention regime under analysis warrants brief elaboration, not as historical background but because the specific mechanisms of exceptionality bear directly on the epistemic conditions the article analyses. Its rationale was precisely that ordinary penal arrangements were inadequate to an exceptional political threat, a justification that made the suspension or differentiation of ordinary guarantees appear necessary, temporary and proportionate. The special detention regime, initially created to contrast political violence, of the late 1970s and 1980s operated through three principal mechanisms, each with specific epistemic effects (see Santorso, 2016). First, systematic censorship of correspondence limited the communicability of prisoners' experience, controlling not only what could be said but also to whom, in what form and with what likelihood of transmission. Second, the ambiguity of emergency legislation, particularly the 'Article 90' provisions of the 1975 Penal Enforcement Act as modified during the emergency period, destabilised prisoners' interpretive authority by placing them in a zone of indeterminacy in which ordinary guarantees and the vocabulary of rights and proportionality were substantially restricted. Third, physical isolation and the suppression of collective life fragmented the shared interpretive resources through which prisoners might otherwise have developed coherent collective accounts of their condition. Together, these mechanisms constituted what this study conceptualises as an epistemic regime: not merely a set of physical restrictions but a structured intervention into the conditions under which punishment could be known, named and contested. Methodologically, the present analysis adopts an archival and interpretive approach oriented towards the epistemic dimensions of punishment (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012: 70–76). The letters are analysed as a chronological archive produced individually and collectively across multiple special detention facilities, allowing attention to both singular interventions and cumulative patterns of reasoning over time. The analysis operationalises lay penology by identifying recurring interpretive mechanisms through which prisoners render punishment intelligible under epistemic constraint. These include the attribution of responsibility, the construction of causal explanations linking institutional practices to bodily harm, the mobilisation of normative vocabularies of rights, justice and proportionality and the stabilisation of collective interpretive frames across correspondence and over time.

Building on this, the letters analysed here are treated as reasoned texts shaped by censorship, surveillance, anticipated audiences and collective circulation, in which the testimonial and the analytical are closely intertwined. These constraints are analysed not as distortions to be corrected, but as constitutive conditions through which knowledge is produced within relations of power (Haraway, 1988: 583–584; Wynne, 1996: 45).

Censorship, fragmentation and interruption are therefore treated as analytically productive features of the archive, revealing how exceptional punishment governs interpretation itself.

In this sense, prison correspondence is approached as an archive of epistemic artefacts: material practices through which knowledge about punishment is stabilised, contested and transmitted from within regimes designed to restrict communication and collective sense-making. The analysis does not seek to establish the empirical accuracy of individual claims, but to examine the forms of reasoning, attribution and diagnosis enacted through writing. Writing is treated as a mode of knowledge production embedded within carceral power, shaped by repetition, strategic formulation and the anticipation of readers both inside and outside the prison.

This approach aligns with scholarship that conceptualises prison correspondence as a space of critique, that is produced from within rather than outside penal authority, and where writing sustains interpretation under conditions of constraint (Nocente, 2021). It also draws on historical and archival scholarship that treats documents not as passive records, but as artefacts shaped by institutional power, affect and struggle (Farge, 2013: 53–78; Stoler, 2009). Letters are read with attention to silences, repetitions, circulation practices and bodily references, recognising absence and material degradation as effects of epistemic governance rather than methodological shortcomings.

The analysis thus examines how punishment is understood, theorised and contested from within regimes of exception.

Data analysis

This section examines prisoners' correspondence as a site of lay penology, focusing on how incarcerated individuals interpret, evaluate and theorise the operation of exceptional punishment through writing. As the foregoing discussion establishes, lay penology denotes the collective interpretive work through which prisoners reason about punishment, and correspondence is its primary medium. Rather than reducing the testimonies contained in these letters to their mere experiential content, the analysis attends to the full range of analytical work they perform: the causal attributions, normative evaluations and institutional diagnoses embedded within and inseparable from first-person accounts of confinement.

Diagnosing exceptional confinement: Punishment as destruction

Across the correspondence, prisoners advance a sustained diagnosis of exceptional detention that explicitly rejects official accounts of special regimes as corrective, preventive or rehabilitative. The letters articulate a reasoned interpretation of its underlying rationality, conceptualising exceptional confinement as a deliberate strategy of erosion oriented towards bodily degradation, epistemic disorientation and the systematic fragmentation of collective life. Isolation, sensory deprivation and the destruction of sociality are not presented as incidental conditions of imprisonment, but as coordinated techniques through which punishment destroys and isolates rather than corrects.

