

Situated Vocabularies

A SITUATED AND AGONISTIC CONVERSATIONAL PLATFORM

Edited by

Virginia Tassinari, Francesca Piredda, and Francesco Vergani

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7. Power Mapping to Bring Out Possible Interdependencies in San Vittore Prison

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7.1 Introduction

Since early 2023, by regularly entering San Vittore with colleagues from Off Campus, I began to observe and interrogate the prison not only as a closed space, but also as a critical node within a fragmented system. In Italy, the prison system constitutes a complex network of institutions and relationships, whose structure is rooted in constitutional principles, particularly article 27 of the Italian Constitution, which states that punishments must respect human dignity and aim at the rehabilitation of the convicted person.

Formally, the prison falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice, but the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education also operate within it, responsible for ensuring detainees' fundamental rights to healthcare and education, as guaranteed by articles 32 and 34 of the Constitution, respectively; in addition, the Ministry of the Interior oversees the Penitentiary Police responsible for security.

Continuous observation from within has clearly revealed that the logic guiding these actors often diverges. The result is not an inte-

grated form of governance, but rather a forced coexistence, marked by interdependencies, frictions, conflicts, and institutional ambiguities. For instance, I have witnessed how security protocols may delay or impede access to medical care or hinder participation in educational programs.

In this intricate relational system, power dynamics play a central role in understanding the research context in which the Situated Vocabulary (SV) project has developed. As Foucault (1975) emphasized in *Discipline and Punish*, prisons are not merely places of confinement, but disciplinary devices where power is exercised through daily routines, social interactions, and institutional structures.

San Vittore in Milan embodies this systemic complexity and its historical contradictions. Built around 1879 according to the Bentham's panopticon model, it currently serves as a detention facility holding individuals awaiting trial – thus legally presumed innocent – or convicted persons with sentences of under five years. This dual function, its central location in Milan, and its public notoriety place San Vittore at the heart of both the judicial system and the public debate on prison reform. Studying San Vittore from the inside thus provides valuable insights into power dynamics and collaboration modes in carceral environments. Its role as a remand prison, hosting a heterogeneous and constantly changing population, makes it an emblematic case for investigating the intersection of formal policies and informal practices. Regular presence in this environment – I went twice a week over the past two years – has made it evident how the public dimension of the institution significantly influences its functioning and, consequently, the lives of those who are incarcerated or work there.

This chapter then presents a first attempt to map the relationships and dynamics between actors operating inside the prison, laying the groundwork for the San Vittore SV project.

7.2 Methodological Positioning and Research Objectives

The historical evolution of San Vittore reflects broader changes in the prison system and societal attitudes toward punishment and

rehabilitation. Originally designed according to 19th century principles of prison architecture, the institution has progressively integrated educational and rehabilitative programs. However, it has not overcome the structural issues that hinder its effectiveness. While a wide range of professionals operate within its walls daily – beyond penitentiary police officers, legal-pedagogical staff, educators, healthcare workers, and teachers, this also includes mediators, volunteers, activists, and representatives of the third sector – systemic problems such as overcrowding, lack of space and resources, understaffing, and the transitory nature of its population exacerbate the challenges in fulfilling its institutional missions: reeducation, healthcare, and security.

The experience of OC San Vittore is positioned precisely within this space of tension, serving as a privileged observation point. Located at a crossroads between different detention areas, it allowed us to observe how power dynamics operate not only through vertical hierarchies but also via informal networks, mediation processes, and strategic alliances. At the same time, through action-research practices and continuous engagement with diverse stakeholders, it provided an opportunity to experience these dynamics directly.

As Donna Haraway (1988) notes, objective knowledge is always a partial, situated, embodied vision. Regularly entering the prison has meant, for me, becoming aware that my presence, my listening, and even this act of writing are themselves political gestures, charged with epistemological and methodological implications. I also realized that my positionality – as a white woman researcher from one of Milan's most prestigious universities, moving within an institutional space marked by profound inequalities, rigidity, and marginalization – is never fixed, but a mobile condition, continuously renegotiated over time and space, in relation to the individuals involved and the power dynamics at play.

