

## Landscapes of prison islands in the sociological perspective

**Andrzej Borowski**

Department of Administration and Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences,  
Pomeranian University in Słupsk, 64 Westerplatte St., 76-200 Słupsk, Poland

E-mail address: [aubor@poczta.onet.pl](mailto:aubor@poczta.onet.pl)

### **ABSTRACT**

Total institutions create and use for their operation a range of natural and artificial barriers. A place where the number of barriers is relatively the greatest is penitentiary institutions that are located on islands. In addition to the artificial barriers created by man, natural barriers (water and adverse climate) in such institutions play the same role in isolation from the world. Employment of that form of penitentiary isolation is usually a revenge taken by society (authority) against the persons being convicted for the most serious crimes in a given legal system.

**Keywords:** island, total institutions, barriers, penitentiary isolation

### **INTRODUCTION**

In public awareness, there have been confirmed beliefs for many years about maximum punitive ailment of some penitentiary institutions. A considerable number of them is associated with a specific location of these institutions under extreme isolation from the rest of the world, i.e. on islands. This paper presents some of the world's best-known ones.

**A.** Description of the functioning of penitentiary institutions which are prisons is done by many sociologists in the context of total institution concept. The essence of total institution is defined by E. Goffman, the author of this concept, as follows:

A basic social arrangement in modern society is that an individual tends to sleep, play and work in different places, with different participants, where are different kinds of authority and there is no all-encompassing rational plan. The major feature of total institution is a breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating these three spheres of life.

However, in addition to a breakdown of the barriers separating the basic spheres of human social functioning, total institutions create or use for their operation an existing or specially adapted range of natural and artificial barriers.

The functioning of barriers is characteristic of the space age described by Z. Bauman that have started to function as early as in ancient times and is characterised by the presence of different types of limitations [restrictions]. Control over the space and the people living in it with barriers and various limitations [restrictions] is a sign of power and a guarantee of security.

**B.** In individual total institutions, there are properly selected different types of barriers that limit opportunities to communicate with the outer world. The functioning of barriers can be analysed in different aspects using the following typology:

*Natural physical barriers:* Forests, deserts, high mountains, Earth's crust, water, outer space, continental ice sheet.

*Artificial physical barriers:* Wire entanglements, bars, windowpanes, wire mesh, ditches, doors, drawbridge, palisade, walls, secure [safe] room, stairways, kerbsides, doorknobs or no door handles, sound absorbing barrier.

*Symbolic barriers:* Enclosure, quarantine, detention, internment, stigmatisation, ostracism, jargon.

*Partial barriers:* Wire entanglements, bars, windowpanes, wire mesh, ditches.

*Full barriers:* Walls, doors, palisade, fences, drawbridge, secure [safe] room.

*Physical adaptation barriers:* Hunger tolerance, dehydration tolerance, motor [physical] activity minimisation, motor [physical] activity maximisation, hypoxia, hyperbaria, hyperthermia, hypothermia, weightlessness [zero gravity], sound barrier, high altitude barrier, thermal barrier.

*Cultural adaptation barriers:* Uniform, mediumistic [media] isolation, moral standards.

*Psychical adaptation barriers:* Sensory deprivation, emotional burdens.

*Mobile barriers:* Handcuffs, security [safety] belts, straitjackets, electronic tags.

*Immobile [Stationary] barriers:* Isolation [Separate] cells, secure cells.

**C.** A place where the number of barriers is relatively the greatest is penitentiary institutions that are located on islands. Examples of the functioning of such places are known both from

the history and the present day of individual penitentiary systems. Prisons located on islands have been formed both in the age of colonial conquest and today within totalitarian systems and in democratic countries.

The world's most notorious prison islands include:

– Australia, a British penal colony

In the early 18th century, a law was passed in Great Britain that allowed the death penalty to be commuted to deportation to British colonies in the North America. In the course of time, the British were shipping prisoners out at the rate of a thousand a year, mostly to their colonies in Virginia and Maryland. But this practice was stopped when British colonies in America won their independence in 1776. Thereafter, convicts were thrown into the ships converted into prison hulks being anchored on London's River Thames. Of course, these floating prisons could not accommodate all convicted. Explorer John Cook furnished the answer when he claimed New Holland – now Australia – for Britain. Shortly thereafter, in 1786, Australia's east coast was earmarked for penal colonies. The following year the "First Fleet" left England to found the colony of New South Wales. Other fleets followed, and soon a number of convict settlements sprang up in Australia, along with one on Norfolk Island, 1500 kilometres north-east of Sydney. Finally, after 80 years, banishment to Australia ceased in 1868. Today Australia's modern, multicultural society gives little evidence of those early years. The ruins of penal settlements are now merely tourist attractions. Yet, a closer look reveals many less painful reminders of the convict era: bridges, old buildings, and even churches—all erected by convicts. Some are in excellent repair and in use to this very day.



