"It's the Prisoners who run this Prison"
—*a study of inmate leadership*

In examining the phenomenon of leadership in prison it is necessary to distinguish between form, function *and* levels of operation. *It is also necessary to distinguish between leadership based on* consent *and leadership based on* coercion.

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ALL LEADERSHIP involves the exercise of power, either in a direct form—when one man tells another to do something or not do it, or in a diffuse form, when the control exerted by the leader is in the sphere of opinion making, in influencing other men and subtly directing them towards certain courses of action rather than giving direct orders. Where leadership is based upon consent, power is based upon the voluntary acceptance of the leader by his followers, he is respected, approved and even admired. Where leadership is based upon coercion, the basis of power is essentially fear; the followers are unwilling or at best ambivalent and the respect that the leader enjoys is an exacted due rather than something freely given. In civilised society the authority of leadership, or government, is based initially on consent, and only in the last resort upon coercion—most people accept the laws that Parliament makes because it is customary to do so; very few have to be coerced by the threat of punishment. In prison society, the forms of leadership tend to be much more distinct, that is to say, the leader whose position rests upon consent can be fairly easily distinguished from the leader whose position depends almost exclusively upon coercion.

Form

The *form* that leadership takes varies considerably. A leader may be the acknowledged head of a group of men (often known as a gang) who makes autocratic decisions about attitudes and behaviour to be adopted towards the staff or other prisoners. Alternatively a leader may be merely senior among three or four other prisoners of roughly equal status all of whom enjoy the respect of a wider circle of acquaintances.

Function

The *function* of leadership also varies. It can provide a kind of long term solidarity expressed in emotional terms—the 'we' continually opposed to 'they'. In so doing, inmate leadership helps to lessen the pains of imprisonment; it keeps a picture of the arbitrary injustices of the prison régime constantly in the forefront of the prisoner's mind and continually reasserts those unchanging values of inmate culture—'doing your own bird', never grassing—which, come what may, cannot be eradicated by the staff. Alternatively, the function of leadership may be merely to enable individual inmates to combine in order to exploit their fellows whom the prison authorities are generally unable (and sometimes unwilling)

to protect. This type of leadership tends to disrupt the unity of inmate society, for it gives rise to the development of 'protective' associations which frequently exploit in their turn. To the extent to which feuds and factions develop, inmate solidarity and resistance to custodial authority is diminished.

Levels of Operation

The inmate leader does not necessarily exert power throughout the prison, though he may. If prison society is likened to a national political community, then there are leaders who operate on a 'national' level and those who operate on a 'local' level. So too the level of operation varies in the sense that some activities effect the whole community and are directed towards group ends, while others are limited in scope and relate to the desired ends of individuals.

Sykes, in his analysis of Trenton,* distinguishes between 'cohesive' and 'alienative' responses in the face of imprisonment. The cohesive response is an action or series of actions which is collectivist in character in that it is directed towards the interests of prisoners *as a whole*. The alienative response on the other hand, is highly individualistic in character and directed towards the satisfactions of an individual, or small group, exploiting both staff and other prisoners as the need arises. Given this, two ideal types of leader can be distinguished which we will call 'Robin Hood' and 'Robber Baron'. Both types are 'troublemakers' as far as the prison authorities are concerned, nevertheless the 'trouble' they create varies appreciably.

*Sykes, G. *The Society of Captives.*

The Robin Hood

He is considered by the mass of the prisoner population to be a major asset in the task of minimising the pains of imprisonment. This leader is a strong-willed man, wise in prison ways, committed to the inmate code of minimal co-operation with the staff but careful never to provoke or bring down trouble upon himself or his associates. He is benevolent, sympathetic, and has many of the marks of a genuine altruist. Such a man was Smith, a forty year old club owner with ten previous convictions and six previous sentences. He was well above average in intelligence, a resilient, well integrated personality, not over enthusiastic about work, but shrewd in pursuing his objectives. His flair for organisation and control, manifest outside by his involvement with organised crime, was turned in prison to large-scale bookmaking. He dominated the prison by his intelligence and wealth, and although suspected of trafficking with an officer, almost certainly made his tobacco profits 'inside'. Though despising 'mugs' and 'tearaways' it is likely that he used the latter as lieutenants in his complex system of controlling the operations of bookmaking, as many of those closely associated with him were aggressive psychopathic individuals. His main claim to popular status was in helping unfortunate prisoners—by arranging for presents to be sent to wives, or children on their birthdays; or by assisting in matrimonial reconciliation. A wealthy man outside the prison, he would, if desired, make the services of his own solicitor available to other prisoners. In all this, of course, he furthered his own self interest—

other prisoners would be glad to do his work in the workshops, or to perform personal services for him. In his relationships with the staff he was 'polite and inoffensive', keeping well out of trouble.