This diagnostic framing is particularly evident in prisoners' attribution of intentionality and coherence to special detention regimes. In a collective statement read in court in Bologna in 1977, special sections, isolation wings and the suppression of social relations are described not as emergency measures but as components of a planned project:

> If, in an initial phase, your objective was to degrade us by criminalising our actions, today the operation you are carrying out goes much further: through the special sections, the dead wings, the isolation cells, and the total severance of social relations, you are seeking to carry out a veritable political genocide (Collective Statement, Bologna, 4/04/1977).

The collective statement performs a specific epistemic operation: it attributes intentionality and systemic coherence to the architecture of confinement, refusing the official characterisation of special detention as a temporary and proportionate response to political emergency. This is a causal claim (the regime is designed to destroy, not to correct), a normative claim (what is happening constitutes political genocide, not lawful punishment) and an institutional diagnosis (the special sections, dead wings and isolation cells are identified as components of a unified project). While the phrase *political genocide* is overtly polemical, it names a specific temporal claim: prisoners refuse the regime's framing as a temporary emergency, insisting instead on its coherence as a sustained, and unified project whose rationale and claimed proportionality can be challenged.

A similar diagnostic logic appears in later correspondence, where special detention is explicitly framed as a coherent penal strategy. Writing from Rebibbia in 1984, Arialdo Lintrami claims:

> It matters little to those who, during that period (from 1977 to 1981), fought firsthand, both inside and outside Asinara, to make that special prison disappear from the face of the earth – the flagship of the strategy of differentiation and psycho-physical annihilation inaugurated in those years by the Ministry of Justice (Arialdo Lintrami, Rebibbia, 13/05/1984).

Lintrami's account enacts a diagnostic function: it names a specific institution (Asinara, one of Italy's prison islands), identifies a specific period (1977 to 1981) and attributes to the Ministry of Justice a deliberate 'strategy of differentiation and psycho-physical annihilation'. This is not merely an experiential complaint but an institutional analysis: the causal chain runs from identified decisions by named authorities to systematic bodily and psychological effects. The reasoning is normative as well as causal, locating the strategy within an ongoing political project. Where testimony names what happened, this passage theorises why and to what end.

Across the letters, this diagnosis consistently reframes punishment as a project oriented towards erosion rather than rehabilitation. Writing from Pianosa in 1984, Agrippino Costa observes:

> The Pianosa affair marks a qualitative leap in the ferocity of the enemy. It anticipates a logic of mass annihilation, mass torture, and mass isolation (Costa Agrippino, Pianosa, 1984).

Costa's account is notable for its forward-looking analytical register: it does not simply describe what has happened but anticipates the logic of what is being prepared. This anticipatory reasoningentails an institutional diagnosis (the enemy is developing a coherent mass strategy) and a normative assessment (the anticipated outcome is torture and annihilation at scale). The letter thus moves from experience to theory, using the specific conditions of Pianosa as evidence for a broader account of penal rationality. This forward-looking analysis theorises punishment as a coherent institutional project oriented towards erosion, reframing exceptional detention as a form of epistemic control with biopolitical reach. The significance of these formulations for the present analysis does not depend on accepting their substantive characterisation of the regime as torture or annihilation; rather, their analytical importance lies in the way they attribute institutional intentionality, temporal continuity and causal coherence to otherwise discrete practices.

The body as evidence: Health, harm and penal knowledge

Letters addressing illness, hunger strikes and bodily deterioration articulate a clear causal relationship between regimes and physical harm. Prisoners do not describe bodily suffering as misfortune or individual vulnerability, but as the foreseeable outcome of isolation, administrative procedures, enforced immobility and the systematic absence of care. In doing so, they transform the body into a material archive of evidence: a site where the effects of exceptional punishment are inscribed, accumulated and rendered legible.

This logic is especially evident in accounts of routine administrative practices, such as transfers and restraints, which are narrated not as neutral procedures but as mechanisms of bodily and psychological injury. As Loris Tonino Paroli writes, following a transfer:

> Then they tied us all together in a line like cattle and loaded us onto coaches, accompanied by forty Carabinieri (Italy's national gendarmerie). With different destinations, we set off from Genoa towards Perugia and Viterbo, stopping in front of prisons to unload detainees. I travelled all day across half of Italy with two metal cuffs on my wrists, which were completely swollen by the time I arrived (Paroli, Viterbo, 1976).