[www.mapsofworld.com]

– Port Arthur (Tasmania), a British penal colony

Port Arthur was named after George Arthur, the Lieutenant Governor of Tasmania (Van Diemen's Land) at that time. The settlement started as a timber station in 1830, being next converted into the largest penal colony in Australia in 1833. From 1833 to 1850, Port Arthur was the destination for more than 1100 convicts, partly the hardest of convicted British criminals and repeat offenders from different prisons of the British Empire. The colony was known from the strictest security measures, while its location prevented any escapes. The peninsula on which Port Arthur is located is connected with the mainland by an isthmus called Eaglehawk Neck, only 30 metres wide, which was fenced and guarded by soldiers with dogs. The main focus of stay in the Port Arthur's prison was specifically understood rehabilitation to society. On the path to achieving this objective, not only strict discipline and severe penalties were used but also a lot of emphasis was placed on religious and moral development and education. Many of the prisoners did not stand the methods being used and chose death, others took advantage of the opportunities of vocational training being offered to them and benefited from the stay in Port Arthur. In the colony, there were shoe-making, sewing, wood-working, metal-working and coopering shops.



The colony also had its own blacksmith's shops. In addition to the vocational training, it also was about teaching the prisoners discipline. All buildings in the colony were constructed by prisoners only. In 1842, a hospital was established there and, though treatment methods were primitive, the mortality rate in Port Arthur was lower than in average British towns. For the hardest criminals, a "solitary confinement" (Separate Prison) was formed in 1849 that was extended between 1853 and 1855.

Separate Prison was similar to Pentonville Prison in London. Corporal punishment was given up here in favour of “psychological punishment”. Prisoners were confined in individual cells for 4-12 months. In the whole prison, conversations were kept to the absolute minimum. If a prisoner left the cell, he had to be hooded and masked; during compulsory masses in the prison chapel, prisoners were locked in individual cages which did not allow them to contact with other inmates.

When the rules were not adhered to, a prisoner was closed on bread and water in a dark cell for 30 days. In the 1870s, the penal colony ceased to be efficient, the ageing prisoners were not able to perform hard work, and it was finally closed in 1877.

– Elba

On 3 May 1814, Napoleon Bonaparte was exiled to Elba where he stayed until February 1815.



– St. Helena

From 18 October 1815 to 5 May 1821, it was a place of exile, and eventually of death, for Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte.

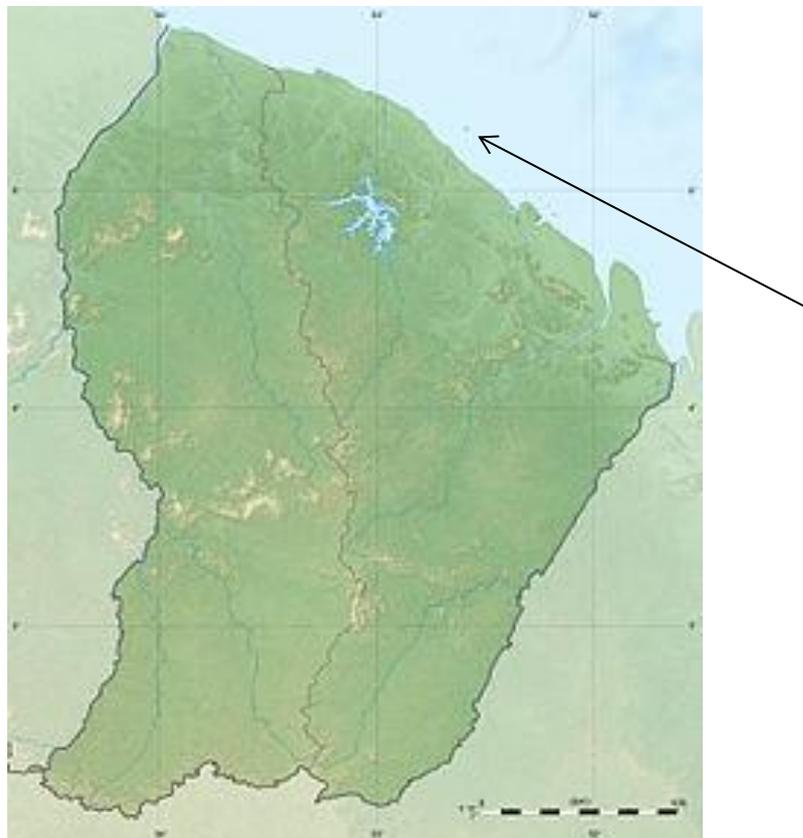


– Devil's Island, off the coast of French Guiana

Devil's Island (Île du Diable) was a prison or rather a French penal colony from which it was impossible to escape. This island, situated in the Atlantic Ocean, north-east off the coast of French Guiana, was used by France as a penal colony from 1852 to 1946. The island was exceptionally suitable as a particularly burdensome place of isolation, and this included three reasons: location, climate and geological structure (solid rock protruding from the ocean to a height of 40 metres).

