Becoming an "Ex-Con": When Ritual Fails and Liminality Endures

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Abstract

People that are released from prison find themselves in a state of liminality: no longer part of the prison, not yet part of the "world outside." As there is no official ritual for release, men create rituals for themselves to escape the state of liminality. However, release rituals often fail, and liminality becomes a permanent state. This article argues that the broader social context is responsible for the failure of ritual and the endurance of liminality by labeling of formerly incarcerated men as "ex-convicts." This argumentation is based on ethnographic research of post-prison life, centering around an adult male prison in Germany.

Keywords: post-prison life; ritual; ritual failure; stigma; labeling; liminality

Introduction

Michael spent five years behind bars in a German federal prison. On the day of his release, a social worker picked him up and accompanied him to the local halfway house, where he would spend the next couple of months. Having unloaded his luggage, Michael went for a walk. His brown leather shoes – the ones he had been wearing when he was arrested—felt strangely hard on the soles of his feet. In prison, he had only been allowed to wear sneakers and slippers. It felt weird to leave the halfway house whenever he wanted, no longer being locked up in a cell. Michael enjoyed the sun of this late October day when he walked around the lake in the municipal park. For the last five years, he had only been in contact with wind and weather in the prison courtyard, surrounded by grey walls with crumbling plaster and barbed wire fencing on top. He made a long visit to the supermarket, strolling through the aisles, looking at the colorful packaging, picking up some products. In prison, doing grocery shopping had meant ticking boxes on the prison shopping list and waiting several days for the goods to arrive. On the evening of his first day "outside," he enjoyed the smell of his freshly washed laundry. It stood in sharp contrast to the neutral smell of the prison washing soap.

A couple of days later, when Michael talked to me about his release, he still was full of joy and relief. At the same time, he felt out of place, insecure, frightened, and alone. Would he find an apartment? Would he find employment? Before his incarceration, he had worked as a sales assistant in a big department store. How would future employers and people, in general, react when he told them about his past? Would he

find friends and a partner? Would he be able to cope with the "world outside?" For Michael and formerly incarcerated men in general, release from prison is as much a time of insecurity and instability as it is a time of elation and excitement. The men are no longer in prison, but they do not yet belong to the outside world. They are "betwixt and between" (Turner 1967, 93), in a state of liminality. Referring to cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, I understand release from prison to be an "in-between" stage. Release from prison is a liminal threshold, within which formerly incarcerated men stand between old cultural orders (prison) and new ones (life after prison), within which old social roles (as inmates) are no longer valid, and new ones (as fathers, workers, tenants, partners) are still to be found.

In this article, I conceptualize release from prison as a state of liminality. I direct analytical attention to release rituals, which I conceive as symbolic and expressive actions (cf. Krieger and Belliger 2013, 7–8) that men create and perform to get past this liminal state of release. During ethnographic research in the field of post-prison life, I encountered men who performed such rituals but who were nonetheless unable to leave liminality behind. I will argue that liminality becomes a permanent state if rituals of release go wrong – and they do so very often. I will show that the "failure" of release rituals is based on society's refusal to allow formerly incarcerated men to cross the liminal threshold of release by stigmatizing them as "ex-convicts."[1]

Michael is one of the twenty-five persons I met during my ethnographic field research on post-prison life. I spent one-and-a-half years working in this field. My research started at a German prison for adult men serving long-term sentences; that meant serving at least two years behind bars in the German context. I spent five months in prison as an ethnographer. I got to know the daily prison routines and their atmosphere.

Moreover, I met with incarcerated but soon-to-be-released men (ten in total) in the prison visiting area for interviews (which took the form of informal talks). My encounters with imprisoned men allowed me to gain many valuable insights into prison life and allowed me to take part in their release process. I met with them in the months, weeks, and days before their release, and I met with them several times after their release and witnessed their struggles in establishing life after prison, their performance of release rituals, and their pain when other people saw them as "ex-convicts" and nothing more.

Like Michael, many of these men had lost all their social ties during their time in prison. They started their new lives at the city's halfway house like Michael. Besides the prison itself, this halfway house was the second starting point for my research. All in all, I spent one-and-a-half years at the halfway house where I met men who had been released for only a couple of days. Furthermore, I met men whose last stay in prison was more than fifteen years ago and who considered the halfway house their "home away from home."[2]

Some of the men I met during my research had been convicted for drug-related crimes; some of them had served their sentences on charges of fraud, burglary, or robbery, while some had been charged with violent crimes, murder, rape, or child abuse. Some had spent two or three years behind bars, others more than a decade. I met men

in their early twenties and men in their sixties from many nationalities. The men all had in common that they had to establish new everyday lives after being released from prison.

I met these men as persons who had committed criminal actions, but I did not reduce them to their crimes—or instead, I tried not to. Sometimes, my prejudices and moral orientations made this difficult (cf. Jewkes 2011; Liebling 2014). Thus, I refer to the people I met during my research as "men" rather than as "ex-prisoners," "ex-inmates," or "ex-convicts." In describing them as "men" and using pseudonyms, I seek to "restore to [them] a kind of dignity of which prison, the courts, and the police [after their release: society] tend to deprive them" (Fassin 2017, xix).[3]

Conceptualizing prison release as a state of liminality is just one way of analytically approaching life after prison, but it is nonetheless a very fruitful one. It unfolds from my overarching research project, in which I explore post-prison life ethnographically. I am interested in the effects of prison sentences on the lives of formerly incarcerated men weeks, months, and years after release. I ask how actors establish everyday life after their release from prison how they experience post-prison life. I look at the marginal social position men often occupy after release and the cultural meaning they attribute to their life situations. I analyze the social forces they encounter due to their prison terms, such as alienation from the outside world, stigmatization, and poverty. Moreover, I identify cultural techniques that men employ to navigate in and around insecure social circumstances (cf. Sieferle 2020a; Sieferle forthcoming).

