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The Moral Economy of the Penal Crowd: The Microhistory of a Pre-War Prison Strike

Alex Tepperman 

Department of Criminal Justice, University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, MB R3B 2E9, Canada;
a.tepperman@uwinnipeg.ca

Abstract

Historical discussions regarding labour organizing within American prisons tend to focus on the period stretching from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, framing those years as both the origin and apex of nationalized and organized inmate-led strikes behind bars. This focus is partly due to a counter-historical assumption that the rebellions of previous eras were primarily focused on “good housekeeping” and were not political in nature. This article challenges ongoing scholarly assumptions that incarcerated Americans were ever pre-political, providing a microhistorical account of the first significant labour unrest at New York’s Attica State Prison in 1932. Through an analysis of the strike’s leadership structure, this paper claims that there is no reason to believe that incarcerated Americans lacked political identities prior to their contact with conscientious objectors, Marxist revolutionaries, and other educated ideologues. Rather, this article contends that the Depression-era Jewish and Italian inmates who led the 1932 Attica strike carried into the prison their own form of political pragmatism, drawn from their experiences operating within interwar-era organized crime syndicates. While this was not a universal experience among incarcerated people, it is indicative of the notion that interwar-era strikes throughout the country surely drew from their own local, informal political norms. This paper concludes that it is unlikely any penal rebellion could exist outside of politics and that historians of prison rebellions must be more willing to look for indirect indicators of political identities that naturally emerge from the struggles of everyday life.



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1. Introduction

On 6 December 1932, New York’s Attica State Prison had its first brush with a prolonged act of coordinated inmate resistance. That afternoon, a group of men who had recently arrived from Sing Sing Prison, an institution located just an hour from Manhattan, refused to do the pick-and-shovel-based work assigned to them by Warden William Hunt and Principal Keeper Robert Kirby. Their refusal was in protest of their recent transfer from Sing Sing to Attica, which sent them hundreds of miles northwest and hours away from their families and familiars. The men met Hunt and Kirby’s demands with violence toward Douglas Gaynor, the only black inmate present at the worksite, attacking the twenty-two-year-old driver from New Jersey in a pique of racial violence that was not only indicative of the participants’ desires to disrupt labour, but was also a reflection of the profound racism that has defined much of American penal history.¹ While guards were quick to shuttle off the two primary instigators of this act of violence, their absence did not effectively stanch the inmates’ tempers.²

Around nine o'clock that night, several dozen men began "yammering"—shouting, cat calling, and hissing at guards from their cells—as a means of disrupting the peace. Eight of them went so far as to flood their cells by breaking their sinks and tearing out the plumbing. The next day, administrators responded to the preceding day's row by rounding up 18 ringleaders who had organized the strike and shipping them off to Clinton Prison (colloquially referred to as "Little Siberia"), a maximum-security institution located near the Vermont border in the remote village of Dannemora.³ It was a predictable outcome that, in retrospect, seemed almost destined to fail. Given that the state of New York had a wealth of mechanisms in place to ensure the stability of the penal order, why did the group engage in such a seemingly chaotic and doomed enterprise?

One can make better sense of the 1932 Attica uprising by placing it within its historical context, but context alone cannot explain its peculiar form. While the period stretching from the end of World War One to the beginning of World War Two was one of extraordinary political tumult behind bars, the Attica strike featured a number of idiosyncrasies that provided it with some unique qualities. Foremost, the sheer ineffectiveness of the exercise is remarkable, as the riot was a complete practical failure when it came to the matter of bettering their living conditions. The strike action seemed almost impromptu, mixing a work stoppage with racialized violence, juvenile heckling, and wanton property destruction in such a way that the effort likely came off as inarticulate to both prison administrators and the press. This was certainly not the only such violent explosion to subsume an American penitentiary during this period. For the most part, however, the most-widely-reported prison strikes of the time, such as those at New York's Auburn Prison in 1929 or Ohio Penitentiary in 1932, were not only much larger, involving hundreds or thousands of participants, but they also featured formal organizing bodies and mechanisms for negotiation. The rebellion described in this article was shambolic and it is unclear as to how much time the leaders of this effort spent planning or how they envisioned their violence and vandalism would yield positive changes to their work duties or a return to Sing Sing Prison.

Secondly, though Attica is now synonymous with grassroots-level radical rebellion, it was a comparatively unlikely site for prisoner objections to material conditions at the time. While the aforementioned Ohio prisoners launched their efforts in the wake of a fire that both killed 322 residents and made the prison essentially uninhabitable for months, one could hardly have asked for more hospitable living conditions than those found at Attica. Opened just one year prior to the strike, the state of New York constructed Attica as a response to damning findings in the 1929 Wickersham Commission report, which had concluded that the state's penitentiaries were inhumane in their crowding and lacked proper upkeep. At great cost, the state of New York built Attica Prison as a more-enlightened, humane form of incarceration. In 1931, anticipating the prison's opening, the *New York Times* even characterized Attica as a "convict's paradise," wherein each prisoner had his own private cell, spring bed, and radio.⁴ This is not to say, of course, that conditions in Attica were luxurious or comfortable, but only that Attica was home to the most-favourable—or least-unfavourable—living conditions for a long-term prisoner in New York State.