Only in one place the rock descends to the water table enough to land on it – the other part of its shore is a 40-metre cliff. Diving under these conditions is thus a matter bordering on suicide and often it is simply a suicide because, in addition to waves crashing against the rocks, there are sharks waiting for a potential daredevil. It is hardly surprising therefore that this place was chosen in the second half of the 19th century as a place of penitentiary isolation for extremely dangerous or inconvenient criminals.

The island's location and natural conditions form from it the perfect place to be used as a prison from where there are no escape. Also extremely adverse climate is a barrier. The most famous prisoner of this island was R. Dreyfuss.



– Solovetsky Islands (Solovki), in the White Sea (Russia)

On the Solovetsky Islands, the first forced labour camp – the so called gulag – in the history of the USSR was set up. Prisoners were kept under deplorable conditions, starved and forced to enormous effort. Many of them did not stand that and a prison sentence turned out to be a death sentence for them. As enemies of the Revolution, they did not deserve, in the opinion of authorities, anything better than that. In the whole archipelago, up to 70 thousand people were detained at once, while several thousands lost their lives here. A several kilometres long heaped stone causeway between the islands is the work of thousands of prisoners. It leads to the remains of the women’s prison. The White Sea’s properties made it to be the best barrier against attempts to escape from the island. In summer, a man can survive few minutes only at so low water temperature, while in winter the sea never freezes near the shore enough that the ice could take the weight of men. Inaccessible location and climate features made that the Solovki became an excellent place of isolation being used both by Orthodox monks and the state. Back to the days of Tsars, opponents and heretics were exiled there but the real “prison industry” developed only after the Bolshevik revolution. Just for comparison: for 400 years of the monastery’s existence, more than 300 people in total were detained there, while for 20 years of the prison camp’s existence approximately several hundreds of thousands of prisoners passed through the Solovki. The first forced labour camp, numbering 350 people together with guards, was formed in the islands as early as 1920. It was one of the first places of that type in the whole territory of the Soviet Union. In 1923, the above mentioned SLON (from Russian: Solovetsky Lager Osobogo Naznacheniya, Solovki

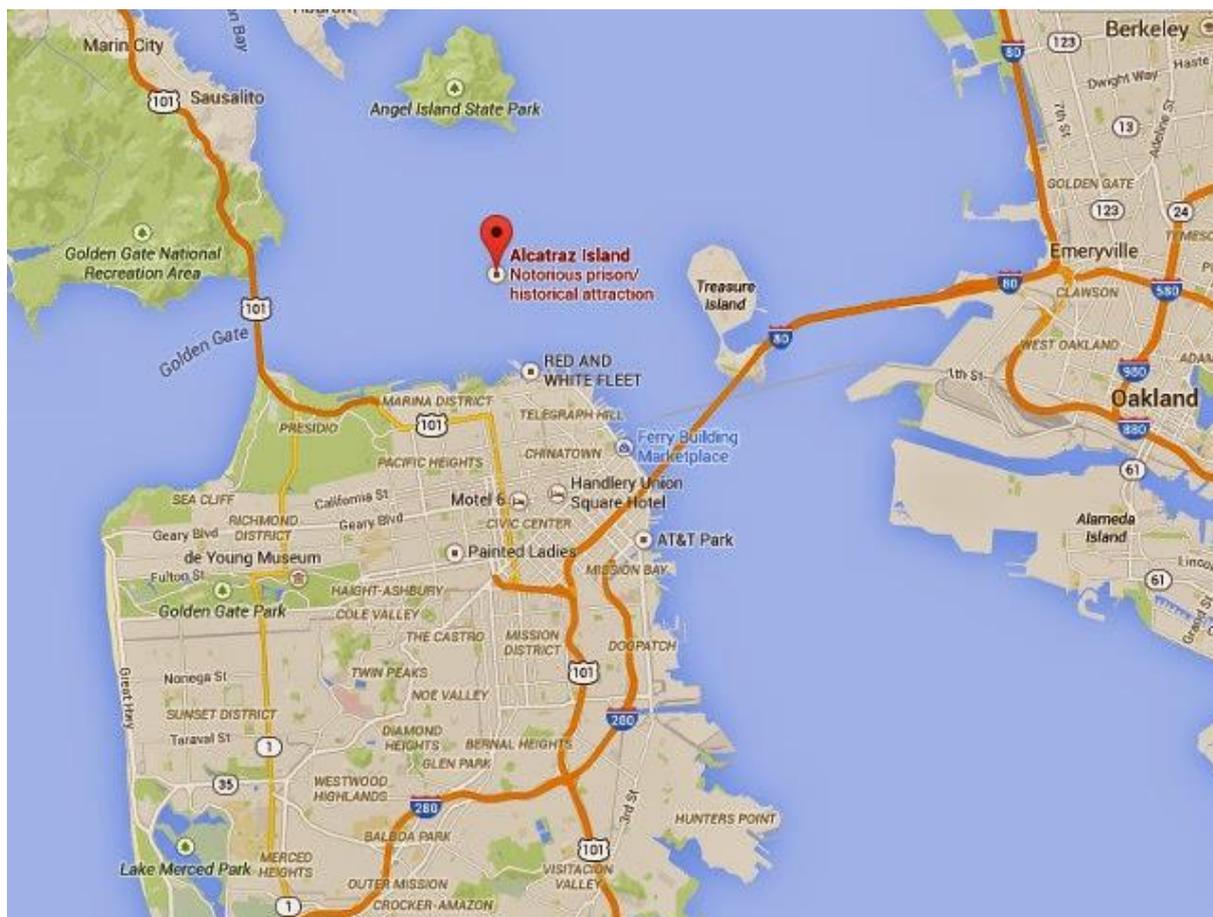
Special Purpose Camp) was established. The first prisoners were political opponents of the Soviet power – the Esers [Socialist-Revolutionary Party members], Mensheviks, anarchists, and the Whites [White Guardsmen]. In addition to the political opponents, clergymen and common criminals were sent to the Solovki in large numbers.