Although there is a range of prison studies that give ethnographic insights into the lifeworlds of incarcerated men and that point to incarcerated persons' alienation from the world outside (cf. Clemmer 1940; Crewe 2009; Fassin 2017; Le Caisne 2009; Rhodes 2004; Sykes 1958; Ugelvik 2014), post-prison life as experienced by formerly incarcerated men is rarely addressed.[4] Prison studies usually end with a short outlook on the processes of release, but they fail to recognize the struggles and insecurities that come with release and the lasting effect of prison sentences on formerly incarcerated men.

Post-prison life is almost exclusively addressed from a criminological or social science perspective. These (primarily quantitative) studies point to important aspects of release and life after prison: They focus on the challenges newly released men face, especially on the structural barriers to finding employment and housing, on the risks of homelessness, social isolation, and recidivism (cf. LeBel 2012; Moore et al. 2013; Munn & Bruckert 2013; Pager 2003; Petersilia 2003; Visher et al. 2011; Winnick & Bodkin 2008; Johns 2018).

However, these studies do not consider formerly incarcerated men's actions and experiences of post-prison life. They do not approach life after prison ethnographically and often overlook the importance of release rituals for newly released men. An ethnographic approach and a cultural anthropological analysis of post-prison life—as I take and conduct my research—enable me to reveal the sociocultural processes and meanings that underly released men's actions and their experiences of post-prison life. It allows conceptualizing post-prison life as an enduring state of liminality.

To do so, I will focus on the liminal experiences of formerly incarcerated men and identify central aspects that make up post-prison liminality. I will describe the release

rituals that formerly incarcerated men perform to leave liminality behind. Focusing on the failure of these rituals, I will then address why release rituals so often go wrong. I will show in ethnographic detail that social labeling as "ex-convicts" prevents the men from leaving liminality behind, making liminality a permanent state.

In-Between: Prison Release as Liminality

Michael felt relieved and excited after his release. At the same time, he felt frightened and insecure. This mixture of elation and fear is typical of release. It starts weeks, sometimes even months, before the upcoming event. (Formerly) incarcerated men call this state of mind "gate fever." It combines both a deep longing for release and a high level of insecurity regarding it: "The traditional way for treating fevers is to eat less, as in the old saying, 'Starve a fever, feed a cold.' But if you've got Gate Fever, you've got to think beyond what's on your dinner plate. You may be worried about what lies in store, wondering if you will cope, and feel restless and even fearful. At the same time you might have grand plans for the future, and be tremendously excited. All these feelings are often mixed up together, and it can really do your nut" (Prison Phoenix Trust 2014, 1; cf. also Campbell 1986, 171-176; Champion 2005, 110).

Gate fever gripped the men, especially those serving their first prison sentence. However, even Silvio, who had been in prison two times before and served a three-year sentence, suffered from gate fever. He was unable to get any sleep in the days before his release. Days felt like weeks, hours like days. Although they had a distant relationship, Silvio's thoughts revolved around his return to his parents, who had agreed to take him in. He constantly thought about where to find employment and what his friends might think about his return—not one of them had visited him in prison, and Silvio did not even know if they still lived in town.

Gate fever illustrates the ambiguous state men find themselves in upon their release. On the one hand, they are no longer confined behind bars. On the other hand, they do not feel like they belong to the "world outside." They are between prison and the "world outside" in a state of liminality: "betwixt and between" (Turner 1967, 93). As Victor Turner points out, actors who find themselves on such a liminal threshold are no longer the person they were before, not yet the person they will become after having left this in-between stage behind. They are in an ambiguous "no longer, not yet status" (Förster 2003, 704), "in a limbo that [is] not any place they were before and not yet any place they would be in" (Turner 1988, 25). They are "transitional being[s], liminal personae" (Turner 1967, 95), "no longer classified and not yet classified. Their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all customary categories (…). Transitional beings (…) are neither one thing nor another (…) neither here nor there" (Turner 1967, 96-97). They are "out of time" (Turner 1982, 24). Liminality is "fruitful darkness" (Turner 1967, 110), "a fructile chaos, a storehouse of possibilities" (Turner 1986, 42). Liminality holds danger and is profoundly unsettling and painful. At the same time, liminality contains the potential for creativity and development. All this holds for men being released from prison. Their liminal status manifests itself on spatial, temporal, social, and emotional levels.

In the field of post-prison life, spatial liminality is to be taken literally: the men

leave prison through its main gate. They are no longer incarcerated behind bars. From then on, they are on the other side of the prison walls but have not yet fully arrived there. Many of them do not know where to go after their release. Some of them stay with family members for a short time, some get a bed in the city's homeless shelter, others move into the local halfway house, which offers rooms for temporary living. As the term "halfway house" indicates, the men find themselves in a space "halfway between inside prison and in society. (…) [T]hey had finished their prison terms but remained in a carceral setting" (Michael 2020, 18; cf. also Becci 2011; Ortiz 2005). The halfway house feels quite similar to a prison, surrounded by other formerly incarcerated men, supervised by social workers and probation officers. It is a liminal space whose inhabitants belong "neither here nor there" (Turner 1967, 97). They are no longer in prison, not yet completely free.

This "in-between state" manifests itself in physical space and temporal levels. The men have done their time behind bars, but many are still connected to prison through their probation periods. The men have to observe all conditions imposed, such as psychotherapy, social counseling, and drug testing. Their legal status as "citizens on probation" places them in a temporal liminality (Michael 2020, 18). Germany's probation time is limited, ranging primarily from one to five years.

Nevertheless, one to five years for men released from prison seems incredibly long. Their thoughts, dreams, hopes, and plans for the future are overshadowed by probation time. Where will I live—and will the potential landlord ask for a certificate of conduct? Will I find work—and what if I have to show my clearance certificate? How will people react to my criminal record? Will I ever be able to find friends and a romantic relationship?