Paroli's account shows how routine administrative procedures inscribe harm directly onto the body. The metaphor of being bound 'as cattle' frames transfer as dehumanisation, while the detail of swollen wrists functions as embodied evidence of penal rationality. Prisoners mobilise bodily experience as evidence precisely because institutional categories and formal entitlements fail to capture the material operation of confinement, a dynamic resonant with what Fricker (2007) terms testimonial injustice. The body itself becomes the medium through which punishment is made legible. Bodily deterioration thus operates as a counter-evidence to institutional accounts of confinement. The reasoning here is institutional: routine procedures (the transfer, the restraints) are identified as the proximate cause of phisical harm, which is in turn linked to a deliberate penal logic. The normative evaluation is implicit but clear: dehumanisation is not incidental but constitutive of the regime. Situated within the broader framework of Article 90, prisoners read such procedures as evidence that the suspension of ordinary guarantees extended

beyond formal legal status into the everyday administration of confinement. Prisoners mobilise corporeal harm as evidence, exposing exceptional detention as a regime that governs through corporeal inscription of punishment as much as through formal sanction.

Elsewhere, bodily deterioration is described as a slow and cumulative process rather than spectacular abuse. Beppe Battaglia captures this temporal dimension of punishment while held in isolation:

> But where, as here, you are forced into twenty-three hours of immobility, the cold seeps into your bones; and so, not satisfied with twenty-three hours of confinement, they even want to force you into bed. It is 11 p.m. as I write, and I am wearing exactly 4 (four) heavy woollen jumpers and a shirt, and a cold that forces me to give up and go to bed (Battaglia, Cuneo, 1982).

Battaglia's account identifies a specific penal mechanism: immobility and environmental exposure produce bodily harm through accumulation rather than spectacular violence. The causal chain is institutional: 23 h of enforced stillness, compounded by cold and inadequate clothing, generates the conditions for deterioration. The normative evaluation is embedded in the precision of his recording: the list of four heavy woollen jumpers is not complaint but evidence, a evidence of how the regime governs through calculated environmental management rather than direct coercion. Under conditions that suppress interpretation, the bodily trace remains as legible testimony of how exceptional detention governs through epistemic deprivation as much as through direct physical harm.

The same logic is evident in prisoners' accounts of medical neglect, where access to care formally exists but responsibility for obtaining it is materially displaced onto the individual. Paroli notes:

> Since the prison nurse told me that, if I want to have three or four teeth filled, I would have to find a dentist willing to carry out the work here in the prison and then submit a request to the prison administration (Paroli, Modena, date not specified).

The analytical operation here is one of structural diagnosis: a formally recognised entitlement to dental care is revealed through prisoners' accounts to be practically inoperative, its nominal availability serving to displace rather than fulfil the duty of care. The significance of the account therefore lies not simply in the gap between law and implementation, but in how formal recognition can coexist with institutional arrangements that render an entitlement materially inaccessible.

Hunger strikes render the relationship between law and bodily harm particularly explicit. When prisoners collectively refuse food, they convert biological vulnerability into a form of political address that operates through the body when other channels of communication are censored. The individual account and the collective argument operate together: the first establishes the fact of suffering, the second names its institutional cause and political stakes. As Paroli writes from an unspecified location and date:

> It is the third day of our hunger strike; we are completely refusing to eat (even though some have already been hospitalised) in order to have our demands met (date and location not specified).

Paroli's account establishes the testimonial fact: the body is withheld from nourishment to force recognition. But the letter does not theorise this act; it reports it. The analytical work is developed elsewhere in the archive, where hunger strikes are situated within a longer collective struggle and given an explicit institutional target. Writing from Rebibbia in January 1984, Arialdo Lintrami frames a previous hunger strike not as an isolated act of desperation but as one episode in a sustained political sequence:

> The latter today faces another obstacle, which can be summarised in the ongoing attempt (as has already happened with the special prisons) to institutionalise through a simple administrative measure the so-called 'death wings', in which a group of prisoners has been held in total isolation for two years now: another battle of which the March hunger strike was not the first form, nor the only one, and will not be the last episode of struggle for as long as even a single 'death wing' continues to exist (Lintrami Arialdo, Rebibbia, 9/01/1984).