Thirdly, the strike effort was atypical due to the ethnic makeup of the strikers, especially when it came to their leadership. Demographically, New York City Jews made up the plurality of the eighteen strike "ringleaders," and they served as that group's ostensible coordinators. Given the concurrent relationship of Jews to American criminal justice, this was an unintuitive group structure. In 1931, the *American Jewish Yearbook*, which has tracked demographic changes in American Jewish populations since the turn of the twentieth century, published its best estimates relating to incarceration. While they noted

Jews made up approximately 3.4% of the nation's total population and 16% of New York State residents, they only made up 1.7% of the carceral population and 10.3% of those held in New York prisons (Linfield 1931, p. 206). These estimates, while inexact, align with other findings relating to Jewish rates of incarceration (Bonger 1943; Rosenberg and Weinfeld 1993) and are a reminder that, despite the high concentration of Jews living in New York, the prisons of that state have always been overwhelmingly populated by non-Jews. For that reason, any historical attempt to understand a secular Depression-era political effort led by Jews requires careful analysis.

Finally, the Jewish inmates who led this effort were violent criminals, which made them unique even among incarcerated Jews. Between 1880 and 1945, approximately two-thirds of Jews committed to Sing Sing Prison, which served as the primary penitentiary for the New York City area, were sentenced for property crimes such as larceny, burglary, or forgery (Arons 2008). The four Jews involved in the Attica strike, however, were all serving robbery sentences, an unlikely coincidence given that robbery was the primary offence of just 12.6% of those Jews sent to Sing Sing (Arons 2008, p. 302). Robbery convictions spiked during the Great Depression, however, and the Jewish organizers under consideration were embedded in the organized crime networks of New York City, a group whose criminal enterprises have received significant scholarly attention (Block 1980; Rockaway 2000; Joselit 1983; Davis 2012), but who have received little meaningful attention either as a group with strong political convictions or as one engaged in meaningful organizing within the prison.

These peculiarities—seeming disorganization, the prison's newness, and leadership by Jews incarcerated for violent crimes—are indicative of how this group deviates from not only the most-common scholarly constructions of historical penal radicalism (Heatherton 2014; Berger and Losier 2018; Tepperman 2020), but are also in opposition to historical accounts of turn-of-the-century collective bargainers among Jewish New Yorkers, who have long existed within the historiography as a radical, heroic group (Foner 1950; Michels 2005; Katz 2011). This discontinuity provides scholars with an opportunity to rethink academic approaches to the history of labour-focused penal resistance in the United States.

Overwhelmingly, historians working on the subject of prison strikes tend to centre on anarchist, socialist, Black nationalist, anti-war, and other identifiably radical peoples, implicitly accepting an assumption borne of mid-century Marxist literature that these radicals were at the vanguard of a new political mentality. Such a notion relies on the supposition there existed a non-ideological form of grassroots radical resistance prior to the enlightenment of the proletarians, an assumption that ultimately treats pre-World War Two American prison populations as having a similar political consciousness to feudal serfs or chattel slaves. Eric Hobsbawm first popularized this view of "pre-political" radicalism in his classic study *Primitive Rebels*, using that label to characterize social movements prior to the widespread adoption of socialistic and communistic philosophies. He pointed to the efforts of highwaymen and banditos, remarking that they functioned "before the poor. . .reached political consciousness or acquired more effective methods of social agitation" (Hobsbawm 1959, p. 23). While Hobsbawm's research did much to advance scholarship on the social history of power and resistance, generations of scholarship on everyday resistance have since obliterated the concept of non-ideological antiauthoritarian rebels.

This article revisits the 1932 Attica strike as a means of reimagining the form and function of labour politics in an American penal environment that scholars have long treated as either apolitical or extremely primitive in its politicization. It approaches a microhistorical study of Depression-era incarcerated Americans by reconsidering the ways in which classic works focused on resistance under chattel slavery (see Genovese 2011; Lepore 2006); feudal peasantry (see Hilton 1973; Gately et al. 1971); settler colonialism (see Wolf 1969; Guha 1983); or any other severely hierarchical system of power (also see

[Linebaugh and Rediker 2000](#); [Scott 1985](#)) might aid scholars in reappraising the meaning of labour strife within the pre-1950s American prison. Repositioning the idea of “politics” through the lens of subaltern studies allows modern scholars to better understand many historical “prison riots” as something altogether more radical and agentic. By treating Depression-era incarcerated populations with the same complexity as we afford Indian peasants under the British Raj, we are able to reimagine “riots” as wildcat strikes—that is, organized refusals to work based on articulable demands for material change despite no contractual assurance of better conditions.

This article’s framing challenges the persistent claim that incarcerated Americans did not have a political identity until civil rights-oriented actors imported one from the free world. Rather, prison strikes have stemmed from some ideology that emerged from tangled intersections of mentality and identity, whether actions were on behalf of the greater good of a broad swath of the population or represented just a few dozen people affiliated along racial, ethnic, or classed lines. That group members may have contradictory, confused, or competing motivations and affiliations by no means precludes them from being political actors, as this is no less the case within “big tent” political parties, in which a bricolage of interest groups coalesce around the desire for temporary power.

2. Microhistory, or Seeing More with Less

As a historical event that does not fit neatly within present-day expectations of penal rioting’s form and function, the 1932 Attica strike serves as a “normal exception” that demonstrates a gap between the mental worlds of the past and present. For that reason, it is a strong basis for microhistorical investigation. Microhistorians seek out any historical event that appears strange or unexplainable to modern audiences but does not register as especially strange or peculiar to the historical actors themselves. This story of a multi-ethnic coalition, led by a group of Jewish violent criminals who engaged in an unprovoked violent rebellion at America’s least-degraded penitentiary, is strange to modern readers on its face, yet it received brief and dispassionate coverage from both prison officials and news reports. This discontinuity suggests that the event was not especially remarkable to people at the time, even as it does not align with contemporary expectations of the form and function of interwar prison strikes. It is the goal of this article to locate important historical truths about work and political identity within the prison that are underrepresented in the literature by exploring the conceptual space between then and now.