These questions point to the social dimension of liminality. Men released from prison are "no longer classified and not yet classified" (Turner 1967, 96). They find themselves between fixed positions. In prison, their social role was clearly defined: they were inmates. With the release, this role dissolves, and the men no longer know what roles to take up. "Behind bars, I knew what I was: an inmate. But who am I now?" Michael asked. He problematized his missing social roles (worker, employee, tenant, friend, husband, partner, father) and undefined social status after his release (Will people accept me? Will they see me as a "criminal" and an "ex-convict?"). Upon release, even men who return to their families have to get used to their social roles as sons, fathers, and partners, as they were alienated from these roles during their prison terms.

Next to alienation, insecurity is a familiar feeling during release. Together with elation, relief, and joy, these feelings constitute the ambiguous emotional dimension of liminality. The fruitfulness and positive potential that Victor Turner attributes to liminality show itself in the men's deep longing for release, in their hopes, dreams, and plans for their lives after prison. Once released, feelings of joy, excitement, and relief are slowly but steadily replaced by estrangement and insecurity due to the social, temporal, and spatial limbo the men find themselves in.

Furthermore, the men are no longer familiar with the habits, rules, and daily routines of the "world outside." They had lost touch with the sociocultural order outside.

Mundane situations and interactions, which people without prison experience take for granted, are highly problematic for released men (Sieferle 2020a). They evoke insecurity, confusion, and stress (cf. Johns 2018, 157; Munn & Bruckert 2013, 71). What do cars look like nowadays? How should I dress? How do I use a computer? Which buttons do I have to press at the ticket machine? Will I be able to go to the bakery and order bread rolls? How do I get a prescription at the doctor? What do supermarkets look like nowadays? Will people notice that I was in prison? The men constantly reflect on their social actions, appearance, and the impression they might leave. Social interaction is a source of stress. It requires the men to speak to non-correctional personnel, to "everyday people," which they might not have done for several years.

Everyday life as familiar ordinariness (cf. Schütz & Luckmann 1989, 1973) does not exist for men released from prison. It does not form the silent background of their lives but instead comes to the forefront of their awareness. The men are accustomed to the spatially and socially confined prison world with its daily routines and rules. They have learned how to act and survive in prison (cf. Fassin 2017; Sykes 1958) while unlearning how to act and survive outside. They have, to put it in the words of the sociologist Erving Goffman (1961, 73), "disculturated" from the habits and rules of the "world outside." Upon their release, they are confronted with a world they are no longer familiar with. Release disrupted their sociocultural order.[5]

Liminality is fundamentally oriented towards an end. It envisions a step into a new sociocultural order with fixed spatial, temporal, and social positions that reduce liminal feelings of insecurity and estrangement. How do formerly incarcerated men take this step? How do they (try to) leave liminality behind?

Rituals of Release

Sascha and I got to know each other in prison during his third and longest prison sentence (three-and-a-half years). He was 30 years old and had spent most of his twenties in prison. We met in the visiting area of the prison regularly. He told me a lot about his experiences behind bars, and his hopes and insecurities concerning life after prison. A couple of days before his release, his girlfriend invited me to Sascha's release party, which I happily accepted. On the day of his release, his girlfriend, together with their 3-year-old son, two good friends, and I had been waiting for over two hours when Sascha finally stepped through the prison's main gate. We toasted Sascha's release with beer. His eyes were full of tears when he held his son in his arms. He was born shortly after Sascha's incarceration. Up to now, they had only met under the gaze of officers in the visiting area. Our little group went to a nearby park. Sascha and his friends refreshed their friendship by sharing memories about their past. The couple sat closely embraced, their son romping around. They enjoyed being together again. We toasted many times more.

A couple of weeks later, Sascha started a job at a local industrial company. Before his incarceration, he had kept himself over the waters with occasional work. His uncle, who worked for the same company, got him the job. Another couple of weeks later, Sascha moved into a new apartment with his girlfriend and son – until then, he lived

with his parents. His friends had helped him find the apartment, and his parents had provided a rental guarantee. Shortly after, I was invited to a housewarming party. We again celebrated Sascha's new life.

Passage rituals—and I consider Sascha's release and housewarming party to be one such ritual—are (most often, though not always) socially formalized actions performed during critical biographical transitions. They bring changes in social status, social role ascriptions, and social relations. They mark, facilitate, sometimes even enable the transition from one sociocultural order to another. Therefore, they are often understood as ceremonies of social transformation.

Whereas the anthropologist and folklorist Arnold van Gennep (1960 [1908]) recognized the threefold pattern of passage rituals (separation – liminality – reintegration), it was Victor Turner (1967, 1977) who (more than fifty years later) took up van Gennep's conceptualization, focusing on the middle stage of passage rituals, liminality, and its transformative powers. Both scientists point to the importance of rituals to master critical life changes and to convey life stages and important milestones.

Release from prison certainly is such a milestone. In the case of Sascha, we performed his transition from prison into his new life ritually: we celebrated his release toasting with beer, and we celebrated his new job and his new apartment with a housewarming party. These were all essential ceremonies to cross the liminal threshold of release. Insecurities concerning work, housing, and returning to his family vanished rapidly due to the support of his family and friends. Marked with rituals, Sascha left his social role as prisoner behind and stepped into his new roles as father, partner, friend, son, tenant, and employee.

For the majority of formerly incarcerated men, release turns out differently. Aged 51, Michael had lost touch with his family and friends during his five-year prison sentence. Far from a ritual of release, he was picked up by a social worker who drove him to the local halfway house – a liminal space that would be his home for the next few months. Unlike Sascha, Michael did not have relatives or friends with whom to perform and mark his release ritually, to attribute to him with new social roles and thus help him reduce the liminal insecurities of release.

Therefore, Michael created a ritual for himself. After a couple of days in the halfway house, as he told me, he looked through his belongings and collected all the things that he associated with prison in a large pile in his room. There were a lot of clothes, some books, his toiletry equipment, a laundry bag, a stereo system, tablecloths and much more. He kept the pile in his room until waste collection day. As soon as he heard the garbage collection trucks, he took all his "prison stuff" (which he had packed into three large waste bags), went out into the street, and convinced the garbage collectors to allow him to throw his bags into the truck by himself. Afterward, he told me with a bright smile on his face, he "felt relieved, twenty kilos lighter and further away from [his] time in prison."