Smith's role in the prison community was essentially cohesive. For prisoners he represented a tower of strengh—'cleverer than all these screws put together'. He advised, and controlled, the extent of his power and influence being sufficient to minimise many of the disruptive forces operative in the inmate social system. His economic interest, i.e. bookmaking, gave him a vested interest in the stability, not only of the inmate sub-system, but of the social system of the prison as a whole. Although the staff disliked him and regarded him as an undesirable exploiter of other prisoners, both he and they had a mutual interest in order and stability. Superiority of brain, and the ability to call upon brawn when necessary, gave Smith an unusual amount of power. It was based, however, upon *loyalty* rather than fear, his good and generous deeds making many men his permanent moral debtors. The staff, recognising Smith to be a leader, often alleged that he "is at the back of all the trouble on the wing at the moment," without any tangible evidence; the effect of their belief was to reinforce his status in the eyes of his fellows as the 'master mind'.

The Robber Baron

He is a very different sort of man, recognised by prisoners as an exploiter, a man whom they would rather do without. In many cases he is actually a tobacco baron or a bookmaker but frequently he is no more than an extortionate bully who demands protection payments or feudal services from those inmates unfortunate enough to come under his influence. He tends to be younger than the Robin Hood, to resort to violence with some frequency and on account of this to be feared by most other inmates. Furthermore his activities tend to be less consistently organised and to be concentrated upon short-run rather than long term objectives.

The *Robber Baron* then is not a leader who can make moral claims upon his followers, but relies upon coercion and fear. It is doubtful whether he is a 'gang' leader in that the term gang implies organisation and permanence which is seldom characteristic of the groups of men he attracts; the term 'near-group' is more appropriate in that it expresses the unstable and ephemeral nature of the bond between him and his immediate followers. In the words of one prisoner:

> "Today there are no really big-time barons, only about twelve of the lesser variety in the whole place. They can't do anything unless they go round in a gang—they are the really dangerous types in the prison. They come in with a reputation and others flock around, i.e. bathing in their reflected glory. The leaders are so-called villains, and like to think they're great shakes, but in fact they can't do anything alone. They are really afraid of trouble. The danger of them is that *if you have a square fight with a gang member you have to go on and fight all the gang in turn if they feel like it.*"

The Businessman

Strictly speaking a distinction needs to be drawn between the Robber Baron who deals in tobacco or bookmaking, and the man who provides other goods and services

at an economic cost. The distinction is not easy to draw because the dividing line between business enterprise which is successfully competitive and sheer economic exploitation or racketeering is narrow. Where the transaction involves simple exchange, for example, payment for getting an extra shirt, no difficulties normally arise. It is only when the transaction is protracted as in the case of gambling or tobacco debts that some additional device of enforcement becomes necessary. As there are no courts in the prison community to which the creditor may have recourse, there is no alternative but to employ coercion* and to this end many of the younger tearaways are employed by barons and bookmakers.

Not all Robber Barons are involved in such business enterprises. Higgins, for example, sold a little tobacco but was mainly concerned that other prisoners should perform services for him for which he was sometimes prepared to pay well above the normal rate of tobacco. A robber in his late twenties, he had sentences totalling seven and a half years to his credit, and was well integrated into the criminal underworld outside. In prison he was well adjusted but tended to be concerned excessively with himself. He rationalised the way in which he made men eager to serve him —cleaning his cell, looking after his contrabrand radio and so on— by saying that he was doing them a good turn. In reality he was buttressing his own ego at other people's expense. In his activities he had the moral and tactical support of Jones, an aggressive psychopath in his mid-thirties serving eight years for manslaughter. Large and physically powerful, Jones had a record of violence in and out of prison and was feared and 'respected' by staff and prisoners alike. A complex personality, he not only shared the control of activities on the wing— access to games, the choice of TV programmes etc., but would exert control over his sycophants by literally using them as furniture.

