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Author(s): Norman S. Hayner and Ellis Ash

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THE PRISON AS A COMMUNITY*

NORMAN S. HAYNER AND ELLIS ASH

University of Washington

A SITUATIONAL explanation of crime calls for a situational approach to prevention and treatment. As sociologists, we are not true to the logical implications of our science if we recommend individual treatment as the only solution of penal ills. If the function of a prison is to protect society, the convict must learn, during his period of incarceration, how to live in society. It is the purpose of this paper to point out some of the major obstacles which prevent the present-day American penal system from performing this function and to indicate changes in administrative policy to overcome them. The concept of the prison as a community is the guiding principle for this analysis.

The prisoner comes from a community and, after an average stay of two and one third years, will return to a community. If he is to be accepted as a law-abiding person on his return, he must learn in prison to play the role of a citizen. He cannot learn those things that will enable him to participate as an acceptable member of the outside community, if he is engaged in activities that are foreign to people on the outside. If the prisoner learns on the inside, that to fit in with institutional routine, he must walk close to the wall, this will not help him on the outside. In fact, it may mark him as peculiar.

We are aware of the real difficulties in the way of fundamental reforms. Unless there is a dramatic escape, a bloody riot, or a "mass whipping," as reported recently at San Quentin, the press and the public are apathetic. J. Edgar Hoover's vigorous defense of the "machine-gun school of criminology" with its hatred of "slimy criminals" and its belief in long prison terms as the only means of punishment and his pungent attacks on "the cream-puff school" with its "moo-cow sentimentalities" and its faith in rehabilitation have swung the pendulum of public opinion in this country in the direction of a hostile attitude toward the offender and away from an attitude of inquiry. It is our conviction, however, that the punitive attitude has been adequately tried and found wanting. The most promising method of progress is through experimentation. Why not, for example, make a sincere attempt to save money for a higher salary level and a better quality of personnel by housing a larger proportion of carefully selected prisoners in the less expensive minimum security institutions? Furthermore, why not make "the prison as a community" the guiding concept for administration?

As it is, the present-day American treatment of men in prison reminds us of the relations between lions and their trainer. The function of a trainer is

* Presented to the American Sociological Society at Philadelphia, Dec. 28, 1939. This paper was also published in the *News Bulletin* of The Osborne Association, Feb. 1940.

to make his beasts respond to the crack of a whip. Although the lion goes through his set of tricks every day, the trainer has found that he must always be on the defensive. He is never so certain of the complete friendliness of the beast that he does not have a chair in his hand or a pistol in his pocket. Likewise, when imprisoned men are treated as beasts, they either sink into apathy or stir up rebellion.

In penal institutions as they are today, the constant hostility between guards and inmates is one of the major obstacles in the reformation of prisoners.¹ The division into "cons" and "screws" (guards) in prison society is even more basic than the Middletown dichotomy into workers and business men. This conflict situation helps to explain the widespread lack of sympathetic and understanding relationships between guards and convicts. Low pay and long hours do not attract a high type of custodial officer. Hence, the most important link that prisoners have with the outside world, their contact with guards, yields little social profit.

Just as the Southern cotton plantation during slavery times exhibited a sharp division into two major groups, the white masters and overseers on the one hand and the black and brown slaves on the other, so also does the American prison. The process of socialization, for example, is twofold. This dual process will be discussed in the following paragraphs as a concrete illustration of the two social worlds in prison society. Achieving a status and role in the world of guards is one thing; in the prisoner group, another. Tannenbaum describes a guard showing every sign of fear and lack of ease in the beginning, who, nevertheless, within two months, had become the most uncompromising officer in the institution. Nelson reports that it is a social error for a prisoner to be seen talking to a guard. For both staff members and convicts, the roles they are expected to play have been defined by their respective groups and wide deviations are not easily tolerated.

The politically appointed warden may give the new officer a book of rules and a speech about proper behavior. Then the deputy warden, who, like the foreman of a plant, has the responsibility for running the institution, will probably emphasize the maintenance of discipline and the avoidance of disorder. To achieve this end, he urges the new man to "put them in their proper place at all times." When the guard comes back to the dormitory after his first day on the job, his fellow officers give him additional advice—often phrased in lurid folk language. As in the outside community, these definitions are frequently conflicting. In the absence of a special training school, the new guard must work out his own policy by trial and error.