Mario, another man I met in prison and accompanied ethnographically in his postprison life, did a seven-day pilgrimage tour on foot to a local Catholic shrine right after his release. Mario had served a ten-year prison sentence and was entirely on his own in establishing life after prison. Before his incarceration, he had worked as a chef.

He doubted whether he would find a job with 54 and a criminal record. While still in prison, he had arranged to make his confessions to the local priest. He brought a candle to the pilgrimage church, got it blessed by the priest, and left it at the pilgrimage shrine. Mario considered this a way of repentance, of ending his old prison life and starting a new one.

Farin, aged 38 and having spent six years behind bars, performed his release ritual many months after he had left prison for good. After his release, he slept on couches belonging to acquaintances for five months. He did not have a permanent place to stay nor any prospects of a job. Before his time in prison, he had worked as a warehouse employee. Since his release, all his attempts to find a job have been unsuccessful. One afternoon, I got a phone call from Farin. I had to keep the phone away from my ear to prevent my eardrum from hurting. Farin screamed excitedly: "I got an apartment. My own apartment. I made it. No more prison feelings! Finally! New life – here I am!" He described in detail the signing of the lease agreement, how his hand had trembled when holding the pen, how powerful and magical it had felt when he put his signature on the document. Intoxicated with joy, he even thought about framing his lease agreement and hanging it on the wall of his soon-to-be new apartment.

Dave, in turn, performed his first day at work ritually. Like Farin, he told me in detail about the start of his first day: how he had proudly put on his suit, prepared his lunch box and a huge flask of coffee, how he stepped through the gate of the company premises and clocked in. Holding his chip card to the attendance recorder had made him feel part of the company. Like Farin, who "made it" when he signed his lease agreement, Dave felt that he "made it" by starting work.

I consider the men's actions to be rituals, which they performed to leave their liminal state of release behind. Mario resorted to an established religious transformation ritual: pilgrimage (cf. Frey 1998).[6] Mario built on popular discourses of pilgrimage and its transformative powers. More than once, he had told me about movies, documentaries, and reports on pilgrimage tours he had seen on TV in his prison cell. He also drew on Christian Catholic religious conceptions of pilgrimage as a form of penance and purification. He intended to purify himself of the criminal offense he had committed and his time in prison. Mario performed his pilgrimage to take off the role of "inmate" and to embrace his (still to be found) new social roles.

Michael's purification ritual looked different. He formed a large pile of prison objects in his room and got rid of them shortly after. Unlike Mario, he did not rely on culturally pre-formed and socially accepted (religious) rituals but instead created a ritual for himself. However, its intention was the same. Michael rid himself of prison and his role as an inmate by throwing away his materialized prison memories. Contrary to material culture studies, which often focus on the use of objects in memorialization (e.g., Braun, Dieterich & Treiber 2015; Kwint, Breward & Aynaley 1999), Michael used the technique of "ridding" (Gregson 2007) himself to "de-memorize" his current life, to transition into a new life.

Michael charged the ordinary, everyday throwing away of trash with cultural meaning. For him, it symbolized the end of liminality and the transition into a new sociocultural order. He ritualized the quotidian act. Cultural anthropologist and ritual

expert Catherine Bell describes "ritualization" as a "strategic way of acting" (Bell 2009 [1992], 7). Ritualization, Bell writes, is "a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction" (Ibid., 74).

Farin and Dave did the same. Farin ritualized signing a lease agreement; Dave ritualized the act of going to work and clocking in. They thereby produced "differentiation and established a privileged contrast" (Ibid, 90), which made their actions more critical (in comparison to their quotidian execution). The actions became "symbolically dominant to [their] conventional counterparts" (Ibid., 90).

In these rituals of release, the men wanted to leave their state of liminality and the insecurities they faced after release behind. The ritualization of going to work and clocking in symbolized the end of Dave's unemployment and financial insecurities. The act of signing a lease symbolized the end of Farin's housing insecurities. These actions marked a move towards "normal life biographies" (Bereswill 2016), as well as the end of their social status as "(ex-)convict," "(ex-)inmate" and "criminal," and the beginning of the adoption of new social roles, such as tenants and employees. The same goes for Michael: in ridding himself of material prison memories, he symbolically rid himself of his status as "(ex-)convict." Mario did so by going on pilgrimage.

The men prepared themselves for new social roles and a new cultural order in the world outside of prison. They turned to ritual actions as a practical way of dealing with their liminal life circumstances (Bell 2009 [1992], 92), as a strategic way of dealing with insecure social circumstances (Ibid, 100). They used rituals to help them cross the liminal state of release and experience "normal life" (Ibid, 104) – at least they hoped so. I will show in the following that the men's rituals failed. They could not leave liminality behind despite their successful performance of release rituals.

Rituals without Passage

Cultural anthropology and ritual studies rarely address the issue of ritual failure (Schieffelin 2007, 1). Ritual theory and empirical studies instead focus on the transformative power of ritual and successful transition into new sociocultural orders (for a comprehensive overview, see Bell 1997; Belliger & Krieger 2013). However, the few studies that address ritual failure (cf. Geertz 1957; Grimes 1990; Hüsken 2007) give different explanations of why rituals may go wrong. Just as I do in this article, these studies base their analysis on empirical, context-sensitive findings. Nonetheless, two main lines of reasoning can be identified.

For some scholars, the cause of ritual failure can be found in the execution of the rituals (cf. Grimes 1990). From this first point of view, failure results from incorrect ritual performance and thus missing (but intended) ritual emotions. For other scholars, however, ritual failure has to be understood from the perspective of the intended ritual outcome (cf. Geertz 1957; Grimes 1990). Following this second line of argumentation, the failure to produce ritually expected outcomes does not necessarily correlate

with failed performances or missing sentiments but rather depends on the ritual's social context (cf. Schieffelin 1996). The latter perspective is of utmost importance for the field of post-prison studies.

