

School For Scoundrels

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NOT SO VERY long ago a certain proficiency in "the three R's" plus a little Biblical and general knowledge had to suffice for the education of the ordinary man. Nowadays we expect more. Not just more technical training but also a better understanding of the whole culture of our society, its arts and higher learning as well as its techniques, and by as many people as possible, not just a small elite. We look to the schools and colleges to deal with aspects of behaviour, of citizenship and of recreation, that were once left to be learned in the home and community or on the job. So we can fairly say that as our culture becomes more complex we depend more on organised education for its transmission.

In prison, dealing with those of whom it might be said that this process of culture-transmission has somehow gone adrift, the services of education are enlisted to help bridge the gap. That at least should surely be a vital part of their function. Yet although the Tutor-Organiser is by now well established in most prisons, it seems

doubtful whether his position in practice accords with a recognition of the importance of this function, and he often finds his scope limited as a consequence. Hugh Klare¹ sees him as something of an outsider, up against the problem of serving two masters, the local education authority and the Prison Commission, with no prospect of a career in the service and liable to be relegated to the sidelines in his daily work. A stop-gap, in fact, rather than a bridge. Klare rejects as a remedy the idea of a centrally planned system of education, or of making it the main instrument of rehabilitation, but he accepts the case for a more fully integrated service with its own career structure. The need for integration is also the conclusion of Frances Banks² in her much fuller study in the light of her considerable experience as a tutor organiser. But she believes that education should be the main force for rehabilitation and holds out the hope of penal treatment ultimately being integrated with educational practice, rather than the other way round. Re-education in place of punish-

ment, that would be. Here I am not so much concerned with speculative future developments as to attempt to analyse the present situation and to argue the case for a due recognition of the proper role of adult education in prisons as they are now.

This particularly refers to the closed type of prison that houses the majority of adult offenders. Perhaps the case is somewhat different with regard to the 'star' and open establishments where there is greater scope—and an elite composed of men who have only temporarily lapsed into crime, or are only just beginning, and most of whom will not be returning to prison anyway. It might be worth trying to unravel to what extent the provision of better facilities for them is based, respectively, on the fact that organisation and control is easier, a theory that they are more likely to benefit, or a feeling that they are more deserving. But whatever may be thought on that issue, the closed prison certainly gives rise to a current of feeling, perhaps compounded with despair at seeing the same old crowd regularly reconvicted, that the inmates neither deserve nor are likely to gain much benefit from such facilities. This is quite a handicap. If the question were simply that of teaching the illiterate to read and write or imparting some knowledge useful for earning an honest livelihood there might be little more to be said. There may also be ample sympathy for

the Tutor Organiser, reflecting his sympathy for those who have to run the place. But classes in music and literature for the old lag—that is really going into the realm of frills and fancies!

There may be no objection to such frills: at least they give the men something better than crime and sex to think about. But men only go to get out of the cell and see their mates, and they (and the teachers) need watching or they will fill their cells with books, and what next! So the Tutor feels he is on the defensive, on a tight rein. Education is interstitial to the main purpose of the prison, whatever that is, all right where it can be fitted in but the first casualty of any pressure on accommodation or administration, and, for the inmate, a privilege that has to be sought and which he can be held to deserve or not according to criteria that have nothing to do with education. So, with all due allowance for the needs of security, one does not get the impression that the torch of learning is exactly being thrust upon him. (This still relates to tendencies and not to standing orders or policy decisions, of course.)

Perhaps the best way of getting a true idea of the scope for education would be to take a careful look, if there were only time to do so, at those who do not—and do not even wish to—get out of the cell in an evening. A prodigious amount of thinking goes on in there. The question can be

approached, however, by starting from a view of the environment itself.

Prison is a learning situation anyway. We do not arrest that natural process by bringing together all sorts and conditions of men in close confinement: we probably enhance it and we certainly give it a different twist. That it may be a totally undesirable twist was recognised by the advocates of the old silent system, which aimed at preventing all communication between prisoners. That there is a hope of turning it to some benefit is now accepted by the protagonists in group counselling, whereby:

"inmates, it is found, will often receive and accept from a group of their fellows in this kind of setting good and realistic advice which they do not readily accept from a member of the staff or any other source." ⁸

Against this might be set the point of view of an ex-inmate:

"The grandly entitled 'Norwich experiment' for instance . . . its complete balls . . . For the simple reason that the whole scheme is based on talk—on good advice—which the prisoners don't want, don't understand and, a lot of them, heartily resent. They've been having it all their lives since they were kids whenever they were in trouble. If they could pay attention to it; if they were the sort of people who could benefit from good advice they wouldn't be in prison in the first place." ⁴

There is no need to take sides: obviously some men seem to seek advice where others spurn it. But there are two aspects of the learning situation, of the prison culture, that shape and condition the attitude of the individual and

seem to give the educational approach, and perhaps especially the approach from outside the prison system, the greater potential in this field.