Stirrers

Alongside such men are others who exert more limited power, described by prisoners as *stirrers*. The stirrer gets other people 'to do his dirty work for him'. "He makes the bullets for other people to fire", and there is some evidence to suggest that a leader who has been defeated in a series of fights and supplanted by a stronger man may adopt such a role.

All these men have complex motivations. They wish their own prison life to be easier and get other prisoners to make it so, but at the same time they need to exert power. A reputation for toughness is important to them both inside and outside prison. Their images among other self-professed criminals must be unchanging.

The Old and the Young

Broadly speaking, as men get older they mature and become less prone to violence. The older men exert their power and influence by more subtle means than the younger, and although they may be able to give a good account of themselves in a fight, violence is frequently delegated to their younger sycophants. Many older prisoners fear the younger element

*Which may in *some* circumstances be limited to 'blacklisting' for future credit.

simply on account of their superior physical strength; as one prisoner (a confidence trickster in his sixties) commented,

"The prison is run by young thugs. The only way to adjust in here is to become a vegetable, otherwise you will be in trouble sooner or later".

Another, aged just over seventy, said he loathed

"... the young tearaways in here who rule the prison by force. Even the officers are reluctant to challenge them unless absolutely necessary".

By and large, these older men steer well clear of the toughs, and are experienced enough not to get into debt with tobacco barons and bookmakers, quite often because they have the kind of job in the prison which carries many 'perks' and allows them to perform services for other inmates for which they are paid in tobacco.

Protection

It is difficult for newly received prisoners to avoid the clutches of the baron although they are officially warned on their cell information cards not to become involved in tobacco or similar transactions. For many, until the modifications of the pay system in October 1959*, this was, and in many cases still is, a pious hope. Once involved, and unable to pay interest at anything up to fifty per cent compound per week, the debtor is in a serious position. Not all tobacco barons immediately order their henchmen to administer a 'going over'; after all, what they want primarily is the tobacco. The threat of violence is often sufficient to get a debtor to pay off some of his debt, but if it is a large one—of more than three or four ounces—he will never pay it off entirely.

*Whereby a prisoner was paid one week's wages on the day immediately following reception.

One resort is to apply for protection under Rule 36, of the Prison Rules, whereby the Governor may authorise arrangements for the prisoner to have non-associated labour in his cell. At the end of one month this arrangement must be approved by the Visiting Justices. Rule 36, however, is seldom an adequate solution, for neither the Governor—nor for that matter the Visiting Justices—are disposed to protect a man under the rule if he will not disclose the identity of his suspected assailants. Few prisoners can afford to flout the Prisoners' Code and 'grass' in this way; for one thing, this would almost certainly invite vengeance, and for another, the prisoner may be genuinely ignorant of the precise identity of his assailants. His creditor will, as part of the psychological terror, deliberately keep him in ignorance of who has been delegated to carry out the attack.

Self-Help

The remaining solutions must be sought by the prisoner himself. He may, in extremity, injure himself or swallow some object in order to be hospitalised, and although instances of this do occur, they tend to be the solutions of men of unstable personality. More reasonable, and in the long run more effective, is the solution of self-help. As Sykes cogently observes, the presence of home-made weapons discovered by the staff in the process of searching is partially accounted for by the prevalence of bullying toughs; they are weapons of self defence in the inmate community rather than offensive weapons to be used against staff.* To some extent self-help is most effective when collectively organised, but it

*Sykes. op.cit. p.92.

would seem that defensive activity presents more problems than offensive activity.

Rival Groups

Because many of the social controls in the inmate social system tend to be based upon external constraint rather than internal consensus, the equilibrium of the system tends to be symbiotic resembling the primitive world of nature. Just as in an aquarium, where one species tends to prey upon another, while other species are allowed to live in peace, a balance is achieved when the predatory species prey equally upon one another. So too, in the prison, violence and exploitation are kept within limits by the presence of rival groups who co-exist for the most part below rather than above the threshold of violence and overt conflict. When violence begins to assert itself it may be checked by violence, and in such situations can be perceived the beginnings of the metamorphosis of the *tough* into the *Robin Hood*.

Such a man was Brown, a twenty seven-year-old unskilled labourer who had achieved some distinction as an amateur boxer, then serving a five-year sentence for defrauding the G.P.O. Although his outside criminal contacts were extensive he differed from the normal *tough* pattern in that he was a hard worker. An illiterate man of primitive and aggressive feelings, he had little control over them, and he admitted to the research worker that he was frightened by his own increasing violence.