All the men performed the rituals they created to pass their liminal state of release successfully. They described their ritual activities in detail when they told me about their ritual actions. All emphasized the performative aspect of the respective ritual and its successful completion, be it arrival at the pilgrimage shrine, the complete removal of prison objects, the signing of a lease, or the first day at work.

Furthermore, all the men mentioned the deep emotional state they had been in during their release rituals. They described these feelings as "intense excitement," "awakeness," "emotional turmoil," "restlessness," being charged with "positive energy," "happiness," leading to "ease," "calm," and "good feelings." These are all common emotions that ritual studies use and emphasize when describing the liminal stage of rituals and ritual transformation processes. The ritualization of everyday activities allowed the men to process the "emotional turmoil" of release, to acknowledge its insecurities emotionally, and envision life afterward. For the men, the ritual was successful in terms of its sentiments and its performance.

However, "successful" ritual sentiments and performances did not achieve the intended, desired, and envisioned end of liminality. For the men, the rituals failed because their intended outcome was never realized: the transition into "normal life," closely connected to the discordance of their role as "ex-convict" and "criminal." Formerly incarcerated men remained "ex-convicts," as society ascribed this stigma to them.

The Stigma of Being an "Ex-Convict"

Dave had started to work and had symbolically highlighted his first day at work. He had successfully ended the liminal insecurities concerning his financial situation. He had become an "employee" now, a "worker," which made him very proud. However, he still had a feeling of not belonging to the "world outside." When he had applied for the job, he had omitted his prison term. Since then, he had needed to hide his past at work. He found this exhausting, as he constantly had to think about what to reveal about himself and what to conceal. Nonetheless, he considered it the right move. He was convinced that he would never have gotten a job otherwise.

Dave's situation points to what formerly incarcerated men experience in daily life: problems finding a job due to their prison sentence. Many men told me about the "vicious circle" regarding their efforts to find employment. Marcel, who had been released eight years previously and had been unemployed ever since, described this vicious circle as follows: "When you don't admit that you've been to jail, and your boss finds out, he accuses you of being dishonest and you are fired. When you apply and tell them right away, you don't have any chance at all of finding a job. No matter what you do, you are always the one to blame."

Similar to Marcel, Farin spoke about the hardships of finding a partner. "There's no good time to tell a woman about my time in prison. When I don't tell her on the

first date, I am said to be a liar. When I tell her, I am said to be a criminal." Although he had successfully moved into an apartment of his own and ritualized the signing of his lease to indicate his move into "normality," the more months passed, the more frustrated he became. Every woman he had dated was either unwilling to meet with him at all (due to his prison term) or left during the date once she found out about his past. He did not even get to tell them why he had served a prison sentence. Mentioning prison alone was enough. The calm and positive state he had been in after signing his lease had vanished long ago. He felt more and more insecure when meeting other people. He constantly feared being reduced to his time in prison.

Many men experienced the fear of being labeled as "different" and "abnormal" after their release (cf. Harding 2003; Keene, Smoyer & Blankenship 2018; LeBel 2012). Potential landlords, employers, friends, and partners labeled formerly incarcerated men as "dangerous" and "suspicious criminals" and expressed that they could not trust them enough to let them an apartment, give them a job, or have social relations with them.

Michael, who had ritually ridden himself of his prison memories, still lived in the halfway house. Almost two years had passed since he moved there. His attempts to find an apartment, a job, and develop a social life, which would have provided him with a sense of independence and self-confidence, have been unsuccessful. "Who would let me an apartment? I am unemployed. Who would hire me—an ex-con?" With the "mark of a criminal record" (Pager 2003), he has found it next to impossible to gain a lease, get employment, or establish social ties. Two years after leaving prison through its main gates, he still feels out of place and like he does not fully belong to the "world outside."

Mario, who went on a pilgrimage to purify himself of his past, has stopped looking for a job altogether. Like Michael, he had been released two years previously. He has experienced too many frustrating rejections when looking for a job. "We don't hire criminals." He has heard this sentence too often. He has lost hope of finding employment. Mario lives in a social housing apartment and spends most of his days in the common area of the halfway house. He considers the halfway house his "home away from home" and especially likes it for its open atmosphere. As he once told me, he does not have to be afraid of "wicked looks and unfair treatment at the halfway house. Everybody has his history and that's okay. Nobody judges you here for what you've done, where you've been." Mario avoids potentially stigmatizing situations by restricting his social contacts to other formerly incarcerated men. The halfway house serves him as a stigma-free space where he feels safe.[7]

Erving Goffman defines stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting," that reduces the stigmatized person "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman 1963, 3). Stigmas are closely connected to negative stereotypes and prejudices (Ibid, 4), which the men experience firsthand in everyday life. "Ex-cons" are considered unreliable tenants, lazy employees, and untrustworthy friends and partners. These labeling processes have discriminatory consequences for the men. Their chances of finding permanent housing, a job, and establishing long-term friendships and partnerships are significantly reduced (Sieferle 2020a)—even years, some-

times decades, after their release.

Though the men performed the rituals "successfully" and had the "right" ritual sentiments, they could not achieve the intended outcome of leaving liminality through the transformation of their social status and ascriptions of new social roles. Through processes of social labeling as "ex-convicts," the men remained—for most of society—"criminals," "offenders," "(ex-)convicts." Although Dave is an "employee" now and Farin a "tenant," the label "ex-convict" holds a "master status," that "overrides other attributes in reactions to the individual such that others view the person only in terms of the stigmatized label" (Lucas & Phelan 2012, 318).

Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner both point to the significance of social integration for the success of ritual passages. In the post-prison research field, Sascha pointed to the importance of the support of a social group for release rituals to be successful in terms of their intended outcome. Sascha's family and friends did not reduce him to his role and status as an "ex-convict," they enabled him to transition into new social roles as a father, friend, partner, employee, and tenant.

Post-Prison Life as Permanent Liminality

However, most of the persons formerly incarcerated men interacted with remained "ex-convicts" and nothing more. Months, often even years, after their release, the men are still faced with insecurities concerning housing, employment, and social relations due to stigmatizing processes. For formerly incarcerated men, the liminality of release is not a transitional stage into "normal life," it is their primary mode of existence (Sieferle 2020b). Liminality becomes a permanent state.

