

1949

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### Recommended Citation

F. E. Haynes, The Sociological Study of the Prison Community, 39 J. Crim. L. & Criminology 432 (1948-1949)

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## THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE PRISON COMMUNITY

F. E. Haynes

The author has been a member of the Department of Sociology at the State University of Iowa since 1914. His major field of work has been in criminology and penology. He is the author of *Criminology*, published by McGraw-Hill in 1930 (second edition 1935), and *The American Prison System*, in 1939. He has been especially interested in prison administration. Graduate students under his direction have served as sociologists at the State Penitentiary at Fort Madison, using the technique of the "participant observer" to study the prison community as a social organization.—  
EDITOR.

A new form of prison study has developed in the United States during the last quarter of a century. It is the outgrowth of an effort to make sociology more exact or scientific and less abstract or theoretical. Social organizations and institutions are studied by sociologists for the purpose of analysis and the making of generalizations that may be used in the interpretations of social situations. Social problems are investigated and the reasons for their existence are examined. The sociologist in contrast to the social worker is interested primarily as to *why* social problems exist and not merely in the *fact* of their existence. Instead of armchair study, the modern sociologist goes into institutions to find out what are the actual individual and social factors that cause the failure of our penal institutions to reform a larger proportion of their inmates. This phase of sociology is responsible for a new approach to penal problems and treatment. It has given rise to what is in reality a new form of prison study—resident study by criminologists of conditions in prisons and the analysis of the prison as a community. This new approach has been described as *the technique of the participant observer*, because it has been found by experience that the only way to determine what causes bad conditions in social relations is to put oneself in a place of observation where social processes are in operation. To understand the prison community one must be in a position to observe from the inside, and still not be involved in responsibility for what goes on in the institution.

Three other developments have contributed to the establishment of this new method of approach: (1) the work of Thomas Mott Osborne from 1913 to 1926; (2) the reforms in penal administration in New Jersey from 1918 to 1925 under the leadership of Dr. W. J. Ellis, and in the Federal Prison System from 1930 under the leadership of Sanford Bates and James V. Bennett; and (3) the influence of psychology and psychiatry upon the use of classification in our more progressive correctional institu-

tions. The result has been the introduction of trained personnel with a more objective attitude to the administration of these institutions than can be expected from purely custodial officials.

*Thomas Mott Osborne*

A pioneer in the development of this new form of social study of prison conditions—prison visiting for the purpose of scientific study rather than for purely humanitarian results—was Thomas Mott Osborne, who in 1913 attracted wide attention by spending a week in Auburn Prison. Osborne lived all his life in Auburn and as a public-spirited citizen had been familiar with the famous institution. As early as 1905 Osborne began his criticism of the prison system. In 1912 he was made chairman of a state commission on prison reform. As a result of his experience and study he conceived the idea of spending a week in Auburn as a prisoner. Originally he had planned to conduct his experiment anonymously, but was persuaded to let it be known to the inmates, whom he addressed upon the Sunday preceding his incarceration. He served under the name of Tom Brown and was treated like any other inmate. His action was severely criticized because a voluntary prisoner could not be expected to see things from the point of view of a sentenced prisoner. He recognized the truth of the criticism, but he believed that he could learn how to improve the situation by such an experience. He brought the prison problem to the attention of the country. He emphasized the fact that prisoners are human beings, and that if reforms were to be accomplished the attitudes of inmates must be considered. Osborne had an unusual ability to form friendly relations with all sorts of people. He established personal relations with prisoners and introduced a new relationship between prison officials and prisoners by the development of Mutual Welfare Leagues in three prisons. These leagues were organizations of inmates, sanctioned by the prison authorities, to facilitate inmate participation in prison administration.

Osborne's association with prisoners was not based upon any abstract scientific principles. He liked people and he had an unusual ability for forming social relations. He believed that by forming friendly relations with prisoners reforms could be accomplished better than in any other way. More or less unconsciously he set the pattern that has resulted in the technique of the participant observer. The most permanent result of his own work has been the establishment of an organization, first known as the National Penal Information Society, and later as the Osborne Association whose objective was to prepare handbooks

of American prisons, containing accurate information as to penal conditions as a basis for intelligent reform measures. This objective was identical with that of the participant observer. Osborne as a penal reformer prepared the way for the sociological study of the prison community. He was not a trained student of sociology, but instinctively he pioneered the way for the prison interne of today.