As is the supposition of all microhistorical research, this article works from the belief that certain elements of historical phenomena are most-observable on the micro level. This is certainly true of revolutionary attitudes, as the last century of social and cultural history have made increasingly clear that major societal changes, epochal events, and global movements are constructed of accumulated facts observable at each of the micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis. Much as the life of a single European vassal can provide a historian information about feudalism that is invisible at the macro level, and a national portrait of manorialism says much that is invisible at the micro level, the political history of incarcerated Americans has remained unexplored due to the fact that scholars overwhelmingly look at convict labour through the lens of the meso ([McLennan 2008](#); [Hindus 1980](#); [Lichtenstein 1996](#)) and only rarely consider the micro ([Goldsmith 1997](#)). By looking at penal labour politics at their lowest level, however, scholars gain the opportunity to revisit their assumptions and to reimagine labour conflict and the body within the historical prison.

While this article is not about the Jewish-American experience with incarceration, *per se*, it does attempt to pair insights on prison labour with a number of original findings on that understudied population. Given the atomized nature of Jewish life in America,

wherein an already-diasporic population that migrated *en masse* across the Western world between the 1880s and 1920s ended up living as small pocket communities within enormous, diverse metropolises, it is remarkably challenging to capture the broad shape of Jewish life, much less Jewish activism within the historical prison. This is an important lacuna, however, as American Jews have played a disproportionate role in radical labour politics, intercultural organizing, and political agitation (Brossat et al. 2016; Michels 2012; Zimmer 2015; Baigell 2015) and the story of penal radicalism misses much without considering Jewish involvement. Stories such as the one described in this paper are critical to understanding the role of Jews as both labourers and agitators within the American prison.

3. Penal Radicalism Prior to the Civil Rights Era

The 1932 Attica riot has never received significant attention, as contemporary observers did not treat it as either tangibly or symbolically important, addressing it only as part of the general tumult of the era. It has also not received a historical reappraisal, even as other uprisings from similar states and time periods have (Bright 1996; McLennan 2008). This is likely due to the fact that the 1932 uprising does not immediately fit the standard historiographical narrative about the evolution of the Prisoners' Rights Movement. Rather, on its face, it fits into a competing narrative about pre-war prison uprisings as being ad hoc, apolitical efforts.

Since the 1970s, discussions of prison strikes and uprisings as liberatory political acts have tended to posit a direct connection between carceral resistance and major court decisions such as *Cooper v. Pate* (1964) and *Sostre v. Rockefeller* (1970), both of which weakened the totalizing power of the state and challenged the notion that American prison inmates existed in a state of "civil death" (see Cummins 1994; Barker 2009; Thompson 2017; Jacobs 1980; Berger 2014; Chase 2019). While the court decisions that enshrined the civil rights of incarcerated people were undeniably a critical part of this effort, few would claim that the "Prisoners' Rights Movement" was simply a direct pursuit of formal rights. Scholars mostly view it as a complex pastiche of local and national political campaigns over decades, with Marie Gottschalk describing the movement as encompassing "the broader effort by a variety of groups and organizations from roughly the 1950s to the early 1980s to redefine the moral, political, economic, and legal status of defendants and offenders in democratic societies through a range of activities, including lawsuits, legislation, demonstrations, strikes, riots, and calls for revolution" (Gottschalk 2006, pp. 165–66). Unfortunately, while this definition is very helpful and fairly sweeping on its face, it is more limited in its utility than the author may have intended, yoking the movement to a tight chronological window connecting the Eisenhower and Reagan administrations. Given that scholarship on the Civil Rights movement has consistently pushed efforts toward racial equality far back into the nineteenth century (Hahn 2003; Masur 2021; Penningroth 2024), the notion that any "rights revolution" could fit within the tight chronology of a few decades is unlikely.

Academic scholarship on prison rebellions also tends to position the period stretching from 1950 to 1954 as a proverbial dress rehearsal for the 1960s, noting how a wave of violent uprisings in Michigan, Massachusetts, Washington, New Mexico, Missouri and elsewhere augured the more-important strike efforts of the 1960s and 1970s (Gottschalk 2006; Berkman 1979, p. 36). Scholars are certainly aware of earlier penal rebellions, and they will occasionally acknowledge important pre-war radical figures who focused on penal conditions such as Frank Tannenbaum, Thomas Mott Osborne, H.L. Mencken, Jack London, or Robert Eliot Burns. Histories of penal radicalism very rarely position early-century uprisings or radical figures near or at the core of the struggle for prisoners' rights, however. For the most part, scholars discuss pre-1950s uprisings as either the manifestation of radical politics imported by educated outsiders during times of conflict (Gottschalk 2006, p. 171;

King 2007) or as small, makeshift coalitions of anarchists, communists, socialists, and Black nationalists who were incarcerated for their overt and strenuous opposition to various forms of injustice (Heatheron 2014; Berger and Losier 2018).

Historians of American incarceration regularly make the claims that pre-1960s disturbances were “spontaneous,” with little strategy or organization, and that they revolved around mere “housekeeping demands” rather than staking their resistance in foundational questions about the legitimacy of the system itself (McLennan 2008; Berkman 1979, pp. 36, 39; Gottschalk 2006, p. 171). The presumption that rebellion within prisons must be both totally conscious and articulable through the explicit language of revolution if we are to see it as properly “political” ultimately forces historical incarcerated populations into positions of inarticularity. Such a view is wholly out of keeping with a half-century of postcolonial scholarship that has sought to free historical actors from an academic presupposition that subjugated populations are unable to speak. From the view of a scholar of subalternity, the logic so often applied to the history of American prison uprisings would also have framed the Stono Rebellion as “spontaneous” and outside of the larger discussion of American chattel slavery. That the 1739 rebellion focused *only* on the immediate needs and desires of a small compact of South Carolina slaves as they attempted to escape bondage, rather than on that group’s articulated desire to challenge the entire system of American slavery, does not preclude it from being a profoundly political action.