The "fish," or new prisoner, undergoes an experience analogous to that of the new guard. He, too, meets the deputy warden and is advised: "Keep your nose clean and you won't have trouble." In his conversation with

¹ The method used in our study of the Washington State Reformatory, with data on the attitudes and connivings of convicts, has already been set forth in "The Prisoner Community as a Social Group," *Amer. Sociol. Rev.*, June 1939, 4: 362-69.

other officers of the classification committee, lip service may be given to the ideal of reformation. The prisoner does not live with the officers, however, but with his fellow convicts. They tell him very definitely what he is supposed to do as a con. Since they are the people with whom he eats, works, sleeps, and talks, he will naturally try to adjust by "getting along." As Riemer has pointed out: "If an inmate desires favorable status in the opinions of his fellows, he must adopt patterns of behavior in line with their culture."² Riemer, a voluntary prisoner, by swearing at an officer and being ordered into solitary confinement as a punishment, won wholehearted inmate approval. In perhaps no other social world do men "watch each other and study every gesture and action" as they do in prison. The first-timer is tested and rated in a variety of ways. If he happens to draw a "rat," or informer, as a cell-mate, this will not help his reputation. He probably knows nothing about conniving when he first comes, but he soon learns. As Halpint told Stanley in the *Jack Roller*: "Don't antagonize the guards; hate them all you want to, but work them for your own good."

Inmate "politicians" play a role in prison similar to that of their prototypes in a corrupt city government. As in the outside community, they must grant favors in order to hold their position and yet they are frequently hated for their self-seeking attitude. The "right guys," on the contrary, can always be trusted to remain loyal to their fellow cons. Clemmer found that "being right" was the essential and most admired trait of prison leaders. A prison mythology, Riemer reports, plays a role in defining the mores for the newcomer. Remarkable escapes, great strikes and riots, and tales of outstanding men are included in these stories.

In the normal community, conflict tends to be adjusted by "accommodation." Eventually the fusion of opposing cultures results in "assimilation." In the prison community, the chronic hostility between cons and screws—to some extent an extension of the progressive conflict between criminals and police on the outside—may lead to superficial and temporary forms of accommodation, but rarely to assimilation. Deciding to "make the best of it," the new prisoner usually undertakes some form of self-culture. As he adjusts to the dull monotony of prison life, however, there is likely to be a "decline of profitable reflection" and a weakening of the attempts at self-improvement. Daydreaming becomes more frequent. "Prison stupor" or becoming "stir simple" are common end results. As the prisoner grows "con-wise," however, he learns that things denied him by the prison administration may be available through conniving. These *sub rosa* activities provide variety, help break the deteriorating monotony, and constitute another type of accommodation.

How important are these characteristics of the prison community for

² Hans Riemer, "Socialization in the Prison Community," *Proc. Sixty-Seventh Ann. Cong. Amer. Prison Assn.*, 1937, 151-55. See also Donald Clemmer, "Leadership Phenomena in a Prison Community," *J. Crim. Law and Criminol.*, March-April, 1938, 28: 869-72; and Victor F. Nelson, *Prison Days and Nights*, New York, 1932.

later careers? Is the common conception of prisons as schools for crime justified? In general, it is our conclusion that the conventional prison situation is the antithesis of the normal community and does not prepare for it. Monotonous routine, sex starvation, lack of self-direction, and isolation from law-abiding culture patterns do not rehabilitate. They demoralize.

More than a hundred years ago, English writers recognized that prisons were ineffective in helping offenders to become law-abiding citizens. Recent studies tend to confirm this view. Any changes in the point of view, activities, and ethics of parolees as compared with "fish" seem to facilitate recidivism rather than reform. Prison may have taught them to be more careful—to stay away from thin ice. "Don't be too elaborate with the 'come-on' schemes, if you are using the mails." True, the idea that reformatories are the "high schools" and penitentiaries, the "colleges" for the criminal world is somewhat erroneous. It gives the impression that the training in crime provided by prisons is formal. In reality, this training is very informal. Just as in conversations with friends in various vocations on the outside we frequently pick up bits of information that we later use, so in prison it is natural for convicts to talk about the things that they have done. Under the present type of administration, there are few other subjects to discuss. As a result, status may be gained in the prisoner group by tales of exploits in the field of crime or sex. After "graduation," the parolee may have a sincere desire to go straight, but in a critical situation—no job, no money, no food—crime techniques unconsciously acquired provide many suggestions.

Institutional services sponsored by the staff are in general too formal, rigid and superordinated to provide training for community life. The real objective for the administration is maintenance. Providing housing, food, clothing, and work for the inmates tend to become ends in themselves rather than means for preparing the men to return to outside communities. The work program may be called "trade training," but such skills as are acquired can seldom be used on the outside. Present educational programs in prisons are largely stereotyped replicas of the conventional educational organization. They are neither adapted to the prison situation nor are they designed to prepare the convict adequately for the role of law-abiding citizen in a somewhat disorganized outside community.