Much of the penal reform in recent years was inspired by Osborne and some of it has been carried out by persons associated with him during his lifetime. His genius for personal relations was not confined to prison inmates. The work of the Osborne Association has been carried on by persons associated with him.

Recent reforms also owe much to the work of psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers. The development of a great variety of tests for individuals and groups during and since World War I has made possible more exact studies of personalities and their social relations. These tests have formed the basis for the wider use of classification in many correctional institutions. Individualization of treatment of prisoners has become a reality in place of a goal to be hoped for but rarely attained. To administer classification a new type of personnel has become essential in our prisons. This personnel is not primarily concerned with discipline and administration. The Federal Prison System has recognized this fact by the appointment of associate wardens who head up classification and allied activities as distinguished from deputy wardens who are traditionally responsible for discipline.

The introduction of a trained personnel into our penal institutions has facilitated the entrance of scientific observers. These observers are men trained in our colleges and universities and often of the same generation as the psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers. Regular visitors to the congresses of the American Prison Association in recent years have noticed the presence of many young university men. These are representative of the new type of prison workers. Recruits to their ranks come from our higher institutions of learning. From the same sources come the participant observers. They are the end results of all the factors just enumerated and described.

#### *Some Illustrations of the Technique of the Participant Observer*

The work of the participant observer was carried on under various conditions. Sometimes graduate students acting as internes or student assistants used their opportunities to study

and record various aspects of prison life. One graduate student became a voluntary prisoner and served a "term" in a state prison. Illinois has so-called "sociologists" who study individual prisoners and make recommendations to the parole board to aid in determining the time of release. In Michigan a sociologist is a member of the classification committee of the state prison. Students in training from the University spend periods of ninety days as assistants in classification. In Indiana graduate students from the State University and Notre Dame also have assisted in classification work. In Iowa from 1937-1942 four graduate students from the State University of Iowa served as voluntary workers at the State Penitentiary in return for the opportunity to interview inmates and collect materials to be used in theses presented for Ph.D. degrees.

Professor Norman S. Hayner and his assistant, Ellis Ash, of the University of Washington have published studies of the prison community as a social group based upon the technique of the participant observer. The junior author spent four months at the State Reformatory and in addition short visits were made for over a year to supplement the period of residence. Mr. Ash was accepted by inmates and officers. Leaders among the prisoners were discovered and their acquaintances cultivated. The confidence of the officers was won. Aid was given in the organization of a classification clinic.

It was some months before the pattern of the prison community began to appear as something distinct from the official organization of the institution. Work was divided on the basis of crews. Place of residence in cell houses was determined by crews. Men were under rigid supervision. The population was made up of incorrigibles, trusties, and the "fish" (newcomers). The organization of the inmates was a sub-rosa one aimed at the obtaining of goods and services denied by the administration. "Conniving" constituted a basic process in the interaction of the inmates. It provided daily training in a code of deception. Gambling was facilitated by the inmates who made the rounds of the cells to deliver study papers or aid in school work. "Politicians" are the key men in the conniving process. They may or may not include "the right guys," the small, select group of natural "con-wise" leaders.

The prison community with its conniving, its perversions, and exchange of crime techniques re-enforces the behavior tendencies which society wishes to prevent. We cannot expect to break down anti-social habits in an atmosphere that is distinctly anti-social. If the function of a prison is to protect society, the prisoner must

learn during his incarceration how to live in society. Individual treatment is not the solution of a situational problem. The punitive attitude has been tried and found wanting. Constant hostility between guards and inmates—"cons" *vs.* "screws"—results only in what sociologists define as accommodation, not in assimilation. Symbiosis, that is, living together, may be satisfactory for plants and animals, but it is not the solution for human relations. Prison stupor or "stir simple" and "con-wise" represent the results of the "machine-gun school of criminology." A sociological study of the prison community emphasizes the need for a more socialized approach to these problems.<sup>1</sup> Why not try the ideas of inmate participation and less expensive minimum security institutions? Analysis and study of the prison community seem to point in that direction.