Lintrami's letter performs three distinct epistemic operations. It names the institutional mechanism at issue: the attempt to institutionalise, through a simple administrative measure, the isolation wings that have been operating without formal authorisation. It situates the March hunger strike within a temporal sequence of collective resistance, framing it not as an exceptional or desperate act but as one episode among others in an ongoing struggle. It makes a prospective claim: the struggle will continue as long as a single isolation wing remains in operation. This forward-looking argument transforms bodily action into political reasoning: the hunger strike is not merely a response to suffering but a intervention in an institutional contest whose stakes and trajectory are explicitly identified. Together, the Paroli and Lintrami letters demonstrate how lay penological reasoning operates across the different dimensions of testimony: one foregrounds the experiential (the fact of suffering, the body as evidence), while the other foregrounds the socio-legal and political (the institutional cause, the collective character, the trajectory of struggle).

Across these letters, the incarcerated body emerges as both object and instrument of penal knowledge. Illness, exhaustion, swelling and decay are not presented as incidental side effects of imprisonment, but as the outcomes of legal and administrative arrangements that govern through bodily exposure. In this sense, the letters do more than testify to suffering: they theorise punishment from the standpoint of the body, challenging institutional narratives that separate care from coercion and revealing the biopolitical logic of exceptional detention.

If the body functions in these letters as a site where punishment becomes materially legible, writing emerges as the space in which that legibility is contested, stabilised and shared under conditions designed to constrain interpretation.

Censorship and epistemic control: Writing under conditions of suppression

Censorship and surveillance emerge in the correspondence not merely as obstacles to communication, but as integral components of punishment itself. Prisoners consistently analyse restrictions on writing, information flows and public representation as techniques

designed to fragment interpretation, discredit their accounts and undermine the possibility of shared understanding. In this sense, censorship is not treated as an administrative inconvenience or collateral effect of security measures, but as a mechanism of epistemic control through which exceptional detention limits who can speak, what can be known and how punishment can be understood.

This diagnosis is particularly evident in prisoners' reflections on the suppression and distortion of their narratives in public discourse. In a collective letter circulated across multiple special prisons in the late 1970s, prisoners explicitly identify the press as a vector of epistemic normalisation:

> The newspapers have downplayed the entire importance of this struggle, censoring everything and presenting our conditions as normal and inevitable (Collective letter, Asinara, 3/10/1978).

Here, censorship operates not simply through omission but through active reinterpretation, presenting exceptional detention as ordinary and unavoidable. Public discourse actively neutralises prisoners' claims, stripping their experiences of political intelligibility. In this way, institutional and social practices together normalise the prison's exceptional measures, shaping both public perception and the legal frameworks that govern incarceration. The effect is not silence alone, but misrecognition: suffering is rendered visible only insofar as it is depoliticised.

Other letters extend this analysis by explicitly linking censorship to the fragmentation of collective sense-making within the prison itself. Writing from Marassi in January 1984, prisoners describe differentiated detention as a regime aimed at psychic and epistemic disorganisation:

> CREATING ARMIES OF NEUROTICS, send the specialists in differentiated treatment. The anxiety and depressive state of the psychologically dissociated individual who has renounced their own self, lost their political, cultural, and mental identity (Collective letter, Marassi, January 1984).

Rather than presenting psychological deterioration as an unintended consequence of confinement, the letter identifies it as an explicit objective of differentiated treatment. Epistemic disintegration appears here as a penal technology: by destabilising identity, memory and interpretive coherence, the regime undermines prisoners' capacity to produce intelligible accounts of their own condition.

Several letters further highlight how censorship operates through the regulation of writing itself. Prisoners repeatedly note that correspondence is read, delayed, cut or returned, generating uncertainty not only about what can be said, but about whether meaning will survive transmission. As Giuliano Naria writes:

> But from the prison, for the moment, nothing or almost nothing; a lot of letters have been intercepted by censorship. It's either good or bad. But that's how it is (Giuliano Naria, date and location not specified).

Even apparent concessions are framed as tactical recalibrations rather than genuine relaxation of control, as one prisoner remarks:

> They have now lifted censorship and allowed one 5 kg parcel per week, but in return the atmosphere in the 'special' units has not changed at all (Lintrami, Milano, 26/11/1984).