In the prison he attempted to limit the powers of the Robber Barons by what were (for the prison authorities) unorthodox means, i.e. by the use of force. Even the Governor had to admit that Brown kept order among prisoners, but became ambivalent as the number of his assualts on other prisoners increased. When, in an uncontrolled moment, he let fly at a prison officer and was taken before the Visiting Justices, another prison officer commented that he hoped the V.C. wouldn't be too tough and turn him against authority. "*He is a good man at keeping order in the prison*". It so happened that he was not harshly dealt with, but unfortunately he continued to be violent towards other prisoners. Nevertheless, his coercive activities were *positively* oriented; for example when a fight broke out, a weak-willed prisoner rang the alarm bell. Brown 'gave him a belting' for this quite flagrant violation of the inmate code. While the staff tended to perceive Brown as a nuisance when he got out of hand, prisoners regarded him as a man who, though wise to avoid, nevertheless maintained justice in inmate society.

'Legitimated' Inmate Leadership

In most prisons throughout the world the authoritarian character of the prison regime is diluted by the delegation of some staff functions to inmates. It is not, strictly speaking, a delegation of formal authority, for whatever task such an inmate performs, and whatever privileges are attached to the job, his status remains that of a captive. For the prison official the 'leader', 'redband' or 'stroke' is a valued asset. He is assigned to a position of trust and responsibility in the task of running the prison. In the eyes of his fellow prisoners

however, he is often a 'grass' or 'screws' man', and the subject of diffuse sanctions of disapproval. Nevertheless, if he performs his task well he contributes to the smooth running of the prison and indirectly to the welfare of his fellow captives. How then is it that he may be regarded with distrust?

The answer is not a simple one, if only because the role of such a leader (whom we can designate a *redband*) is complex. For while undoubtedly he serves the staff, he seldom does so in a spirit of disinterested altruism. The relative freedom accorded to him, and the work tasks he is assigned, enable him not only to lessen the deprivations of imprisonment for himself, but not infrequently to do the same for other prisoners by the supply of illicit goods and services. But however far he may go in this direction he is still basically suspect, if only because he has violated one of the ideal premises of the Prisoners' Code, namely that no self-respecting 'con' should do the work of a screw. The *redband* tends to be selected from among those whose attitudes towards authority tend to be positive, in the sense that they are neither overtly hostile nor passively non co-operative. To become a *redband* 'one's face has to fit'. There is little doubt that he tends to identify with authority, and his demeanour around the prison may antagonise the orthodox adherents to the inmate code—and alienate him from the bulk of inmate society. The *redband's* solution to this problem is frequently to act a double life, to leak information to the staff, but at the same time to leak information in the reverse direction.

Inmate Councils

In the 'training oriented' prisons there have been official moves towards developing inmate responsibility by the setting up of inmate councils* and there is no doubt that this move away from the Nineteenth Century ideas of consistent repression is in essence constructive. How far it is likely to have far-reaching effects upon the mass of social forces operating in the prison community for the intensification of criminality is another matter. The leaders meeting, as observed in one training prison, was essentially a 'grumbling session' and although this may have had some merit as a safety valve, there was little evidence to suggest that these were necessarily even the grumbles of the non-leaders. In fact there were unmistakable signs that the group constituted a socially isolated élite in the prison, remote from the real foci of power in the inmate social system.

Stability and Conflict in the Inmate Social System

In reality, the prisoner must steer a course between the Prison Rules and The Prisoners' Rules, and the task is frequently difficult. The prison as a whole is territorially divided between wings, workshops, and exercise yards, and in each of these areas inmate leadership will be exercised. As in most human communities, the ultimate equilibrium of the system will depend upon a balance of the forces contending for power, and power in inmate society is based sometimes upon concensus, sometimes upon external constraint,

*The Director of Prison Administration made history by directly consulting one of these a year or so ago.

and frequently upon a combination of the two. The physical, social, and psychological deprivations of imprisonment undoubtedly stimulate among most prisoners behaviour which is designed to to minimise them; at the same time the prison contains men with strong drives towards controlling other men and in so doing satisfying many of their inner psychological needs.

Restraining and Utilising Indigenous Leadership

It is a simple truth that in the face of *complete* and *massive* refusal to comply with his orders the prison official is powerless.