As ritual studies rarely focus on the failure of rituals, they seldomly think of liminality as a permanent state and a primary mode of experience. However, Arnold van Gennep points—even if only briefly—to the possibility of liminality becoming a permanent state (van Gennep 1960 [1908], 11). Victor Turner developed this thought further by speaking of the "institutionalization of liminality" (Turner 1977, 107).[8] By using monastic orders as his only example of the institutionalization of liminality, Turner solely emphasized spatial and social seclusion from society. Nevertheless post-prison life is not an institutionalized form of liminality. Its permanent liminality is characterized somewhat differently. The continuously felt insecurity, social marginalization (not only spatial and social seclusion), and constant stigmatization make up its essence.

Criminologists Diane Johns (2018) and Eileen Baldry (2010) both point to the enduring marginal, liminal position that formerly incarcerated men hold in society. They both emphasize society's role in preventing formerly incarcerated actors from leaving their liminal release state behind. Baldry (Ibid, 261) writes: "Rather than a threshold into a new space it continues as an ambiguous space. It is marginal in that it is right on the edge of mainstream community and society's consciousness and barely worthy of attention, with the exception of forays to deal with delinquency and offending." She stresses what Didier Fassin (2017, 58) states for prison, but which also holds for post-prison life: it is a "well-kept public secret." I understand the term "secret" as a refer-

ence to society's non-thematization of the lifeworlds of (formerly) incarcerated actors, to the marginal space these actors occupy within society, and to the lack of socially accepted release rituals.

Prison Release as Ritual Gap

The folklorist Christina Burckhardt-Seebass (1990, 144) refers to the lack of socially provided rituals as "ritual gaps." Such gaps force actors to undergo transitions privately, secretly, and without cultural framing, "though, there is no doubt that such transitions are highly significant for society" (Ibid.). Whereas Burckhardt-Seebass assumes that transitions are successful despite ritual gaps, post-prison life shows otherwise. There are no institutionalized rituals of release for people being released from prison. Therefore, formerly incarcerated men create rituals for themselves. But the lack of social support causes them to fail. However, I agree with Burckhardt-Seebass that the ritual gap in prison release is "highly significant for society" (Ibid.).

I consider the absence of a socioculturally accepted and institutionalized release ritual indicating society's disapproval of formerly incarcerated men. Social actors position formerly incarcerated men in a marginal social place by reducing them to "ex-convict" during social interactions. Correspondingly, social actors and the state indicate their refusal to integrate formerly incarcerated men into society by failing to provide formalized and accepted prison release rituals.

The criminal justice system performs powerful, institutionalized rituals of incarceration. Court trials can be interpreted as state-sanctioned "degradation ceremonies" which "ritually destruct" previous social status and role ascriptions, as the sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1956) points out. With the court's judicial sentencing, actors are marked as and reduced to "criminals" and "convicts." Accordingly, Erving Goffman (1961, 14) describes incarceration rituals (e.g., change of clothing, body searches, cell allocation) as "mortification processes," as "a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self" (Ibid., 14), which mark actors as "inmates."

Powerful, institutionalized, state-sanctioned rituals which may undo role ascriptions as "criminals" and "convicts" do not exist for prison release. The criminologist Shadd Maruna problematizes (2011a) this: "As a society, we make an impressive ritual of punishment – from the drama of the courtroom to the elaborate de-individuation processes involved in institutionalization. Yet, when it comes to reintegration – turning prisoners back into citizens – we typically forgo all such ritual and try to make the process as stealthy and private as possible, if we make any effort at all. This contradiction may account for why the imprisonment of human beings is taken for granted as 'normal' or even 'natural,' and yet the return of the same human beings to communities is the cause of often inordinate concern."

Maruna argues that degradation rituals of court hearings and incarceration classify sentenced men and women as "dangerous" and "abnormal." Due to the lack of release rituals, society perceives formerly incarcerated men and women as a threat to the social order. Such perceived danger manifested itself during my research on media coverage ("Offender released after ten-year sentence. Will he move back to his

hometown?"), in citizen protests against the establishment of halfway houses in their neighborhoods, and in reactions to my research topic ("Isn't it dangerous what you do?" "Take care when meeting with 'these people.'" "Aren't you afraid?").

Maruna argues that society and the state need to create official prison release rituals to address these public fears which would allow formerly incarcerated men to transition from their liminal role as "ex-convict" into full members of society. Maruna explains that these rituals prevent society from reducing formerly incarcerated men to their prison sentences. Indeed, a few countries have already created such institutionalized release rituals, such as Japan or New Zealand (Braithwaite & Mugford 1994), as well as France (cf. Herzog-Evans 2011; Maruna 2011b).

In France, this ritual process is called "Judicial Rehabilitation" (Herzog-Evans 2011). It consists of a court hearing following the convicted person's release. In this hearing, for which formerly incarcerated persons must apply, they testify that they have paid all the damages to their victim(s), that they take full responsibility for their past criminal actions, and show, convincingly, that they have not pursued any criminal actions upon their release. If they do so successfully, all criminal record files are deleted – no matter which criminal action they had committed (except for sexual offenses). This hearing serves as an acknowledgement for the formerly incarcerated person, but also for his/her relatives, friends, neighbors, and broader society, that he/she has left prison (and his/her criminal actions) behind (cf. Herzog-Evans 2011).

Criminological studies on these rituals in France, New Zealand, and Japan point to the reduced social stigmatization of formerly incarcerated actors. With state-sanctioned release rituals, prison no longer holds a master status. Furthermore, the studies point to the famous phrase from the cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966, 65; cf. Maruna 2011a): "There are some things we cannot experience without ritual."

Prison release might be such a thing. It needs the ritual support of a broader social group to enable formerly incarcerated men to become full members of society and to take on "normal" social roles such as trustworthy and reliable partners, friends, tenants, workers, neighbors, etc.