Hans Riemer, a graduate of the University of Chicago, served three months in 1936 as a voluntary prisoner in the Kansas State Penitentiary. The legal and formal commission of an offense, conviction and commitment by a criminal court, and admission to the State Penitentiary were the steps involved. Neither officials of the court and of the institution nor the inmates of the prison were aware of the nature or purpose of the commitment. The study was conducted under the direction of O. W. Wilson, chief of police of Wichita, Kansas. Arrangements were made, and advice and sponsorship were secured from Professor E. H. Sutherland of Indiana University.

Three months were spent in the prison and two weeks in a county jail. In both institutions Riemer lived according to the ordinary routine and was treated as an ordinary inmate. The objective was a study of the social life of the inmates. The study was undertaken because of an interest in the plans and theories of inmate participation in the administration of penal institutions.

The basic theory of the study is that the behavior of convicts is determined by the convicts themselves. The reaction of convicts to the prison situation is outlined by "traditions, a social hierarchy, mores, attitudes, and a mythology."

The existence of a social hierarchy becomes apparent early in the period of commitment. The prison population is broken up into cliques and groups. Each man is classified and acquires status in terms of his reaction to the prison situation. Association with a "rat" or a "punk" results in a suspicion of like tendencies by other inmates.

<sup>1</sup> Hayner and Ash: *The Prisoner Community as a Social Group*, *American Sociological Review*, June 1939, pp. 362-369.

The prison population is largely controlled by two groups of leaders. The "politicians," who hold key positions in the administrative offices, who can distribute special privileges and make possible the circulation of special foods and other supplies. The other group is made up of the "right guys," who can always be trusted, do not abuse or take advantage of other inmates, and are always loyal to the interests of the convicts.

The mythology of a prison community is a strong educative force in determining the behavior of new inmates. Stories of remarkable escapes and accounts of riots are passed on from one generation to another. The characters become legendary heroes and their exploits are described in exaggerated terms. "Big shots" who have committed spectacular crimes are admired by other prisoners. The myths and legends are built on opposition to the law and its enforcement and the administration of the prison.

Traditions, attitudes, and mores of the prison community are directed against the prevailing order of society, personified by the institutional administration. The conflict situation influences all members of the prison community. Punishments and withdrawals of privileges are the instruments for enforcing regulations. Organization of work and production are governed by officials. Hence there is a constant conflict between the officials and the inmates.

The convicts function under two general influences. If he desires a favorable status in the opinions of his fellows, he must adopt patterns of behavior in line with their culture. And since there is a very keen awareness of all his acts, he must be very careful unless he does not care for the ill will or ostracism of his fellow inmates. If he accepts a specific group, he tends to adopt their behavior. "Daily incidents and daily conversations mold reactions that fit into the mold of the conflict situation which is the life of convicts."<sup>2</sup>

Another study made by a graduate student in the State University of Iowa based upon some months of experience as a psychologist at the Fort Madison Penitentiary points out that the prison is interesting as an example of an autocratic group, where policy is, for the most part, determined by the top members of a hierarchy. It is clear that no program aiming at anything more than segregation and punishment can be effective without taking into consideration the reactions of its subjects.

The prison group run according to authoritarian lines has

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<sup>2</sup> Riemer: *Socialization in the Prison Community*, in the *Proceedings of the American Prison Association*, pp. 151-155.

neither "the desire nor the opportunity for the development of those self-imposed responsibilities which make possible the smooth conduct of a free society." Prisons, consequently, have "an almost infinite capacity for the anti-socialization of their inmates. And the more onerous one makes prisons, the more will he facilitate the process of atomization and social disruption."<sup>3</sup>

The most comprehensive study of the prison as a community has been made by Donald Clemmer and published in 1940 under the title *The Prison Community*. One reviewer described it as "the first life-size portrait of the prison community processually analyzed."

The author worked in a large prison system (Illinois) for nine years. He was a professionally trained sociologist and enjoyed relative academic freedom and political immunity. In addition to his routine duties as a member of the classification board, he coached prison football teams, acted as a father confessor, assisted inmate journalists, and participated in many other activities. He functioned as a member of a group of psychiatrists, psychologists, physicians and sociologists in the service of the state. His assignments have taken him into every branch of the penal system. The book covers a period of three years and is a by-product of his routine duties.