(a) COHESIVE ELEMENTS

The reason why large scale rebellion seldom occurs inside even repressive prisons is partly that inmate society is too heterogeneous to be capable of such unified action, but most importantly because numerous inmates have a conscious investment in tranquility. Even the *tough* who seeks to control the excesses of the barons and other toughs plays a cohesive role, but one which is likely to achieve only temporary stability. Finally one might note that 'the businessmen' who supply illicit goods and services and remain honest in their dealings, make stability worth investing in, and by lessening the deprivations of imprisonment make for a contented population.

(b) DISRUPTIVE ELEMENTS

Contrasted to the above types are the real contenders for power in the prison. These others are the truly anarchic elements who, undisciplined themselves, would if unrestrained, reduce the prison to a Hobbesian 'State of Nature' in which every man's hand was against every other. Their roles are essentially alienative in that their behaviour is ego-centric and inconsistent. Sooner or later their demands are resisted by others of their own kind and conflict ensues. It is perhaps because they are so often seekers after power *for its own sake* that they constitute such a danger in the prison community.

The Reality of the Situation

In order to control the activities of such individuals the full weight of the prison's coercive power needs to be applied, and unfortunately 'tightening up' bears resemblance to a non-selective insect killer which destroys not only the particular pest which happens to be its primary objective, but other insects which have themselves been instrumental in reducing the pest, at least to some degree. The first task of the administrator then is to distinguish effectively between different types of leader in the prison and to recognise that not a few of them are doing some of the work for him. Some prison officials are indeed able to recognise this, but their freedom of policy manoeuvre is generally restricted.

Classification and Segregation

The second task of the administrator is to buttress the cohesive elements of the inmate society and at the same time attempt a systematic erosion of the power of the alienative elements. The achievement of the latter objective tends to be made simpler by adequate classification and if necessary by segregation. The experience of Morrice at Peterhead Prison suggests that at least some of the troublemakers transferred there from Barlinnie responded to

psycho-therapeutic techniques,* although he notes that segregation is a "technique of *dealing* with subversive elements that raises problems of its own." By isolating them from their prey, tensions are built up in the group which bring them to the point where psycho-somatic symptoms and tension states render them amenable to treatment. Segregation then, can provide both protection for the general mass of inmates and the pre-conditions of treatment, but needs to be of significant duration. It is doubtful whether the use of Rule 36 in this regard is likely to provide more than a temporary solution.

Strengthening the cohesive elements in the prison raises implications for the stability of the inmate social system as well as for the formal structure of authority. It is difficult to look favourably upon the 'businessmen' who supply illicit goods and services, even though they constitute a major share of the forces working towards the maintenance of order and the status quo. What is striking about many of these men is their capacity for organisation and planning, and the consistency of their behaviour. If amelioration of those aspects of prison life which are the legacy of the Nineteenth Century (and have no place in the ethos of the *treatment* institution) proceeds, they will cease to have a function to perform. At the same time, there is every reason to believe that many of these men could and would play constructive roles on inmate councils. Unless there can be real sharing of power and authority, and the lowest ranks of the discipline staff can feel secure that such sharing neither diminishes their own authority nor renders them likely to be unsupported by their superiors at critical moments—unless these conditions are fulfilled, inmate councils and committees will be as meaningless as Parliamentary democracy under the Czars.

*Morrice, J. K. W., *Psychiatric Treatment of Habitual Criminals*, Brit. J. Delinq: X.1. July 1959. p.17-18.

Social Responsibility

It might of course be asked by those whose information and attitudes towards the treatment of offenders is shaped by the wildly distorted stereotypes of prisons, prisoners and prison staffs which still abound, what useful purpose would be served by such a development. One answer would be that inmate leadership cannot be obliterated, therefore any forward looking penal system must try to harness the forces associated with it rather than expend its scarce resources in a futile effort to contain them. Another would be that just as men cannot be trained for freedom in conditions of captivity, so men cannot be trained to accept social responsibility in conditions which, at their most extreme, reduce them to a state of near infantile dependency. The task here is to mobilise the social capacities of men who are seldom wholly anti-social in such a way that the words: "It's the prisoners who run this prison" are an expression, not of resentment on the part of a prison official who feels that things have got out of hand, but of achievement, that men who have hitherto failed to adjust to life in a socially acceptable manner have moved significantly towards responsibility and maturity.