This chapter presents a preliminary examination of the internal power dynamics at San Vittore, the outcome of a mapping effort conducted in collaboration with colleagues as part of our daily practice in prison. This work, complex and challenging in this context, is far from being concluded with this initial research phase. It has, however, led to the identification of a series of key terms that served as a starting point for selecting, discussing, and collaboratively collecting

shared meanings. Through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and continuous ethnographic engagement, we sought to identify and problematize the hierarchies, interdependencies, and friction zones that pervade prison life. Following Spradley's (1980) ethnographic principles and embracing Foucault's (1975) relational conception of power, we immersed ourselves in the prison's everyday practices to capture their nuances. Semi-structured interviews with inmates, penitentiary staff, educators, and healthcare workers enriched the study by offering qualitative insights into the perceptions, experiences, and expectations of the various actors. In line with Geertz's (1973) notion of thick description, the ethnographic immersion aimed to uncover not only practices but also the meanings attributed to them by actors. A shared research diary accompanied the entire process, enhancing the analysis with researchers' reflections and ensuring positional awareness. Reflexivity became a crucial part of this ethnographic practice, providing an understanding of the researcher's influence on the field and interpretation.

The approach, also inspired by Manzini's (2015) principles of design for social innovation, forms the foundation of the San Vittore SV.

Far from offering an exhaustive analysis or a static representation of power relations, this ongoing mapping serves to open spaces of understanding, reveal existing fractures, and, above all, lay the groundwork for more conscious research practices and the co-construction of a shared vocabulary. Such a vocabulary seeks to foster mutual recognition, allow for the expression of dissent, and potentially generate new forms of correspondence and understanding.

7.3 Mapping of Power Dynamics and Stakeholder Identification

Within the complex system of roles and relationships that shapes a constellation of formal and informal powers, the power mapping conducted at San Vittore – which informed the SV project – enabled the identification of key actors, hierarchical structures, transversal networks, and systemic tensions. This highlighted the interdependence between security, care, education, and control.

Among the system's central figures stands the Director, who occupies the top of the hierarchical structure and holds overall responsibility for the institution. Reporting to the Department of Penitentiary Administration (DAP), the Director ensures compliance with institutional policies and serves as the primary liaison with judicial authorities, local institutions, and civil society organizations. Alongside the Commander of the Penitentiary Police, the Coordinator of Educational Services, and the Head of Healthcare Services, the Director guides a core governance body that mediates between central regulations and everyday complexity.

The Penitentiary Police, with its hierarchical structure, exercises regulatory power on a daily basis, overseeing security, movement, and discipline. Its authority to impose disciplinary sanctions reinforces its formal power and often creates tension in relations with inmates. The officers' constant presence in the institution makes them both privileged observers and essential interlocutors. While their structure reinforces vertical dynamics, their frequent interactions with educators, healthcare workers, and inmates also introduce horizontal influences.

The educational team, led by the coordinator and composed of legal-pedagogical officers, network agents, and educators, is responsible for promoting inmates' rehabilitation and social reintegration through treatment strategies and educational, cultural, and recreational programs. By collaborating with both internal actors, such as management, police, healthcare services, and external actors, including supervisory judges, social workers, and communities, they often serve as mediators between inmates and the prison institution. Although their formal authority is limited, they can exert a strong influence over inmates' paths.

Another key figure is the healthcare staff, coordinated by the Head of Healthcare Services, which provides medical, psychiatric, and psychological assistance. Although formally autonomous from the penitentiary administration – as they report to the Local Health Authority (ASST) –, they rely on the prison for logistics and access. Along with this tension between professional autonomy and institutional constraints, healthcare professionals frequently have direct contact with inmates, allowing them to identify issues that might otherwise remain hidden.

Lastly, inmates constitute the largest and most socially heterogeneous group. Though formally powerless, they exert informal influence through internal hierarchies and collective behaviors. Their relationships with custodial staff are varied: ranging from cooperative to conflictual, depending on individual circumstances and institutional conditions. Inequalities and sharp power asymmetries continually shape these interactions. Within the Vocabulary project, inmates became central actors, with the opportunity to choose the words to focus on for the collection of meanings.

As Goffman (1961) theorized in his study of total institutions, prison represents a space where the management of the self is constantly negotiated between submission and resistance. The dynamics between staff, inmates, and third-party actors at San Vittore confirm this continuous renegotiation of roles and identities in a space marked by high normative density.

This mapping process and the associated reflections led to the selection of actors to be involved in the San Vittore SV, which aims to build bridges between groups with different roles, priorities, and levels of power – fostering dialogue and systemic change through shared and participatory practices.

Based on their systemic relevance and with the goal of ensuring as heterogeneous a representation of perspectives as possible, involvement was tailored to each group: more direct with educators and external operators, more gradual with the Penitentiary Police and healthcare staff, for whom internal ambassadors were engaged to mediate trust and access. The collaboration with Young Adult detainees, already initiated through the *StoryLab* workshop, provided a solid foundation for building relationships of trust and co-producing meaning.