The following criticism of prison education by an unusually articulate inmate describes what is no doubt a typical experience. It contrasts the wishful-thinking of the prisoner with this disillusioning experiences on parole. It shows the need for a wholesome community life in prison that will encourage inmate participation and develop rather than deaden initiative. Preparole classes that facilitate frank and realistic discussions of such social science topics as the causes of failure in social relations and business, how to find and keep jobs, the competitive character of modern industrial society,³ would provide a valuable first step in the right direction.

³ See Joseph S. Roucek, "Experiment in Adult Education at Rock View Farm Prison, Bellefonte, Pennsylvania," *School and Society*, 42: 199-200. See also the social education pro-

Most of us see the folly of our ways and want to mend them. In fact, the average confined man aims above this; he wants to start from the tape, gain success, be somebody. In his cell, he dreams of this, pictures himself on the upward road; and he takes advantage of the means that are offered—schools and vocational work—to prepare himself. He is encouraged by the prison officials, and the future appears a pleasant picture. The man has infused himself with a spirit like that found at every school graduation. Perhaps his is greater because of the contrast that he sees between his present and his future.

What happens when he is released? After graduating from school, most of us experienced the disillusionment of learning that the world was not our oyster. Unfortunately, the same story that followed his graduation from school is often repeated when a man is released from prison—tenfold worse. If he is fortunate enough to have one waiting, he goes to a job. Chances are that he is untrained for the work. His fellowworkers and his employer know him for an ex-convict and no matter how broadminded the average person outside may be, the barrier or stigma is there, invisible, but noticeable. This is the released man's first shock. And unless his character is coarse and impenetrable or unless he has unusual will power, sooner or later the situation becomes more than he can endure. Result—he leaves for strange fields. And with self-initiative dulled by time spent as a "number," he goes forth to compete against those who have kept abreast of the time. There is only one outcome. But the sense of self-preservation is still as strong as ever in the man. Rackets that he unconsciously absorbed while in prison come to his mind. This time he is going to be more careful.

Let the confined man keep his individuality; keep him in a competitive run similar to that he will meet outside; give him greater freedom in choice of work. Develop a system the aim of which is to free a man not only reformed, but entirely clean of prison. Do not break him while reforming him. Thus fortified, a man will be able to step straight into competition.

If "the prison as a community" is accepted as the guiding principle for administering a penal system, what practical implications follow?

1. Unless he belongs to that small group which is immune to any known method of socialization, the convict definitely must be prepared to play the role of law-abiding citizen in his home community.
2. To achieve this goal, he must participate actively in prison society and gradually develop a sense of social responsibility.
3. Increasing use of the plan whereby selected prisoners are shifted progressively from maximum to minimum security institutions is indicated.
4. Whether vocation or social, education should be more closely adjusted to the actual problems confronting the inmates.
5. To mitigate the present hostility between cons and screws, the staff must cultivate a more informal and cooperative relationship with inmates.
6. The personnel, from the warden down, obviously should be chosen on the basis of merit and for long periods, rather than as a reward for political services.
7. Classification and individualization of treatment can be more effec-

gram of the New York State Department of Correction as described by W. M. Wallack, G. M. Kendall, and H. L. Briggs in *Education Within Prison Walls*, 22-27, New York, 1939; or more in detail by Kendall in *The Organization and Teaching of Social and Economic Studies in Correctional Institutions*, New York, 1939.

tive with a change in the social situation. Inmate participation in government, on the other hand, is more likely to succeed with transfer of defective and psychotic individuals to specialized institutions. The psychiatric and sociological approaches are supplementary rather than competitive.

Success in such an enterprise necessitates a willingness to experiment. In spite of the fact that we live in an age that is characterized by large scale experimentation, the experimental attitude is rare in American prisons. The State Prison Colony at Norfolk, Massachusetts, under Howard B. Gill was an interesting exception. Its primary aim was the reduction of criminality in the individual man. To achieve this aim, Gill developed "a supervised community within a wall." His major contribution was toward the reduction of hostility between inmates and staff. Realizing that it is difficult for a man to be both guard and educator, he made a clear distinction between house officers and watch officers. The former were resident case workers; the latter were responsible for the prevention of escapes. A high wall with a "no-man's land" fifty feet from it helped to make the prison secure. Within this wall, the house officers tried to build a community. Staff members sat in on all meetings of an inmate council and council members sat in on all staff meetings. During the summer, graduate students served social internships as assistants to the house officers. They associated freely with the convicts and provided natural, wholesome contact with the outside world.⁴