Naria's letter performs a specific institutional diagnosis. Censorship is identified not as an administrative irregularity but as an institutional mechanism, its effects measured through the absence of communication rather than through any individual act of suppression. The regime controls meaning by controlling the infrastructure through which meaning is transmitted. Even apparent concessions, such as the lifting of censorship noted by Lintrami, are read not as genuine relaxations of control but as tactical recalibrations that leave the underlying epistemic regime intact. Yet it is precisely under these conditions that the collective interpretive practices constitutive of lay penology become visible.

This reflexive awareness of surveillance does not paralyse writing; rather, it reshapes it. Letters are composed strategically, circulated collectively, copied and discussed across institutions. Crucially, this circulation is not merely the vehicle through which pre-formed analyses travel; it is the medium through which analysis is produced. The interpretive work traced in this archive is not the product of individual writers' reasoning in isolation but of a collective epistemic process sustained across correspondence, time and space. When Lintrami names the institutional mechanism behind the isolation wings, or when prisoners collectively frame a hunger strike as one episode in a sequence of struggle, they articulate positions shaped by sustained exchange with others facing the same conditions. Writing thus becomes not only a counter-practice to epistemic control but the very infrastructure through which collective socio-legal reasoning is built, maintained and transmitted under conditions that constrain it.

Across the correspondence, writing functions not simply as a medium of expression, but as a mode of resistance to enforced epistemic fragmentation. By narrating bodily harm, naming censorship and attributing responsibility, prisoners attempt to preserve continuity of meaning in environments structured to suppress interpretation. As with the body, knowledge itself becomes a contested terrain of punishment. Exceptional detention operates not only by exposing bodies to harm, but by eroding the conditions under which that harm can be collectively understood, named and contested.

Collective sense-making under isolation

Despite the systematic fragmentation imposed by exceptional detention regimes, the correspondence repeatedly documents attempts to preserve collective interpretation and shared meaning. Writing does not appear solely as an individual coping strategy, but as a social practice through which prisoners seek to sustain relationality, political continuity and common frameworks of understanding under conditions that systematically undermine them. Isolation is a recurring theme, described in both physical and epistemic terms. Battaglia writes from Cuneo:

> Now they want to turn the archipelago into 'separate islands' and, within each island, many 'little islands' (cells, groups of cells, small sections, wings) separated from one another. […] A growing number of comrades and extralegal proletarians have inaugurated a new series of 'long-control wings', that is, total isolation: no newspapers, no mail, no books, radio, or TV, no fresh air, no visits, no extra purchases, and no contact with other prisoners (Beppe Battaglia, Cuneo, 26/09/82).

Similarly, Lintrami from Palmi reports:

> So keep in mind that the isolation regime for us began in 1977 and, year after year, has become increasingly severe, culminating in the current 'wings', which, mind you, are still operating at an experimental stage – but they will soon be generalised, and the day will come when we will no longer even be able to write that 'famous' letter a month! (Lintrami, Palmi, 16/12/1982).

These passages make clear that isolation is not only spatial but also relational: it is intended to prevent interaction, dialogue and shared interpretation among prisoners. Against this backdrop, sociality is framed as a deliberate achievement. Letters describe efforts to physically and symbolically create shared spaces. From Asinara in 1978:

> After a month of struggle in the concentration camp, we dismantled the passage fences and broke through all the walls separating the cells in order to reclaim internal sociality; the section became a single hall […] We, about twenty comrades, defended the sociality we had won (Loris Tonino Paroli, Asinara, 28/9/1978).

The emphasis on us signals that sociality is neither given nor spontaneous but produced through effort and coordination. These efforts often required direct confrontation with institutional authority and were sustained under conditions designed to fragment communication and collective life. Paroli notes in 1977:

> They are not satisfied with the harsh prison conditions we endure, with making visits impossible, but they also block our correspondence […] This is the first Italian concentration camp (Loris Tonino Paroli, Asinara 5/8/1977).