Subaltern studies offer a valuable perspective with which we might reimagine the history of prisoners’ rights, first and foremost by rejecting the notion that any prison uprising *may* be either apolitical or spontaneous. As the historian Ranajit Guha has suggested, the immense danger and potential loss of rebelling against hegemonic conditions is precisely what precludes it from being apolitical, even in the absence of an articulable ideology (Lupsha 1981, pp. 4–9). Given the average American prison’s immense panoptic power and capacity for violence, it is unreasonable to claim that incarcerated peoples have ever rebelled with an apolitical spirit, given the titanic personal and collective costs of failure.

This article treats American prison rebellions as similar in spirit to the acts of peasants or serfs who grounded their efforts in shared grievances, beliefs, and experiences, even if they had no obvious political or organizational framework at the outset of their efforts. It also wholly rejects the notion that a prison rebellion can be “spontaneous.” To quote Antonio Gramsci, “‘Pure’ spontaneity does not exist in history. . . . In the ‘most spontaneous’ movement it is simply the case that the elements of ‘conscious leadership’” cannot be checked, have left no reliable document” (Gramsci 1992, p. 196). To that end, this article is largely a discussion of the ways in which supposedly apolitical actors attempted to enforce the moral economy of incarceration, even as such riots were doomed to fail in destabilizing New York State’s vast penal apparatus.

4. Doing Time in the Interwar Era

4.1. Jewish Representation in the Depression-Era Big House

The six decades preceding America’s involvement in the Second World War were a time of remarkable change for Jews across the world. Millions migrated from Eastern Europe to the United States between the start of a rash of anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia in 1881 and the passage of the 1924 Immigration Act, which signalled the end of “open door” immigration into the United States. By World War One, New York City was home to one of the largest Jewish populations in the world, receiving nearly half of all Jewish immigrants to America.

Whereas Jews never even reached 4% of the total American population, they composed more than 15% of New Yorkers by 1917 (Linfield 1928, pp. 102–13). This incredible concentration found some representation within criminal justice, as 16.1% of the residents

at Sing Sing Prison were Jews by the 1910s, up from 10.0% in the 1900s. In Auburn Prison, which largely served the state's secondary industrial hubs such as Buffalo and Syracuse, the Jewish population rose from 6.83% in 1908 to 8.93% in 1921. These trends levelled off somewhat by the Great Depression, with Sing Sing's Jewish population dropping to 14.9% in the 1920s and 10.3% in the 1930s. The shifts were not unique to Jews, however, as they paired with proportionately large drops among "white ethnic" immigrants from Italy, Greece, and other Eastern and Southern European states, along with massive increases in the number of Black prisoners, stemming from the radical demographic shift brought about by the Great Migration (see Table 1).⁵ Even as Jewish penal representation declined, however, they maintained a significant presence in New York penitentiaries through the 1930s, never dropping below one-tenth of New York's inmates despite never constituting more than one-fiftieth of inmates outside of New York (see Arons 2008; Linfield 1931).⁶

Table 1. New York state prison populations by race and religion, 1933.

State Prison	Residents	White	Black	Catholic	Jewish
Sing Sing	1088	77.9	21.6	52.6	10.7
Auburn	1810	89.3	10.3	47.5	2.4
Attica	963	74.9	24.8	55.5	9.4
Clinton	1510	83.2	16.4	57.5	6.4
Elmira	1206	90.5	9.1	60.6	7.3
Great Meadow	1103	76.8	22.9	51.1	9.7

Data drawn from the Cox et al. (1933).

Jewish populations were particularly robust within Sing Sing Prison and Attica Penitentiary. In 1933, the *Handbook of American Corrections* published its first overview of Attica, which had opened a year earlier, and found that the prison was home to 963 residents as of the first of July. The population was approximately three-quarters White and one-quarter Black and, in terms of religious practice, nearly one-tenth (9.48%) of residents were Jewish whereas the majority (55.63%) were Catholics who largely came from Italian and Irish backgrounds (Cox et al. 1933, pp. 594–97). As the prison's demographic makeup—particularly its small number of White Protestant inmates—suggests, it was an institution that primarily served the New York City area. While it was located in Western New York, Attica did not draw its population from Buffalo, Rochester, and nearby cities, but instead functioned as a proto-supermax for many of the New York City-based dangerous offenders who would have previously inhabited Sing Sing.

Because New York's Bureau of Prisons maintained uneven records with no eye toward longevity, it is remarkably difficult to meaningfully track the movement of inmates between prisons and the nature of their behaviours within those institutions. Much of the micro-level information employed in this study exists only in the form of brief comments or marginalia in Auburn Prison inmate files.⁷ Auburn was unique for including one-sentence descriptions of individual acts of misconduct directly on prisoner's primary records, much in the same fashion as federal penitentiaries did. Only in reading hundreds of these micro narratives can one see a hazy outline of day-to-day rebellion, with administrators frequently referring to machine breaking, shouting, rudeness, laziness, and willful obstruction in such a way that a general trend of "resistance" takes shape over time. This is especially true for those serving sentences for robbery, as a sample of 153 non-Jewish men serving robbery convictions in Auburn showed 27 (17.7%) engaged in some form of workplace agitation, the most common acts being various forms of lollygagging, chronic lateness, work slowdowns, and rudeness. Of this group, who were overwhelmingly born in either New York City, Italy, or the Southeastern United States, seven attempted to organize coordinated efforts (including strikes) while one man engaged in machine breaking.