Generally speaking, a country gets the kind of prison it deserves. As long as fraud, corruption and disorganization continue to pervade American life, it cannot be expected that prisons will be much better. The prison is a part of a given social structure and tends to reflect that culture. Russia has challenged the world by providing correctional labor colonies that are self-governing, pay union wages, encourage normal family life, and produce graduates who voluntarily return to their "alma mater" to live. No doubt reflecting the increasingly conservative emphasis in the Soviet Union, John N. Hazard reports a recent ". . . trend on the part of courts toward penalties which bear less relation to rehabilitation than used to be the case during the first decade after the revolution."⁵ But whether, in the long run, education or punishment will receive the most attention, the transplanting of penal practices to the United States would be very difficult due to the fundamental differences between Russian and American mores. England, with traditions more like our own, has its Lowdham Grange and North Sea Camp, where the influences on carefully selected young adult prisoners seem to make for rehabilitation. In November, 1933, C. T. Cape, the self-sacrificing and intelligent governor of Lowdham Grange, dictated the following statement to the senior author about a philosophy and methods that exemplify surprisingly well the practical implications of this paper:

There is a definite attempt to make conditions within Lowdham Grange approxi-

⁴ For observations during a month's residence at Norfolk in the summer of 1933, see Fred E. Haynes, *The American Prison System*, chap. 4, "A Community Prison."

⁵ "Trends in the Soviet Treatment of Crime," *Amer. Sociol. Rev.*, Aug., 1940, 566-576.

mate those with which the lads will have to contend on the outside. We attempt to eliminate control by central government and to substitute for that, self-control by self-government. Responsibility is thrown on the lad himself. We have abolished parades. A boy does not march to work. He is not taken to a place—he must get there himself.

Payment gives an incentive and a reason for work. Without pay, the boy worked as a prisoner under pain of punishment. He worked to keep his head above water—to avoid trouble. Now the attitude is utterly altered. A man takes pride in his work. The stigma of prison labor is removed. He desires to excel in craftsmanship.

Pay is in the coinage of the realm—not in tokens. The actual amount paid is much less than outside, but the pay is in direct proportion to output and skill.

About two thirds of the weekly earnings are deducted for board and lodging. There is also a small "income tax." The rest is paid in cash. All clubs and athletic activities, including cricket and swimming, are optional and can only be enjoyed by the payment of a weekly subscription. Concerts and pictures are paid for at the door and are optional.

The pay system has introduced responsibility for property. If a boy is careless with his clothes, they are repaired at his cost. If a fellow breaks a window pane, either through negligence or deliberately, it is replaced at his cost. If a boy is not at work by 7:30, he is fined twopence; a second offense doubles the fine. A serious offense calls for a conference with the governor. As a last resort, the boy may be transferred to another Borstal. This occurs in less than three percent of the cases.⁶

The fact that the Royal Commission to Investigate the Penal System of Canada recently recommended the principles embodied in the English penal system gives the Borstals more significance for America. New Haven, British Columbia, a new institution for not more than fifty selected young men from Oakalla Prison Farm, is a promising American experiment in the application of Borstal ideas. Furthermore, the American Law Institute is recommending to its proposed "Youth-Correction Authorities" types of institutional treatment utilizing Borstal methods.

The prison community has been described in this paper both as an actuality and as an ideal. As it now exists there is constant hostility between guards and prisoners; socialization means one thing for guards and another for prisoners; formal education is usually inadequate and ineffective; "training" in crime techniques, although informal, is very effective. When used as a frame of reference for prison administration, it is clear that convicts must learn to live in a community, perhaps at first by transfer to such minimum security prisons as at Wallkill in New York. That hostility between inmates and house officers can be cut down has been demonstrated at Norfolk Colony. The building of a sense of social responsibility is well illustrated by the English experiment at Lowdham Grange. What has been proposed as a practical plan for penal administration appeals to the authors as the logical implication of a sociological analysis. A clear realization of the degenerating influence of our present prison system should encourage more experiments aiming to devise a community for offenders that will actually rehabilitate.

⁶ For more details about the English Borstals, see Norman S. Hayner, "English Schools for Young Offenders," *J. Crim. Law and Criminol.*, Jan.-Feb., 1937, 27: 696-705. See also B. S. Tounroe, "Borstal Experiments," *Contemp. Rev.*, Oct. 1937, 152: 469-73.