When I first arrived with my audio recorder to ask prisoners about disenfranchisement, the officials were incredulous. ‘You want to ask about politics? These guys don’t care about voting. Your interviews won’t last 5 minutes’. Ah, but people do care about voting – especially people who have been told they cannot vote. To be sure, many had never voted and many would never have the opportunity to do so. Nevertheless, they had wide-ranging political opinions and experiences, so those hasty interviews turned into much longer conversations.

But prison officials were not the only sceptics. The initial response from academics was downright discouraging. Criminologists could not imagine how political rights would be salient to US prisoners, when they had so many other pressing material needs. To be fair, law professors viewed the topic as ‘interesting’, but only insofar as it engaged some rather esoteric and narrowly framed philosophical and legal questions. And, to my great surprise, political scientists and sociologists seemed completely uninterested in disenfranchisement. Many dismissed voting as a ‘thin’ form of political participation – something hardly worth mentioning these days. Real political engagement, for these scholars, meant activism and movement participation.

Cormac Behan knows better than that. Long before scholars like Jeff Manza and I took up felon disenfranchisement in Locked Out, Cormac had been teaching political education in Irish prisons. I cannot overemphasise the importance of this experience – and the depth that it brings to Citizen Convicts. Frankly, too much of the scholarly work on disenfranchisement has a lamentable ‘armchair’ quality. That is, it seems to have been written at great remove from those affected by the practice.

Just as certain themes seem to inspire more than their share of bad poetry – take moonflowers, for example – so too, the topic of felon disenfranchisement seems to inspire a lot of untethered bloviating: untethered because the work is not grounded in concrete empirical referents; bloviating because the platitudes are too easy, the metaphors too obvious.
One might see little harm in trotting out naïve platitudes about disenfranchisement, without ever engaging the people who have lost or regained that right. Yet such authors tend to make equally untethered assumptions about the actual human beings subject to disenfranchisement, treating them as some sort of strange and exotic species. Depending on the political sensibilities of the writer, they might be demonised as brutes, sentimentalised as harmless victims or romanticised as revolutionaries.

*Citizen Convicts*, in contrast, offers a sharp and cogent presentation of the actual political behaviour of real people in prisons. But it does more than that. After a balanced discussion of the rationale for and against felon disenfranchisement, Doctor Behan presents a textured analysis of case studies in South Africa, Israel, Australia and Canada, as well as the United States and the United Kingdom. This offers an excellent framing for the detailed and authoritative analysis of the fascinating case of the Republic of Ireland. In both the Republic and in Northern Ireland, prisoners and former prisoners have long played an exceptionally visible and pivotal part in political life.

Two eye-opening empirical chapters come next: results of the first comprehensive survey about prisoners’ political life, and a qualitative presentation of in-depth interviews with 50 prisoners. We learn that about 10 per cent of eligible prisoners cast ballots in 2007 and that they tended to favour Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and the Green Party. Rates of voting and volunteering within prison are significantly higher, however, both exceeding 50 per cent among interview participants. The next chapter broadens the scope of analysis to include other forms of civic engagement and participation, inside and outside prison walls. Finally, the book concludes by making a strong case for viewing prisoners as citizens and creating the space needed for their more active participation.

Although prisoners may have a more complicated relationship with the state than other groups, their political views and experiences are not all that dissimilar from those of your friends and neighbours. Which issues are most important to them? Certainly not crime and punishment. *Citizen Convicts* reveals that they were far more likely to list the health service, the economy and political corruption as the most important political issue. Here and throughout, we learn precisely how prisoners remain citizens while incarcerated – and how we cannot assume the roles they play as prisoners trump or even dominate their political identities and behaviours.

Some prison walls are real, but others are illusory. I invite you to engage with Cormac Behan’s work and to reflect on its implications...
for the conceptual wall dividing ‘prisoner’ and ‘citizen’ in public consciousness.

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