Even when letters are eventually delivered, external representation remains controlled. This shows how isolation extends beyond the walls of the prison, threatening the continuity of collective interpretation with epistemic fragmentation. Despite these constraints, prisoners actively preserve shared meaning through circulation, repetition and coordinated interpretation. Letters are read, discussed and compared across individuals and institutions, enabling prisoners to align experiences and construct collective diagnoses of punishment. As one letter from Asinara in 1978 reflects:

> When you end up in the hands of the enemy, it finds a thousand pretexts to keep you inside and in the worst possible ways. There is no point in agitating; everything is determined by the balance of forces: we will make them pay for everything! (Loris Tonino Paroli, Asinara 3/10/1978).

Repetition and shared political vocabulary work as stabilising practices, countering the fragmenting effects of isolation and sustaining the collective interpretive ground on which prisoners read their situation.

Temporal strategies and the persistence of agency

Beyond the structural and epistemic dimensions of exceptional punishment, the correspondence foregrounds time itself as a central medium through which prisoners sustain coherence, continuity and interpretive capacity. Far from being merely reactive or episodic, letter-writing is oriented towards duration: it preserves relational ties, anchors memory and allows prisoners to situate present conditions within longer trajectories of confinement and struggle. Under regimes explicitly designed to fracture experience and compress life into an indefinite present, temporal practices emerge as a crucial, if limited, site through which prisoners resist disorientation and erosion.

Prisoners frequently frame their letters as part of an ongoing exchange rather than as isolated communications, thereby creating forms of temporal continuity that counter the fragmentation of confinement. References to previous letters, established rhythms of correspondence and accumulated years of contact underscore a sustained effort to maintain continuity across weeks, months, and even years of incarceration. One writer reflects on the affective and temporal density of this exchange:

> Recently, I have very much enjoyed our correspondence […] In these eight years in prison, you have been the only external correspondent to send me pink postcards! (Lintrami, Palmi, 9/1/1983).

Here, duration is not abstract but relational: time is measured through bonds that endure despite enforced isolation. Letters function as repositories of shared memory, countering the institutional tendency to reduce prisoners to an eternal present of control and deprivation. This insistence on continuity is echoed in more explicitly phenomenological terms by another correspondent, who describes the temporal distortion produced by extreme confinement:

> Here, however, a black hole … time stretches and space compresses. Words, thoughts, actions, numbers, etc., repeat themselves as in a paranoid dream (Costa Agrippino, Pianosa, 19/4/1984).

Against this imposed suspension and repetition, correspondence operates as a temporal lifeline. Writing and receiving letters reintroduces sequence, retrospection and anticipation, allowing prisoners to narrate themselves as subjects moving through time rather than as bodies immobilised within it. This temporal dimension of correspondence is itself a form of epistemic resistance: it counters the institutional effort to collapse prisoners' experience into an undifferentiated present of control and deprivation.

Temporal orientation also underpins prisoners' analytical engagement with institutional power. Letters systematically register modifications to rules, routines and administrative practices, situating individual experience within a broader chronology of

repression. Rather than relying on isolated events, prisoners describe punishment as cumulative and incremental, unfolding through small adjustments that become legible only over time. Recognition of deterioration depends on remembering earlier conditions and resisting the institutional normalisation of loss. Such practices echo accounts of carceral power that emphasise how deprivation is rendered tolerable through gradualism, routine and enforced adaptation, rather than through spectacular rupture (see inter alia Crewe, 2011).

This cumulative logic is experienced not only through formal restrictions but through the slow saturation of everyday time. As Costa Agrippino observes:

> I alternate this writing with going to the window that looks out onto the courtyard of the small exercise yard […] Do you know what kills the most in prison? Beyond the structure, beyond arbitrariness, beyond the sepulchral stench, beyond every form of squalor, there is boredom – a staggering boredom imposed by the rules that seeps right into your brain, a boredom that distils itself in you day by day, a terrible boredom that will irreversibly become the paranoia of your future (Costa Agrippino, Pianosa, 19/4/1984).

Repression here appears not as a singular rupture but as a temporal process of attrition, sedimented through repetition and enforced monotony (see inter alia Nixon, 2011). Through memory, prisoners connect isolated experiences into a coherent account of confinement, identify patterns of institutional action and name the gradual erosion of body and mind as the effect of a insitutional penal logic rather than the natural passage of time.

Correspondence also serves as a means of monitoring institutional change and retaining interpretive clarity. Prisoners document shifts in disciplinary arrangements and administrative procedures with precision, transforming letters into records of systematic observation, in which the testimonial detail serves an analytical purpose. As Paroli notes when describing yet another adjustment to the regime of visits:

> Cardullo's [the prison warden] latest move is this: prisoners whose surnames begin with the letters A to G can have visits on Tuesday, those with H–P on Thursday, and Q–Z on Saturday. Imagine the chaos! (Loris Tonino Paroli, Asinara, 16/9/1978).