[www.horyzonty.pl]

– Alcatraz Island, the USA

It is an island located in the San Francisco Bay. In Spanish, it is called the Island of Gannets (Pelicans) (Spanish: Isla de los Alcatraces), but it is also called the Rock in English. On the island, there is the already closed maximum security prison that operated from 1934 to 1963. Prior to 1934, a military fort functioned on the island, and then a military prison. The federal prison, existing from the 1930s to the 1960s, was closed mainly due to high costs of living and construction [design] flaws that helped escaping from it. The most famous prisoner of the Alcatraz prison was Al Capone.



– Robben Island, the Republic of South Africa, near Cape Town

Robben Island can be called the “Seal Island” (from Dutch). It is one of the world’s most notorious prisons. Nobel Laureate and former President of South Africa Robert Mandela was imprisoned there for 16 of the 27 years he served behind the bars. From 1961, Robben Island was used by South African government as a prison for political prisoners and convicted criminals with harsh sentences.

Until then, the incurables and the lepers were placed there. They were spiritually accompanied by an Anglican priest who had a small church for his disposal. From the time of island’s transformation into a prison, there were tendencies to destroy the church building fearing the spread of leprosy. Fortunately, this has not happened and this place is now available for tourists. Robben Island does not have its own source of drinking water, and therefore water for dozens of inhabitants of this place is shipped here every morning. In 1997, Robben Island has been recognised as a National Heritage Site.



– Guantánamo Bay (Cuba)

Guantánamo military prison, Guantánamo Bay detention camp – a prison administered by the United States, located within the US Guantánamo Bay Naval Base in the territory of Cuba being leased for use by the USA. After the attacks of 11 September 2001, the base has become for the USA one of the tools that can be used to combat terrorism. On 11 January 2002, the first prisoners transferred from Afghanistan have come to Guantánamo. They have been detained in wire-mesh cells at the now-closed area known as Camp X-Ray. The released prisoners have often complained that they were tortured or ill-treated in another way when being kept in the base.

The techniques of torture and humiliation of the detainees included beating, keeping in isolation for a long time, sensory deprivation, sleep or light deprivation, prolonged interrogation, dog baiting, prolonged constraint in uncomfortable positions, interfering with prayer and insulting religious feelings and objects, such as Koran. The use of tortures has been also confirmed by the FBI report. Incidents of self-mutilation and suicide attempts among the prisoners are frequent – three of them, in June 2006, were successful. On 22 January 2009, the USA President B. Obama has ordered to shut down the detention facility in Guantánamo within one year but this has not been done yet.



## CONCLUSION

Employment of that form of penitentiary isolation that was the placing in an island-located prison is usually a revenge taken by society (authority) against the persons being convicted for the most serious crimes in a given legal system. Rehabilitation outcomes have never been a major factor deciding about the functioning of that type of total institutions. Punishment in the form of placing in an island-located prison often had a public character through media coverage at that time and was to deter others from committing crimes and rebelling against the laws being enacted by authority. In the course of time, a new form of discipline has been formed. In order to control people under penitentiary oppression, new techniques have been adopted to minimise unwanted phenomena. To use the space through discipline, strictly defined zones, being comparable to actual prison cells, have been introduced. This trend has initiated a decline of the idea of penitentiary institutions located on islands.

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