In summary, the mapping revealed that in San Vittore power dynamics are distributed across formal and informal structures, reflecting both hierarchical authority and networked influence:

- Hierarchical power: the Director, holding the overarching authority, is helped by the Penitentiary Police in defining the institution's operational boundaries and access thresholds. The decision-making process is structured but often slowed by bureaucratic constraints and limited resources.

- Informal influences: educators and healthcare workers build alliances based on proximity and mutual recognition. They wield informal power through advocacy, trust-building, and collaboration, which often transcends their formal roles.
- Parallel governance among inmates: informal leadership networks operate as micro-systems of power, influencing internal dynamics and mediating interactions with staff. These structures may complement or challenge staff authority, adding complexity to institutional governance. Recognizing and critically engaging with them is crucial to operating consciously within this system.

7.4 Insights

Through countless informal conversations, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews, a stark discrepancy emerged between institutional narratives and the lived perceptions of both inmates and officers. For the former, the rehabilitative purpose of incarceration is often seen as an empty rhetoric, invalidated by exclusionary practices: delays in accessing healthcare and activities, lack of transparency in selection criteria, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Many inmates expressed a sense of powerlessness in influencing their pathways – even in contexts where the law provides for their participation like the choice of activities for example that are often chosen by educators for them.

On the other hand, officers reported persistent operational difficulties like chronic understaffing and expressed feelings of being unprepared to handle the complexity of their role, which continually exposes them to the human suffering inherent in incarceration, often exacerbated by psychiatric disorders. Many officers voiced a profound distrust in the prison system, from which they feel abandoned.

This discrepancy underscores the pressing need to reevaluate the concept of justice in a more inclusive sense – one that incorporates the perspectives of those who have firsthand experience with the prison system, as argued by Smith *et al.* (2005). The profound psychological and relational impacts of incarceration on both inmates

and staff have been extensively documented (Liebling & Maruna, 2013), resonating with the tensions observed in San Vittore. Structural issues, such as overcrowding, exacerbate these tensions, as San Vittore's current rate is 225% (Associazione Antigone, 2024a), and resource scarcity, which are emblematic of broader systemic problems in the Italian penal system (Lombardo & Fossati, 2016).

Participant observation also revealed tensions stemming from the divergent mandates of the ministries involved. The security needs enforced by the Penitentiary Police may clash with the principles of confidentiality and accessibility that underpin healthcare, or with the rehabilitative logic of incarceration. Recurring episodes, such as delays in escorting detainees to medical appointments, court hearings, or school activities, often due to understaffing or security constraints, erode trust and reinforce perceptions of systemic inefficiency.

This lack of coordination between institutional mandates highlights the challenges of implementing integrated governance models within prisons – an issue well-documented in the cross-sector collaboration literature (Bryson *et al.*, 2011). These findings align with the analysis by Bruce (2021), who emphasizes the importance of more effective inter-institutional coordination to reduce operational friction and enhance the efficacy of treatment pathways.

Ultimately, the research highlighted the importance of informal networks in disseminating information, resolving conflicts, and aligning needs with available resources. Inmates with recognized roles – such as peer supporters or work-assigned prisoners (*lavoranti*) – often become access points or operational interfaces, fulfilling an ambivalent function: on one hand, they may reinforce internal hierarchies within the inmate population; on the other, they play a crucial role in facilitating communication with staff and conveying useful information.

Although these networks are not free from ambiguity – as the interests at play may diverge from those of the institution –, recognizing and engaging with them consciously can enhance the effectiveness of interventions, especially within a framework of shared responsibility and relational justice.

It is worth mentioning that OC San Vittore represents a unique case within the Italian prison system, as it functions as both an obser-

vatory and an interface through which the university, an independent institution external to the carceral apparatus, engages directly with the detention environment. This very presence constitutes a rupture in the established order of San Vittore, challenging the normative separation between academic inquiry and institutional confinement.

The insights gained through the complete immersion underscore the importance of adopting a more integrative and collaborative approach to prison management. Addressing the tensions between security, healthcare, and education requires creating spaces for dialogue and coordination among ministries, institutional staff, and inmates. By capturing the lived experiences of stakeholders and illuminating the nuances of institutional dynamics, this work provides a powerful tool for reimagining the carceral system. This approach not only exposes the shortcomings of current practice, but also reveals avenues for meaningful and sustainable reform.

7.5 Identification of Keywords and Thematic Pairs

The observation and mapping work also served as fertile ground for the emergence of a series of keywords that encapsulate the complexity of experiences and systemic challenges within San Vittore prison. These terms and binomials were adopted as a starting point for developing the SV, reflecting the tensions, aspirations, and interpersonal dynamics that shape everyday life in prison. Following Chantal Mouffe (2000), the goal is not to resolve conflicts through consensual synthesis, but to recognize dissent as the foundation of democratic politics. Even within San Vittore, creating spaces for mutual listening between institutional actors and detainees means accepting antagonism as a precondition for any possible transformation.