Such detailed recording does not restore control over conditions themselves, but it preserves prisoners' capacity to interpret them, countering the disorienting effects of continual procedural change and asserting continuity in the face of institutional instability.

A further dimension concerns the calibrated timing of communication under censorship and surveillance. Several letters reveal an acute awareness of how correspondence circulates, is intercepted and delayed. Writing is shaped by assessments of risk and awareness of procedural delay, even when this calculus remains implicit. As one correspondent notes:

> Today I was informed that one of your telexes was seized and sent to the Judicial Authority. I wonder what on earth you wrote to make the censor take such a measure (Agrippino, Fossombrone, 7/1/1984).

Rather than deterring communication, such knowledge shapes when and how prisoners write, enabling them to work within temporal and procedural constraints and to retain a limited capacity to anticipate and respond to the circulation of information.

Collectively, these temporal practices show that letters function not only as records of experience but as sites of reflection through which prisoners orient themselves within, rather than outside, disciplinary power. While such practices do not undo repression, they resist its temporal logic by sustaining continuity, preserving memory and maintaining interpretive clarity. By foregrounding longitudinal practices rather than episodic acts, the correspondence shows how agency persists under conditions of extreme constraint, illuminating how time, repression and the the capacity to interpret interact under conditions of exceptional confinement.

Punishment as an epistemic project

This article has shown that prisoners' correspondence constitutes a sustained, collective and analytically coherent effort to interpret the legal and institutional logics of exceptional punishment, even under conditions that constrain interpretation. Correspondence generates, transmits and stabilises knowledge about the rationalities, mechanisms and contradictions of penal power. The testimonial and the analytical are not opposed but mutually constitutive dimensions of the same epistemic practice. The letters shows that prisoners occasionally rise above their experiential situation to produce analysis, but that epistemic capacity is intrinsic to the act of writing under confinement: prisoners are knowledge producers and the archive is the record of that production. From this perspective, exceptional detention is not merely a suspension of rights or an intensification of coercion; it is also a regime oriented towards the management of knowledge, one that fragments collective understanding, undermines credibility and constrains prisoners' capacity from making a collective sense of what is being done to them. Understanding punishment as an epistemic project extends critical socio-legal accounts by showing that control operates not only through physical and procedural mechanisms but through the management of what can be known, said and believed about confinement (Catala, 2025: 55–63). States typically justify exceptional regimes as proportionate responses to emergency, yet the epistemic architecture they establish can persist beyond the specific threat that initially authorised it: once censorship, isolation and differentiated confinement are normalised as legitimate tools of penal governance, their logic may become available for reuse against other populations recast as exceptional.

By foregrounding the epistemic dimensions of punishment, the findings advance three interrelated contributions to socio-legal scholarship. First, this study suggests that prisoners can be understood as epistemic agents whose analyses of punishment constitute a form of socio-legal reasoning. This claim does not simply require that all prisoners engage in lay penology in the same way or to the same degree; rather, it holds that the capacity for such reasoning is not the exclusive preserve of professionally trained institutional actors and that the conditions of this archive render it unusually legible. Rather than treating prisoners' accounts as experiential supplements to institutional narratives, lay penology captures the interpretive work through which they diagnose the objectives,

mechanisms and contradictions of penal power. This approach challenges tendencies in mainstream criminology to marginalise prisoners' perspectives or to subsume them under narratives of resistance without recognising the analytical content of prisoners' own accounts. Recent work on epistemic injustice in carceral contexts shows how prisoners' accounts are routinely discredited, excluded from official knowledge and reduced to anecdote rather than evidence, a process that narrows what can be known about penal harm beyond institutional or policy accounts (Mulligan, 2025: 180–186). Importantly, recognising prisoners as epistemic agents does not imply that epistemic justice is attainable within regimes of exceptional detention. On the contrary, the analysis shows that epistemic deprivation is constitutive of such regimes rather than a contingent failure that can be remedied through procedural adjustment.