> A man who has spent any time 'inside' is put permanently 'outside' the ordinary social system. With no rite of aggregation which can definitely assign him to a new social position he remains in the margins, with other people who are similarly credited with unreliability, unteachability, and all the wrong social attitudes. (Douglas 1966, 121)

The rituals of court sentencing and incarceration symbolize "moral exile" (Johns 2018, 86). "Without rites to renew social status, ex-prisoners remain forever 'in the margins' – perpetual outsiders, socially excluded," concludes the criminologist Diane Johns (2018, 87). I want to add: The absence of release rituals extends moral exile into a permanent state of liminality.

Becoming an "Ex-Con." Toward a Conclusion
The notion of "becoming" is inherent in liminality (Johns 2018, 91; cf. also Biehl and Locke 2017). The "no longer, not yet status" is fundamentally oriented towards an

end. In the field of post-prison life, this notion manifests itself in the rituals formerly incarcerated men perform to leave this insecure liminal state behind. It shows itself in their hopes of becoming "normal" citizens, taking on social roles as tenants, employees, partners, and friends. However, this is rarely realized. "Who am I?" Michael asked himself in the time following his release. Many men ask themselves this very question years, sometimes even decades later. They do not identify with the label "ex-con" that society forces upon them. At the same time, their attempts to leave the stigma of being an "ex-con" behind consistently fail. For formerly incarcerated men, "becoming" never ends. It becomes a permanent state.

This article has used ritual and liminality as analytical lenses to understand post-prison life. I have argued that formerly incarcerated men experience prison release as a state of liminality that comprises four dimensions (spatial, temporal, social, emotional). As I have shown, prison release liminality is characterized by insecurity regarding everyday life outside of prison and essential life areas (housing, work, social relations). Men create and perform rituals to leave this insecure state of liminality behind. As institutionalized rituals of prison release do not exist, the men do so by ritualizing everyday actions to mark the passage from liminality to "normal life." As I have shown empirically, these rituals often fail.

However, the failure of rituals does not rest on a lack of the "right" ritual emotions or the "right" ritual performance, but rather on society's refusal to allow formerly incarcerated men the intended ritual outcome: integration into society. The "failure" of ritual highlights its normative dimension: the men are shown the moral incompatibility and otherness that society ascribes to them. In realizing that their rituals have failed, they feel that their efforts to "become" someone (apart from an "ex-con") have failed. Through labeling and stigmatization, society places formerly incarcerated men at the margins of society—in a permanent state of liminality.

Notes

1 I use the term "failure" and its opposite "success" as field evaluations of ritual processes. Formerly incarcerated men did not use the term "ritual." It is an analytical concept I use to approach and understand life after prison.

2 To protect my research partners, I have not only anonymized their names, but also withheld information about their criminal actions, life stories and the social and spatial contexts of my research.

3 However, I do not agree with cultural anthropologist Didier Fassin (2017, xix), who states that the use of invented names gives ethnographic stories an anecdotal turn. My use of

pseudonyms as first names rather indicates a research relationship based on trust and empathy (cf. Sieferle 2021).

4   For a comprehensive overview of the anthropology of (post-)prison see Cunha 2014; Rhodes 2001; and Wacquant 2002. For post-prison studies, that address life after prison in an ethnographic manner see Becci 2001, Johns 2018, Munn & Bruckert 2013.

5   Many of the men adapted to life outside after a while, but their sense of alienation has never vanished completely. Many feel different from the rest of society even years and sometimes decades after their release.

6   It is not surprising that it was Victor Turner (Turner and Turner 2011 [1978]) who introduced the idea of pilgrimage as liminal transformation into the scientific discourse.

7   On an analytical level, the halfway house was not a hierarchy-free space. Instead, it was structured according to prison hierarchies, depending heavily on the hierarchization of offense types. Men who had served a prison sentence for acts of violence and sexual offenses against women and children were at the bottom of the hierarchy. They were tolerated among the group of formerly incarcerated men, but they were not accepted. Furthermore, there were sharp categorical distinctions between voluntary workers, social workers, and "ex-cons," in which institutionalized hierarchies were manifested, placing formerly incarcerated men at the lower end.

8   Sociologist Arpad Szakolczai (2000, 215–227), in turn, conceptualizes modernity as a permanent state of liminality (cf. Thomasson 2009). Cultural anthropologist Sarah Nimführ (2016) describes migrant experiences in Malta as a permanently lived legal liminality.

9   Due to reasonable research pragmatic factors, especially in the landscape of German prisons and the access to them, Barbara Sierferle´s—and most other studies—focus on *men* released prison. It is also important to note that 94 percent of prisoners in Germany are male (e.g. Kinzig 2021). For further research in this field, it would be a relevant question how the liminal state after prison may be influenced by gender aspects.

10   Despite intersections, there is obviously an important difference between the "carceral experience" during lockdown and the "carceral reality" (Tschanz/Hernandez 2021, 143). Furthermore, it should be noted that the described experience might be very different for people who were imprisoned for a longer period and who often lose their social contacts during this time.

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Responses

Social Inequalities After Prison Release: The Aspiration of Future within Permanent Liminality

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In his introduction to "Prison Worlds," the cultural anthropologist and sociologist Didier Fassin states: "the whole of society […] decides who should go to prison, and why" (Fassin 2017, 26). Barbara Sieferle's study in the field of post-prison life illustrates that society also decides who sustains the status of 'ex-convict.' Drawing from intensive fieldwork and rich ethnographic data, Sieferle demonstrates vividly how the social context makes it impossible for men[9] released from prison to also release themselves from the insecure state of liminality.

By re-introducing Arnold van Gennep's concept of passage rituals and Victor Turner's frameworks of liminality, Sieferle convincingly argues that formerly incarcerated men live in a permanent state of liminality. The article shows in-depth how the "liminal status manifests itself on spatial, temporal, social and emotional levels" (Sieferle 2022, **p. 56**). One of the most striking findings is that the reason for such liminality is not due to a lack of engaging in passage rituals in the liminal phase after the prison release. In contrast to trial, detention, and incarceration, there are no commonly known or institutionalized passage rituals for release. Those released develop and perform individual rituals, such as release and housewarming parties, throwing away all things associated with prison, a pilgrim tour, or rituals around meaningful events like getting their own apartment or their first day at a new job.