While the sample's non-Jewish robbers were certainly disruptive, Auburn's Jewish robbers were remarkably combative. Primarily born in Russia or New York City, nearly one-third of Auburn Jews (31.1%) were incarcerated for robbery and, of those 47 men, 18 (38.3%) received punishment for some sort of workplace disturbance. Ten engaged in general resistance, five were actively engaged in labour organizing of some sort, and three men undertook machine breaking. Given that this group engaged in workplace resistance at double the rates of non-Jewish robbers, it is perhaps unsurprising that four of those 47 became leaders of the 6 December 1932 rebellion.

4.2. The Ethnic Bond of Robbery

Based on the records of two strike participants, Eli "Pickles" Gersewitz and Nick Messina, it seems that the de facto head of the uprising was one Irving Mazzer. In describing the configuration of the 18 striker collective, Auburn administrators said of Gersewitz that he was "one of Mazzer's gang. Does just what Mazzer tells him; also going on strike" while saying of Messina that he "follows Mazzer's instructions."⁸ Accepting the possibility that these comments may be incorrect and simply the product of an administrative gaze that fundamentally misunderstood the nature of the rebel group, it does appear likely that Mazzer *was* the leader and that this was an obvious fact to outsiders. This is not to say that the group was severely hierarchical, as it may easily have been more collaborative than administrators understood, but an analysis of Mazzer's criminal and institutional history suggests he was an understandable intermediary between the Russian Jews and Italian Catholics who spearheaded this effort (see Table 2).

Table 2. Russian-Jewish and Italian-Catholic Confederates in Attica's 1932 rebellion.

Name	Age	Offence	Birthplace	Mother/Father Birthplaces	Religion
Irving Mazzer	23	Robbery	Russia	Russia/Russia	Jewish
Eli Gersewitz	18	Robbery	NYC	Russia/Russia	Jewish
Samuel Mihalstein	20	Robbery	NYC	Russia/Russia	Jewish
Arnold Shields	22	Robbery	NYC	Russia/USA	Jewish
Frank Abbandando	23	Assault	NYC	Italy/Italy	Catholic
Nick Messina	20	Att. Robbery	Utica, NY	Italy/Italy	Catholic
Amiello De Martino	24	Robbery	NYC	Italy/USA	Catholic

While many facts about Irving Mazzer's life are unclear today, he was subject to enough documentation that one can piece together a broad sense of his criminal career. Born in Russia in 1898, the Mazzers settled down in 1908 at Port Chester, a small community in Westchester County that served as a bedroom community for New York City. In 1918, Irving reported to the Selective Service System that he was a shipping clerk for Bell Garment Company in Manhattan, but the fact that he was also involved with organized crime during those years offers some reason to doubt the veracity of this claim.⁹ By early 1922, Mazzer had moved to the Williamsburg neighbourhood of Brooklyn and operated under the alias Jacob Bernstein. According to newspapers of the time, Mazzer and his Italian-American co-conspirator Salvatore Risafi led a group of five masked men in a failed nighttime robbery on the night of January 31 that ultimately landed all five men in prison. The group had held up 11 men who were playing cards for money at a restaurant in Midtown Manhattan, absconding with just \$12 for their efforts. Police quickly found Mazzer and Risafi and, on February 16, the men were arraigned on robbery charges at Jefferson Market courthouse. They each received a twenty-five-year prison sentence, as each was a repeat offender.¹⁰

4.3. Mazzer's Confederates

Unlike Mazzer, Eli Gersewitz was born in New York City, his family having immigrated from Russia a decade prior. Gersewitz's criminal career first appears in the historical record with a *New York Daily News* report in 1927. On 28 December, police brought in Henry Sherman and Gersewitz, who was just seventeen years old at the time, for stealing the overcoat of a man whilst that man attended a cabaret.¹¹ The fallout of this act could not have been very severe, as Gersewitz was free within a few months and, by the end of the year, was again hunted by the police as a member of Brooklyn's "Little Augie" gang. That April, Gersewitz found himself back in prison after he and Sherman held up a drug store in Manhattan. That the drug store owner, Bernard Davis, was also the man whose coat the pair had stolen months earlier gives this story critical context, suggesting that this may have been part of broader criminal operations. The *Brooklyn Daily Times* reported that Gersewitz and Sherman were "known to the police as drug peddlers and drug users" and, despite this being the first felony conviction for each man, the pair received sentences of 15-to-30 years in state prison.¹² Remarkably, the state not only granted Gersewitz parole in 1934 after just six years of incarceration, but it did so despite his participation in the 1932 strike, an act that surely could not have contributed to his "good time."

Arnold Shields and Samuel Muhlstein were the other two Jewish strike participants, though the amount each man served in a leadership role is unclear. Auburn administrators reported on Shields as "going on strike and participating in General disturbance on Gallery. . . by shouting from his cell and using vile language." Shields was reportedly "prison wise" by the early 1930s, having served two previous convictions in 1930 at the Westchester County Penitentiary and New York City Workhouse. In March 1932, Shields and his co-conspirator Michael Desandro attempted to rob an undercover prohibition agent at a hotel room in the Manhattan Towers. At 26 and 24, respectively, Shields and Desandro were convicted of robbery, assault, and a number of drug-related offences, and were handed fifteen-year sentences.¹³ For his part, Muhlstein landed in prison in 1931 following a failed attempt to rob the home Bernice Huston Leonard, the daughter of New York Yankees owner Tillinghast L. Huston and wife of Walter Leonard, Muhlstein's former high school English teacher.¹⁴

The Italians involved in this effort seemed primarily connected to each other by their heritage and language, whereas they were tied to the Jewish strikers by way of their criminal enterprises. The general public was already familiar with one striker, Frank Abbando, who in 1932 was a well-known enforcer for the famous Jewish-Italian crime syndicate Murder Inc. Abbando had also recently made news when a New York judge acquitted him and his two Jewish co-conspirators, Harry Strauss and the famous mobster Abe Reles, for the murder of two competing Jewish gangsters, Irving and Meyer Shapiro.¹⁵ Abbando was unique among the Italian strike leaders in that he was the only one with clear connections to organized crime.