Second, exceptional detention can also be understood as having an epistemic dimension of penal governance. Techniques such as censorship, isolation and differentiated regimes of confinement do more than restrict communication. They operate on the production and uptake of meaning, shaping what can be said, heard and taken seriously. This perspective resonates with scholarship examining how institutional structures within carceral settings systematically diminish prisoners' epistemic authority (Altanian and El Kassar, 2021: 105–107). By showing how penal regimes govern not only through coercion but also through restrictions on what prisoners can know, say and contest, the analysis extends current accounts of epistemic injustice into the domain of penal governance.

Third, writing itself functions as a socio-legal practice through which normative understandings of punishment are reconstructed from below. Prisoners' letters provides sites where shared interpretations of punishment are stabilised, responsibility is attributed and normative expectations about rights, proportionality and accountability are articulated. In this sense, letters operate as epistemic interventions that challenge official narratives framing exceptional punishment as temporary, necessary or proportionate. This analysis aligns with broader discussions in critical studies about law from below and how marginalised actors generate normative critique and alternative justice imaginaries (Anderson and Kramer, 2025). Writing is therefore not merely expressive but a form of epistemic labour through which prisoners produce and sustain knowledge about punishment despite conditions that constrain its interpretation.

The dynamics identified here may extend beyond exceptional detention but appear in attenuated forms across carceral contexts, wherever epistemic deprivation operates alongside physical coercion as a mechanism of penal governance. Taken together, these contributions reposition prisoners' correspondence as a important site for understanding how punishment is interpreted, contested and rendered intelligible from within its most restrictive forms. Analysing letters as epistemic artefacts offers a framework for examining the production of legal knowledge under coercive conditions and highlights the relevance of epistemic control to contemporary forms of exceptional punishment. While this study is based on a selected archive of correspondence, which may reflect specific institutional contexts and censorship constraints, the analysis underscore the broader significance of prisoners' interpretive work for socio-legal scholarship and debates on knowledge and power in penal contexts.

This approach not only enriches understandings of penal power but also creates analytical spaces for examining how marginalised subjects generate, circulate and defend knowledge in contexts where interpretation itself becomes a terrain of struggle. The epistemic dynamics identified in this study should not necessarily be understood as historically confined, even if they are most clearly observable in settings of intensified control such as the Italian special detention regime of the late 1970s and 1980s. The framework developed here provides a basis for examining whether similar epistemic dynamics operate in contemporary maximum-security and emergency detention regimes. The patterns of lay penological reasoning traced in the Italian archive may recur wherever the restrictions of communicative and interpretive capacity function as a mechanism of penal governance, whether under exceptional detention or across carceral contexts more broadly, even if in attenuated and less legible forms.

Conclusion

This article has shown how exceptional detention operates as an epistemic regime as well as a coercive one: a mode of punishment that governs not only bodies and movement but the very conditions under which punishment can be known, interpreted and contested. Read as epistemic artefacts rather than simply as testimony to be corroborated or discounted, prisoners' letters reveal a sustained practice of lay penology – causal explanations, normative evaluations and institutional diagnoses produced from within the most restrictive spaces of confinement.

This has consequences beyond the Italian case. If penal knowledge can be produced under conditions that constrain its production, then accounts of punishment centred on institutional, professional or externally observed knowledge remain incomplete: it is also produced where interpretive agency is most constrained. Recognising prisoners as epistemic agents is not a reformist move. Exceptional detention does not become less exceptional by improving its procedures. It is an analytical move that unsettles who is authorised to theorise punishment and on what terms.

The broader stakes are contemporary as much as historical. Emergency measures, maximum-security regimes and differentiated confinement may operate through comparable epistemic mechanisms, through the restriction of what prisoners can know, say and contest. Attending to those epistemic conditions – not only the material and bodily harms of confinement, but the terms on which those harms become visible, legible or normalised (Mathiesen, 2006) – is therefore part of what it means to take contemporary emergency penality seriously and a task for further research across different carceral contexts.

Prisoners' correspondence thus enacts lay penology, while exceptional detention operates as an epistemic regime. In this context, the production and contestation of knowledge become central sites of struggle over the meaning and legitimacy of punishment. The significance of these letters, therefore, lies not simply in what prisoners say about punishment, but in the fact that they theorise it from within conditions that constrain their capacity to do so. Exceptional confinement is therefore also a struggle over who can produce knowledge about punishment, whose interpretations are credible and what can be made intelligible from within conditions of coercion.

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