

What the doers think

John Conrad

MOST correctional theory is made by practical men. This has always been the case. Though learned social scientists take an increasing interest in our field, the working hypotheses which govern our programmes are constructed by the people who operate our prisons, probation departments and the rest of the correctional apparatus.

This is just as it should be. No social scientist will argue that his theories should be applied by people who are not thoroughly sold on them. No correctional administrator wants to run a programme which he doesn't think he can handle. But most administrators are eagerly grateful for useful new ideas from social scientists which can be translated into action. We have a tough job. We need all the help we can get to solve our problems more effectively. What help we get from the social sciences is recent and is thinly applied. Hardly anywhere in the civilised world are the problems of penology being subjected to as massive attack as in England, where the research resources of the Home Office are teamed with the experience and enthusiasm of the Prison Commission.

So it is that most correctional theory is developed on the spot by trial and error methods. To a disconcerting extent, the prisons of today have been designed and developed by unschooled turnkeys, keepers, governors and warders of years gone by. They were grizzled old characters who never heard of

anomie and wouldn't know a chi-square from a T-square. But they built our prisons, organised our staffs, and instituted the procedures by which we work to this day. They learned from experience; they applied what they learned as far as they could. Research and social science have added a gadget or two here and have subtracted an excrescence or an obsolescence there. But the structure of the correctional field is intact. The prison governor of the good old days would not be much mystified by today's institutions.

This is the framework on which we must build. Even if we wanted to, we could not tear it all down and start anew. But from this framework change will proceed, whether we like it or not. Prisons are no more immune to evolution than any other social institution. It just seems to take longer.

Our problem as social scientists is to see what can be done to channel the course of evolution. In California, a new Institute for the Study of Crime and Delinquency has been established. Its principal objective will be the harnessing of social science research and correctional practice so as to bring about a more orderly development of our field. For an initial project to break the ground the Ford Foundation has allocated a substantial grant.

I have thought of this project as an enterprise to find out *what the doers think and what the thinkers do*. It is quite correct to say as we often do, that this institution or that

agency wasn't planned—"it just grew like Topsy". But a lot of able people devote their lives to Topsy-like programmes. They *think* they are getting results; they *think* that what their programmes do is helpful in accomplishing an important social assignment. What makes them think so? The answer may be inarticulate but it is based on operational social theory. It is one of the tasks of the project to search out and define theories of this kind.

Let me cite a couple of random examples from my own observation. In California, we have evolved a technique for dealing with aggressive inmates which we refer to as the Adjustment Centre. The Adjustment Centre is the direct descendant of segregation units at San Quentin and Folsom. By trial and error, by good advice and bad, we seem to be arriving at something which may actually help certain disturbed inmates. What theories of group management support the Adjustment Centre? What are the ideas about human beings in confinement which make them effective? If another prison system wanted to incorporate Adjustment Centres, how would we advise going about it? Why?

Another example. In England last year I observed with admiration and fascinated interest the development of the Detention Centres. I spent some time trying to find out what makes them work; I was deeply grateful for the patience of their wardens in explaining their conceptualisations to me. But then we have a new type of institutional care based on a combination of intuition, some social theory, some common sense, a rising public demand, and an administrative necessity. Out of these factors was developed, not without pain, a

hopeful new kind of institutional treatment which works for some lads. For whom does it work, and why? For whom is this treatment contra-indicated, and why? Can these techniques be exported to California, where they would be eagerly received if we could assure ourselves of their effectiveness with our particular kinds of adolescent hell-raisers? Or is this an institutional form which is rooted in the national peculiarities of English culture? It is not only in the United States or in England that these questions burn. With the steady drift into mass social forms there will be in the years to come a concern over issues like this in every civilised country in the West.

So part of our task is to find out what the doers think. What do the thinkers do? All over the Western World there is an active attack by the forces of scientific method on the stubborn problems of systematically modifying human behaviour which represent dangerous or otherwise undesirable social deviations. A good deal of this work is being done in the universities and scientific institutes. But there is an increasing sense of public responsibility for correctional research.

The work being done by the British Home Office, by the United States Bureau of Prisons and by the California Department of Corrections is only a token of a much larger effort to come in which we shall be working out together a rational basis for the effective treatment of delinquents.

Questions to the thinker are urgent as never before in the history of corrections. With the accelerating urbanisation of society we can be sure that the number of people to be corrected will increase, and not

at the same rate as the population explosion. It takes no prophetic insight to imagine what is ahead for us if between our doers and our thinkers we do not arrive at solutions to check crime and its consequences. Further, we ask these questions at a propitious time. The development of theory in the social sciences has reached a stage when it will be to the mutual benefit of both thinkers

and doers to improve channels of communication.

Our project will scarcely clear all the channels or bring together all the ideas. But it will be a reconnaissance of the whole field to see where the ideas of the doers and the deeds of the thinkers are taking us. For social evolution need not be a blind process. Topsy may have just grown, so far, but maybe with planning we can make a real lady out of her.