Nick Messina was, like Abbando, an American born to Italian parents and was intertwined with Jewish co-conspirators, although his criminal activities took on a far different character. Messina was not from New York City, having spent his early life upstate in Utica. In 1929, he pleaded guilty to the burglary of two trucks and was sent to Clinton Prison at the age of just seventeen. By 1932, he had re-offended with the help of a Jew, Henry Kohn, as they held a Bronx milkman at gunpoint for the purposes of robbing him of \$130.30, and it was this offence that brought him to Attica.¹⁶

The final Italian striker, Aniello De Martino, was something of an outlier. He was similar to the others in being a robber, as the 24-year-old came to prison after joining two teenagers in knocking over a delicatessen in Queens of \$48.75. However, De Martino had moved with his parents to the United States from Italy at the age of seventeen and

knew very little English. He was also not connected to organized crime, indicating to Sing Sing administrators that he committed the robbery because he was “out of work so took a chance on getting money this way.”¹⁷ This was a common story in the files of Depression-era Sing Sing Prison inmates.

De Martino and Muhlstein aside, the reappearing Jewish-Italian criminal relationship in these stories is surely less an example of progressive multiculturalism than a broad indicator of the willingness of “white ethnics” to cooperate in common cause when combating financial distress. It is also instructive of how these men were able to develop connections across ethnic lines during a period of extreme nativism, antisemitism, and anti-Catholicism. It does not necessarily suggest that the Attica strike was merely due to the efforts of a Jewish and Italian Catholic minority within the coalition, however, as the exact dynamics of the group are lost to time, but it does strongly suggest that the Jewish-Italian Catholic coalition was real and provides a promising window through which modern scholars might better understand what yoked these men in common cause.

The other obvious link connecting this group of men was their shared experience with the violence of urban life in Depression-era America. The group was a coalition of very young, white men from urban areas who had turned to violence in a period of economic crisis. These connective threads fall outside of the neat linkages offered by racial and ethnic affiliation, but they shared in profound hardship that, as the sociologist Kai Erikson has shown, can itself produce strong bonds within communities of suffering (Erikson 1994). One need not dig deeply to see how anomic despair and experiences with state violence might have pushed the non-Italians and non-Jews toward cooperating in the strike. William Bitus, the youngest participant at just sixteen years old, watched as New York police crippled one of his co-conspirators and killed another with a gunshot to the back. Henry Griminger joined as someone wholly out of place at Attica, having been sent there from the State Insane Asylum despite a diagnosis of “prison psychosis” by a “lunacy commission.” Strike participant and known gangster Victor Patterson was in his sixth year in state prison on a murder conviction for which a different man—John Maxwell, executed at Sing Sing Prison in 1927—had already confessed.¹⁸ Almost all of the strike’s participants came to Attica with stories of profound economic and emotional challenges that pushed them toward violent crime.

Though this article does not have the space or proclivity to reconstruct each of the eighteen strike members’ life histories, even a brief overview of their respective interactions with the brutal machinery of the American state gestures toward why this group may have been able to make connections through shared alienation. Accordingly, this article’s primary focus on Irving Mazzer, his fellow Jewish rebels, and their Italian confederates is by no means an attempt to tell the entire story of the many figurational connections that set this group into common cause. Rather, it is only an attempt to speak to what may have brought a plurality of the strikers under the leadership of Mazzer, and what that says about the nature of organizing within the interwar American prison.

5. Organized Crime and Ethnic Pluralism

5.1. *The Rational Thug*

At first glance, all of the principal Jewish actors in this rebellion appear as minor figures within the broader social ecology of New York City crime. On a macro scale, however, these men were almost all functionaries of enormous criminal enterprises that prepared them to both push against normative economic attitudes and lean into cross-cultural cooperation whenever it was profitable. Most of the men involved in the 1932 insurrection had engaged in crime with ethnic “others,” either through informal neighbourhood connections or through formal relationships within New York City’s vast organized crime syndicates. In

1922, Irving Mazzer robbed Coney Island's Atlantic and Pacific Grocery Store as part of a quintet comprising two Jews and three Italians.¹⁹ In 1932, Arnold Shields was arrested alongside Michael Desando, whose parents had moved to the Bronx earlier in the century from Calabria, Italy.²⁰ And as Abbando had worked with the famous Jewish gangster Abe Reles, Eli Gersewitz spent years as a functionary of the famed Italian-American gangster Lucky Luciano.²¹

These are noteworthy connections, given the complex and uneven historical relationship between Italian- and Jewish-Americans. The peculiarity of these connections make sense only upon recognizing that many of the 1932 strike leaders were part of a unique Judeo-Italian organized crime counterculture that revolved around notions of rationality, adaptability, and utilitarian cooperation. As the criminologist Lupsha (1981) has argued, those Jewish New Yorkers who entered into organized crime throughout the interwar period were not so much victims of a profoundly antisemitic or anti-Catholic American society that unfairly cordoned off opportunities so much as they were rational actors who entered into lifestyles that they believed would best suit their life circumstances and individual desires. Lupsha argues that such a worldview prioritized economic practicality over rote ethnic hostility, a notion stressed as early as Thrasher's (1927) hugely influential observations on multiethnic street gangs and criminal organizations. In a similar vein, Alan Block's *East Side, West Side: Organizing Crime in New York, 1930–1950* set out to examine the social world of organized crime in mid-century New York City and to show how the "private" violence of criminal syndicates was intertwined with public-facing, respectable forms of economic and political life. In observing the organizational functioning of Jewish and Italian organized crime, he concluded that it was the pursuit of power that was "the cement holding together under- and upperworlds" (Block 1980, p. 239), not ethnic or religious identity.