The purpose of the book is to present an accurate picture of an American prison. The institution studied (Menard, Illinois) has many features common to all American prisons. It is typical in size varying only 200 in population from the average of fifty-one major correctional institutions. The study covers the period 1931-1934. There were at that time about 2,300 inmates and 230 employees, including 160 guards, eight or nine captains, and a warden and two assistant wardens.

The book aimed at a description of the culture of the prison. It is more concerned with social processes than with incidents or events. Attention is focused on such phenomena as class stratification, informal group life, leadership, folkways and other social controls. The author hoped "to make clear the pattern of prison life woven of those salient social forces which influence and prescribe the attitudes and behavior of prisoners," and "the extent and degree to which the culture of the institution determines the philosophy of the inmates."

After three preliminary chapters on the culture antecedents of the prisoners, the composition of the penal population, and the

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<sup>3</sup> Polansky: *The Prison as an Autocracy*, in the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, May-June, 1942, pp. 16-22.



organization of the penitentiary, Clemmer describes the social relations in the prison community, social groups, leadership phenomena, social controls, the social implications of leisure time, sexual patterns, and the social significance of labor.

A final chapter on culture and the determination of attitudes summarizes the manner in which attitudes of prisoners are modified as the men spend month after month in the prison. Structural aspects of the prison community are important in the determination of attitudes. The greatest cleavage is between officials and inmates. Next in importance is the existence of spontaneously formed primary and semi-primary groups. These cleavages are by no means absolute. The relations are symbiotic rather than social. The prisoner's world is an atomized world. Social controls are only partially effective. Daily relationships are impersonal. It is a world of "I", "me", and "mine", rather than "ours", "theirs", and "his".

Assimilation into the prison world may be described as *prisonization*. "Every man who enters undergoes prisonization to some extent. He becomes at once an anonymous figure in a subordinate group. A number replaces a name. He wears the clothes of the other members of the subordinate group. He is questioned and admonished. He soon learns that the warden is all-powerful. He soon learns the ranks, titles, and authority of various officials. And whether he uses the prison slang and argot or not, he comes to know its meaning."

"Acceptance of an inferior role, accumulation of facts concerning the organization of the prison, the development of somewhat new habits of eating, dressing, working, sleeping, and the adoption of local language, the recognition that nothing is owed the environment for the supplying of needs, and the eventual desire for a good job are aspects of prisonization which are operative for all inmates."

These aspects of prison life are important because of their universality, especially among men who have served many years. Their influence is "sufficient to make a man characteristic of the penal community and probably so disrupt his personality that a happy adjustment in any community becomes next to impossible."

These aspects, however, are less important than the phases of prisonization "which breed or deepen criminality and anti-sociality and make the inmate characteristic of the criminalistic ideology in the prison community." Every man feels the influence of the universal factors, but not every man becomes prisonized by the other phases of prison culture. Whether or not com-

plete prisonization occurs depends upon a number of determining factors. It depends: (1) on the man himself, his personality; (2) the kind and extent of relationships which he had outside; (3) his affiliations with prison groups; (4) chance placement in work gang, cellhouse, and with cellmate; (5) acceptance of the dogmas or codes of the prison culture. Other determinants are age, criminality, nationality, race, and regional conditioning. All determinants are more or less interrelated.

Most men in prisons have no chance of being salvaged if they become prisonized to any appreciable extent. Clemmer concludes from a wide acquaintance with hundreds of inmates that those who were improved or rehabilitated were men who should never have been committed to prison, and who were prisonized in only the slightest degree. The rehabilitation of habitual criminals is more likely to be the result of treatment which keeps them in prison until they reach such an age that they no longer have sufficient physical or mental vigor to commit crime. A few men are "scared out of" further adventures in crime, and consequently become prisonized to a lesser degree. A few seem to develop a new sense of loyalty and responsibility toward their home folks. Their prisonization has not progressed very far. Many concrete examples are known where subsequent behavior proved the genuineness of the change.

"The adoption of religion usually occurs among a few men who are relatively unprisonized. They take up religious teachings because they are prisonized only to a mild degree and the adoption of religion, in turn, prevents further prisonization. We have no information to offer as to the permanence after release of the religious influence, although it is important in the penal community because it reflects the attitudes and adjustment of men in reference to prisonization."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Clemmer: *The Prison Community*, preface and Chapter XII, The Christopher Publishing House, Boston, 1940.