Nevertheless, these rituals fail to set up a new social role, so the state of liminality continues. Sieferle's article makes an important point: the ongoing state of liminality is not based on a "wrong" ritual performance or emotional setting, "but rather on society's refusal to allow formerly incarcerated men the intended ritual outcome: integration into society" (ibid, **p. 67**). The main reason for this "moral exile" (Ibid, **p. 66**) lies in the ongoing stigmatizing of these men and the marginalizing label of 'ex-convicts' they are given, all of which overshadows any other possible social roles.

Sieferle's article makes a significant contribution to the study of permanent and involuntary forms of liminality that come without institutionalized rituals. This way, we do not only learn about the everyday life and struggle of men released from prison but also obtain further inspiration about possible ways to adopt and discuss Victor Turner's concept in the context of specific contemporary fields and related practices. In taking up theories in a fruitful way and reading them through empiric material, researchers do not have to adhere to them in every aspect but rather can discuss them. One aspect that caught my eye, was that according to Turner, persons in states of liminality are "no longer classified and not yet classified" (Turner 1967, 96) and Sieferle confirms this for men released from prison (cf. Sieferle 2022, **p. 57**). The question then is; whether one might argue that the label "ex-con" is already a lasting classification, even though it is not one they choose on their own.

Furthermore, the opening quotation of Fassin illustrates that social inequalities affect them much earlier before the prison release. Sieferle addresses her research partners as "men" and not as "ex-convicts" or similar. This reflexive use of attributions reminds us to think about ways of writing that do not reproduce stigmatizing labels.

Despite the specific stigma that people experience after prison, it seems noteworthy that permanent liminality could be described as a universal phenomenon. While one might extend the observation of permanent liminality to other fields and social groups, especially marginalized and vulnerable groups, some have argued that modernization processes led to a normalization or permanentization of liminality, often connected to "crises" (Thomassen 2009, 22 f.). The COVID-19 pandemic might be another example of widespread liminality during a continuing crisis.

Although my research does not focus primarily on *post*-prison life, a conversation with one of my research partners during my fieldwork occurred to me. When I first talked to him, a few months after he was released from prison, I asked him how it felt that he left prison during an immense change in everyday life due to the pandemic. His answer surprised me; despite all the obvious negative aspects of the pandemic in and outside of prison, he felt a strong relief that he could return slowly into life after prison. He met his friends and family one after another, and everyone was empathetic that he was not ready for crowded events.

The common experience of such liminality led to a sense of community in his case. He also assumed that, although the lockdown at home was not like prison

life, people might used it to gain a better idea of his carceral experience.[10] It would be interesting to find out if the research partners at the halfway house, where Sieferle did most of her fieldwork, also felt some sense of community throughout their common liminal experience.

In the introduction of her article, Sieferle states: "Conceptualizing prison release as a state of liminality is just one way of analytically approaching life after prison, but it is nonetheless a very fruitful one" (Sieferle 2022, 3). I agree and would like to add; from my research perspective on negotiations of digitalization scenarios in German prisons, the current concepts linked to future may also prove fruitful in these conversations. Of course, future orientation is already an essential part of processual passage rituals, especially in situations of liminality, with its striven transformation between statuses and imagined futures.

As Sieferle has shown in her previous research work, specific ways of dealing with the future arise in the liminal times after prison, particularly the use of hope as an active form of designing the future (c.f. Sieferle 2021). Reading Sieferle's latest article not only reminded me of the importance of studying social inequalities from an anthropological, actor-centred perspective, but also represented potential courses of study on unequal futures.

While understanding "future as a cultural fact" (Appadurai 2013) was not always a central tenet of cultural anthropology, anthropological engagement with future has grown exponentially with different global crises since the 2000s (Bryant & Knight 2019, 9). It is worth mentioning that we should not only analyze the temporal elements of the social but also social elements of time: according to Appadurai

"'the capacity to aspire' is unequally distributed" (Appadurai 2013, 289). Consequently, not only the realisation of future plans but even the imagination and aspiration of a different future depends on your social status.

Considering current practices of future-making, the sociologist Andreas Reckwitz recognizes a "room of uncertainties" in which open positive scenarios are no longer considered, but rather the avoidance of negative conditions are central (Reckwitz 2016, 130). While the future of formerly incarcerated people is deeply affected by their past, it is no coincidence that their hopes concentrate on 'modest' goals in the near future, like finding a job, an apartment, or a partnership. As European ethnologist Stefan Wellgraf has shown in his example of German secondary schools, people who experience economic and social insecurity aspire to these small goals of a 'normal biography', in contrast to bourgeois aspirations of a 'unique lifestyle' which devalues the former (Wellgraf 2019).

Men released from prison experience daily barriers and constant liminality, yet their ongoing hopes can be connected to what the cultural theorist Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011). Cruel optimism takes place among precarious work and life conditions. Berlant asks, "why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies – say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work – when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?" (Berlant 2011, 2). Cultural anthropologists have much to offer in the study the possibilities and obstacles to aspiring futures in the field of post-prison life. Such study might ask questions like;

how may we interpret hopes and optimisms during permanent liminality and crisis? Are these hopes and optimisms "cruel," or are they essential resources for socially excluded actors to use in shaping their futures and initiating transformation?

Barbara Sieferle´s article gives us rare insights into the lived experiences and practices of men released from prison, and provides an analysis, more generally, of the social context linked to these observations. Her research contributes to the use of liminality theory in the field of post-prison ethnography. Furthermore, it shifts the focus of ritual theory from only "successful" rituals to the consequences of rituals "failing." Ultimately, her work makes us aware of the marginalization of people released from prison. Her article raises important questions for the reader on how the whole of society could possibly act in a more inclusive and less stigmatizing way—and to aspire different futures.

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