Building on Donald Cressey's characterization of the Enforcer as that member of an organized crime syndicate whose function was "to maximise organizational integration by means of just infliction of punishment of wrongdoers" (Block 1980, p. 201), Block laid out ways in which Jewish and Italian gangs pooled their skills and their resources as a means of systematically consolidating power through semi-formal arrangements. Jewish and Italian organized criminals could respond rapidly and efficiently to economic and political shifts precisely because they were goals-oriented, not values-oriented, in their efforts. Through maintaining a relative openness to intercultural cooperation, both Italian and Jewish organized criminals avoided the suffocating limitations of cultural chauvinism. This is not necessarily something to be uncritically praised, as the ruthless efficiency of organized crime in New York City allowed bad actors to more effectively exploit small business owners and political and economic organizations such as the United Hebrew Trades and the Hebrew Butchers Workers of America. In this sort of practical cooperation, however, one may see the outlines of an ideology that might push a small, diverse group of men into undertaking a strike with no foreseeable possibility of success.

Not all events have profound political meaning, of course, and an insistence that every act challenging power is a radical act of righteous counterhegemonic resistance tempts anachronism. In many instances, including this one, understanding that the sort of Jewish and Italian criminals who entered Attica in 1932 would often have considered hard-hearted interethnic cooperation as normal and sensible makes this rebellion far more comprehensible, as well as consistent with attitudes of that time. It is altogether likely that Mazzer, Gersewitz, Shields, Mihalstein, Abbando, and Messina were not only prepared to work in common cause, but that they saw themselves as part of a collective subgroup whose values and desires generally aligned and ran in direct contradiction to those of the prison.

5.2. Moral Economy and Adaptability in Prison

The notion of “moral economy” serves to connect organized crime and interculturalism by imbuing subaltern populations with an expectation of rationalism, as opposed to the expectation of irrationalism implied in earlier studies of collective violence. Since the 1970s, scholars of subaltern studies have been at the fore of innovating new models for studying the capacity of disempowered populations to function politically in the absence of a unifying ideology. E.P. Thompson popularized the notion of “moral economy” to describe the ways in which English peasants insisted upon a certain equilibrium in their relationships with the country’s paternalistic power elite, exchanging their acquiescence to preexisting hierarchical structures in society in exchange for the implied promise not to use force in challenging the aristocracy’s right to rule. In Thompson’s words, the smooth functioning of such a society relies on “a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. An outrage to these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action” (Thompson 1971, p. 79). Moral economy is a disposition toward society that treats the riot—over food for Thompson or prison conditions in this article—as imbued with latent expectations, making it something far greater than a simple fit of pique from the *hoi polloi*.

Among the Attica strikers, one finds a group of men whose experiences with American society were unquestionably out of keeping with broader notions of justice and fairness. Those strikers involved in organized crime—approximately half of the group—had surely already internalized the notion that it was acceptable to work within a parallel economy to the legal norm and viewed rule-following as impracticable. It is not so difficult to see, then, how such a group’s disposition would have been attractive to other strike members, most of whom had legitimate grievances of their own with their treatment within the criminal justice system and within society more broadly. They likely had little or no interest in fundamentally overturning society as they only claimed wanting to work easier jobs and to serve their sentences in a prison closer to their families. Correctly or not, they surely viewed their violence as a reflection of the prison’s unreasonable attitude toward what they considered their wholly reasonable demands.

We might say, then, that the 1932 strike was not a response to imprisonment, as most of the participants had already experienced incarceration and surely accepted it as a potential outcome to their acts. Rather, it was a comment on a form of imprisonment that they considered too cruel to pass without objection. This certifies the riot as a political action. The functionality of American prison life relies on incarcerated people at least partially accepting the paternalistic oversight of the government, as a total institution cannot work without a minimal level of fealty. Among this group of Attica rioters, one sees how a group with both a feeling of legitimate grievance and a pre-existing imported model for rebellion—the shadow economy of organized crime—might advocate for a new deal or, as Thompson put it, made the prison pay the price for maintaining the “everyday exercise of hegemony” (Thompson 1991, p. 301).

Such a framing of prison strikes pushes against the common view that uprisings before the Civil Rights Era were “spontaneous” or pre-political. Administrators and journalists of the time had every reason to position strikes as unreasonable acts of society’s maladjusted misfits, but historians benefit from questioning the verisimilitude of that perspective. After all, rebellion is part of the normal functioning of power relations within almost all labour contexts (Bloch 2014; Linebaugh and Rediker 2000; Hilton 1973), as counter-hegemonic resistance exists at the micro, meso, and macro levels in all reaches of the world and at all times.