Among the many words pairs such as *Justice/Injustice* exposes the gap between normative frameworks and subjective perceptions of fairness; *Freedom/Constraint* speaks to the ongoing tension between the aspiration for autonomy and the reality of incarceration, where body and time are regulated. Words like *Hope/Despair* tackle existential dimensions, while *Trust/Mistrust* or *Empathy/Hostility* reveal the

fragility of relationships between the institution and individuals. Terms like *Project* and *Desire* express agency – the ability to choose, act, and make a difference – in a context where every action is regulated; even voicing a desire represents a minimal yet powerful form of self-determination. The word *Responsibility* in this framework is not solely legal, but relational: it implies being seen, being heard, and being-with. Finally, radical pairs such as *Life/Death* open a space for reflecting on the very meaning of living in prison – not just as biological survival, but as social, emotional, and relational existence.

This linguistic framework is not limited to describing existing criticalities but opens possibilities for systemic change. Situating these words within the context of power dynamics allows them to function as transformative tools. The shared lexicon thus becomes a means to decipher relationships among the various prison actors and to question institutional mechanisms that hinder change.

7.6 Conclusions

Ethnographic immersion in daily routines and the field work allowed us to grasp dimensions of prison life that would otherwise remain invisible, providing a situated understanding of the relationships among inmates, staff, and other stakeholders. This approach enables an exploration of the discrepancies between official narratives and subjective perceptions, shedding light not only on tensions but also on potential spaces for meaningful reform. As Haraway (1988) argues, every act of knowledge production is a political positioning that involves the body, the institution, and the context. This implies that ethnographic research within San Vittore is never neutral; it is embedded in the fabric of power, and we, as designers, must be conscious of this while actively participating in its (de)construction.

This initial phase of research produced three primary outcomes. First, it documented the existence of a system of complex interdependencies among different actor groups, in which inmates, prison officers, educators, healthcare workers, and management develop reciprocal adaptation strategies that often bypass formal procedures. Second, it demonstrated that building trust in high-density

institutional contexts requires ongoing negotiation and the ability to navigate structural ambiguities. Third, it highlighted the transformative potential of collaborative practices that, while not altering formal hierarchies, open spaces for mutual recognition.

These findings suggest that prison can be understood not only as a control device, but also as a relational space, a place for the production of situated knowledge and innovative practices. The San Vittore Vocabulary project thus positions itself as a tool that can contribute to making total institutions more porous, fostering processes of institutional reflexivity and the shared construction of meaning. It is proposed as a replicable model to promote dialogue and shared understanding even in the most complex contexts, opening promising perspectives for future explorations of participatory methodologies in prison environments. As bell hooks (1994) also emphasized, deconstructing the structures of power that sustain oppression is not merely an analytical exercise, but a necessary act to imagine alternative forms of relationships. In this sense, the SV project seeks to create a discursive space where marginalized subjectivities can redefine their existential conditions.

In this process, I found myself confronting not only the opacity of institutional structures but also my position within them. Visiting San Vittore twice a week for over two years meant exposing myself to a space dense with frictions and contradictions, but also with micro-openings and unexpected relationships. This bodily and symbolic crossing allowed me to understand that every gesture – from observation to writing – is never neutral, but always situated, responsible, and potentially transformative. In a place where the possibility of speech is often denied or surveilled, contributing to the construction of a shared vocabulary has come to represent, for me, a political act: an attempt to restore voice, to name injustice, and, perhaps, to imagine other forms of co-existence.

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The book explores the *Situated Vocabulary*, a participatory design research project aimed at co-designing vocabularies of shared meanings to feed conversations between situated communities and prompt transformative actions for their future.

Drawing inspiration from the vocabulary artifact and rooted in Hannah Arendt's definition of democracy, the project explores the transformative power of words to highlight both convergences and potential divergences, and the possible nuances of meanings in-between. Its objective is to disarticulate and potentially rearticulate different perspectives within a specific context, collaboratively gathering meanings from the diverse set of actors and stakeholders residing in it. The project presented in the book is framed in two different experimentations within the city of Milan and developed in the urban living labs of Off Campus. Off Campus, an initiative by Politecnico di Milano, aims to make the university's presence in the city more tangible, fostering researchers' responsibility, attentiveness to social challenges, and closeness to the community. By exploring case studies in the Nolo neighborhood and San Vittore prison (Milan, Italy), the book questions how designing for participation can embrace other worldviews, attempting to identify the radical interdependence deeply connecting them.