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Notes

- ¹ File #45736, Inmate Case Files, Auburn Correctional Facility, 1914–1956, New York State Archives, Albany, NY.
- ² U.S. Census Bureau (1930). “New York-Westchester-Ossining-District 0294, ED-60-294, Sheet 18.” Retrieved from <<https://www.ancestry.ca/search/collections/6224/>>, accessed 10 April 2025; Douglas Gaynor, No. 82617. State of New York. “New York, U.S. Sing Sing Prison Admission Registers, 1865–1939, 1929 July–1929 December. Retrieved from <<https://www.ancestry.ca/search/collections/8922/>>, accessed 10 April 2025.
- ³ “Attica Rioters Taken to Auburn: 20 Convicts Blamed for Disorder at New Prison are Transferred,” *Daily Sentinel (Rome, NY)*, 8 December 1932, p. 1; “Ring Leaders Arrive in Auburn in Chains,” *Buffalo (NY) News*, 8 December 1932, p. 14; “Tranquility Again Reigns at Attica, Declares Warden,” *Democrat and Chronicle (Rochester, NY)*, 9 December 1932, p. 1; “Convicts Riot in State Prison at Attica,” *Buffalo (NY) Courier Express*, 8 December 1932, p. 1.
- ⁴ “Attica Prison to Be Convicts’ Paradise,” *New York Times*, 2 August 1931, p. E5.
- ⁵ Records drawn from State of New York Prison Department, “Fourteenth Annual Report of the New York State Commission of Prisons for the Year 1908,” transmitted to the legislature 23 February 1909; State of New York Prison Department, “Annual Report of the Superintendent of State Prisons for the Fiscal Year Ending 30 June 1923”; State of New York Prison Department, “Annual Report of the Commissioner of Correction for the Fiscal Year Ending 30 June 1927.”
- ⁶ U.S. Census Bureau (1930). “New York-Cayuga-Auburn-District 0008, ED-6-8, Sheets Nos. 1A-17B.” Retrieved from <<https://www.ancestry.ca/search/collections/6224/>>, accessed 10 April 2025; U.S. Census Bureau (1940). “New York-Cayuga-Auburn-District 6-14.” Retrieved from <<https://www.ancestry.ca/search/collections/2442/>> accessed 10 April 2025. Upon aggregation, the Auburn Prison (n = 1548) population was only 9.6% Black in 1930 but rose to 22.9% among Auburn’s 1940 population (n = 1703).
- ⁷ This sample is drawn from a systematic random sampling of 2280 case files, 151 of whom were Jewish (out of which 47 were convicted on robbery charges) and 153 of whom were convicted of robbery but were not demarcated as Jewish. Inmate Case Files, Auburn Correctional Facility, 1914–1956, New York State Archives, Albany, NY.
- ⁸ List of participants taken from “Male Inmates Received, 1928 January–1937 June,” New York, Auburn Prison Records, 1816–1942. Retrieved from <<https://www.ancestry.ca/search/collections/61601/>>, accessed 10 April 2025.
- ⁹ Files #45734, #45736, #45738. In Inmate Case Files, Auburn Correctional Facility, 1914–1956, New York State Archives, Albany, NY. For additional information on participating inmates, consulted State of New York. “New York, U.S. Sing Sing Prison Admission Registers, 1865–1939.” Retrieved from <<https://www.ancestry.ca/search/collections/8922/>>, accessed 10 April 2025. Includes Sing Sing Receiving Blotters 86083 84036, 85830, 82617, 80839 and 74162.
- ¹⁰ “Woman Magistrate Puts Holdup Bail at \$25,000,” *New York (NY) Herald*, 16 February 1922, p. 24; “Sing Sing Doctors Aid Brooklynite,” *Daily News (New York, NY)*, 10 August 1932, p. 193.
- ¹¹ “Stolen Overcoat Puts Pair in Cold, Cold Prison Cell,” *Daily News (New York, NY)*, 28 December 1927, p.182
- ¹² “2 ‘Augie’ Pals Jailed,” *The Brooklyn (NY) Daily Times*, 12 April 1928, p. 3.
- ¹³ “Police Disrobe Bandit Suspects,” *Times Union (Brooklyn, NY)*, 24 March 1932, p. 25.
- ¹⁴ “Wife of Brooklyn Teacher Held Up By Trio in Home,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, 28 January 1931, p. 2; “Amateur Thief Was Too Much of a Gentleman,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 30 January 1931, p. 28.
- ¹⁵ “Jury Acquits Trio, But Court Jails Two,” *Brooklyn (NY) Eagle*, 20 April 1932, p. 5; “Shapiro Target Again; Lien Slapped on Entratters,” *Daily News (New York, NY)*, 21 July 1931, p. 457; Sing Sing Receiving Blotter #98256
- ¹⁶ “Forgery Charged,” *Daily Sentinel (Rome, NY)*, 30 October 1929; Sing Sing Receiving Blotter #85897
- ¹⁷ Sing Sing Receiving Blotter #82747
- ¹⁸ “Text of Maxwell Confession Issued,” *Brooklyn (NY) Daily Times*, 19 December 1926, p. 4; “Brooklyn Convict Now in New Prison,” *Brooklyn (NY) Daily Times*, 13 October 1931, p. 13; “Two Youths Dying, Third Held as Detectives Avert Robbery,” *Brooklyn (NY) Eagle*, 14 April 1932, p. 10; “Griminger Pleads Guilty in Murder,” *Times Union (Brooklyn, NY)*, 30 March 1932, p. 46; “Burglars Get 20 to 40 Years,” *Mount Vernon (NY) Argus*, 2 January 1932, p. 13. Sing Sing Receiving Blotters 78495, 86256, 86258, 85418.
- ¹⁹ “Five Charged with Robbery, One Identified,” *Brooklyn Daily Times*, Monday, 6 February 1922, p. 3.
- ²⁰ “Two Convicts Transferred,” *Buffalo (NY) News*, 26 September 1930, p. 1.

- ²¹ Census Bureau (1940). "New York-Clinton-Dannemora-District 10–18." Retrieved from <<https://www.ancestry.ca/search/collections/2442/>> accessed April 10, 2025; "\$10,000 N.Y. Holdup Trail Ends in Ark." Daily News (New York, NY), 25 February 1936, p. 150; "Holdup Suspect Trapped By Pet," Mount Vernon Argus (White Plains, NY), 2 March 1936, p. 7.

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