The first relates to values. Too easily it is assumed that the inmate simply has none, has some innate deficiency, a lack of moral sense, and that is why he is here. It would take an exhaustive study to try to define the values he is said to lack but the rest of us, presumably, to possess. Certainly prison has no monopoly in dishonesty, or in the attitude that anything goes so long as you can get away with it, so long as you are not found out. Yet on the other hand there is a sense of shame about the more selfish and materialistic aspects of our society, which seems to betoken higher values even where it does not restrain behaviour. The inmate however is one who has been found out. His particular, and generally petty, form of selfishness and materialism was probably only too easy to expose. So he is put time and again through the judicial process, where his concern is focussed with all the dramatic panoply of the law, not on values but on the chances or mischances of conviction. There is no room for shame. The judge who pronounces: "this is a court of law, not of morals" can hardly add: "and you should be ashamed of yourself." But he need make no such pronouncement: he has just had to acquit in a more successfully defended case one who has got

away with it, and anyway there are so many others equally involved but unmolested. So for the victim of the law, as he now sees himself, reaction to any advice or homily is purely a question of tactics. As in the heat of the contest there is little scope for finer feelings, so in defeat it is his tactics and not the value of his deeds that he re-examines. There may be the possibility of appeal. "Have you any books on Habeas Corpus?" was one of my very first requests for educational assistance. Expediency and strategy are a main focus of his quiet thoughts and daily intercourse. It is his rights versus the wrongs, (commonly referred to as diabolical liberties) he suffers rather than judge's or parson's right and wrong. Moreover, in adjudications and punishments during the sentence we, by proper adherence to the rules of evidence, reinforce the lesson that the clever lie and well-rigged defence pay material dividends that penitence cannot offer.

Thus the penal system breeds psychopaths—or, rather, propagates a culture in which they thrive and on which they can have an undue influence. The sentence is a tangible seal of membership. Outside the walls it is a culture (a sub-culture, to be precise) that recedes from the backstage of society, knowing all the tricks and subterfuges of those who are in on the act, their vanities and failings rather than their qualities, profiting thereby but seeing no virtue in the

show, which is all, from the highest organs of state to the smallest enterprise, a box-office racket anyway, one way of exploiting the mugs. Perhaps these "mugs" are to some extent neutral or incalculable. The dividing line cannot be sharp, but somewhere in opposition is felt to stand the law and its supporters: "In-law blokes like you and them all on the watch for the out-law blokes like me and us, and waiting to phone the coppers as soon as we make a false move," as Alan Sillitoe's borstal boy^s saw them. It is not that there are no values but that values are relative to the culture. This borstal character felt that he had always been honest in himself, and even saw honesty in the nasty detective who arrested him, but none in the Governor's appeal to an honesty that pretended to embrace both of the cultures. Likewise with athletic standards, the Governor tried to link the value to the wrong culture so the boy made sure he lost the race.

Prison values, then, tend to be relative and individualistic, and the commonly accepted codes of conduct to be self-protective, supporting the culture, which is otherwise wide open in tolerance of almost any form of belief and behaviour. Too much should not therefore be expected from the wide-ranging and interesting discussions in this field that are the basis (or bane?) of some permissive types of group work. This is not to disparage such work. Permissiveness—to act as a

normal, talkative human being—is so recent an acquisition to prison that it has to be nurtured. But when it comes to counselling it should be remembered that these men have had a lot of good advice, prescriptions for reform and rehabilitation—often inspired from and having a reference point way beyond the cultural divide. The claims may have been unrealistic or the response lacking, but the result has not been achieved, and in either case they tend to be dismissed as false claims and broken promises. Sometimes these failures are openly adduced as grounds for the rejection of this type of approach, and they can then be discussed on that basis, though it is easier to earn respect as a good talker than to undermine the basic cultural attitude of rejection. Often there seems to be acceptance without commitment. As Sillitoe's character reflected: "I gave them the answer they wanted because I'd hold my trump card till later."

The teacher has some initial advantage in being an outsider and less immediately involved in this situation of culture-conflict, though he too should not be over-impressed, if he had expected otherwise, by the lively tolerance accorded him, a pleasant mug amongst the rest of the crockery. But his main advantage is his being master of a craft or subject in which the inmate participates. Standards of achievement are set by the material or subject matter and not by any claims the teacher

may make. There is still room for debate and difference of opinion but the basis of judgment is the well-made article, the correct solution or the right interpretation, according to values that the student forms for himself by participating. He is not floating on a sea of opinion. These values are standards of truth and goodness if the subject is worth teaching at all.

It is a far cry from a little handicraft or mathematics to the values men live by, but let us bear in mind the isolating nature of the sub-culture and the tendencies to phantasy and unrealism to which imprisonment gives rise. A start has to be made somewhere—but not just anywhere. It should involve commitment to something worthwhile and at hand, something based on what is clear and demonstrable rather than vague and conjectural, something of which the values can take root and grow in the sub-culture without being dependent on it, being equally relevant at large. There should also be some objectivity in the sense of turning outward from the self: personal problems may be acute but they need to be got away from as well as faced, and they can easily be over-indulged. Above all, our efforts should be made and seen as pertaining to man in society as a whole and not mainly in some partial role—as criminal, teacher, etc. But they must avoid pretentiousness. To have the roles and affairs of the affluent and successful world

paraded before the eyes, to be taken upstage and given a nodding acquaintanceship with the big names at the top of the bill may be good television but, by itself, bad teaching. In the prison situation, apart from the question of values, it can both emphasise isolation and dissociation and feed the phantasy of those who suffer from trying short cuts to muscle in on the act. Education involves disciplined study, and one of the salient features, of adult education at least, is that you cannot get fully involved in the study of the humanities without in some way coming up against problems of ethics—the values men live by.

The other aspect favourable to the educational approach concerns authority. Without delving deeply into the problems of the exercise of authority in general it is obvious that the power to punish and restrain produces resentment and resistance. Any lead given by an individual identified with that power is subject to this resistance and liable to be discounted as an insidious means of furthering his power. He should not be daunted on that account, for none of us has only one simple role to play. The teacher is also identifiable with the intolerant, law-abiding aspect of society responsible for repression, and if his manner is too authoritarian he will surely be so identified to his disadvantage. For despite the immaturity to be found amongst prisoners, and the attitude of dependency that is often the mark

of institutionalisation, they are not as children, having a naturally accepted sense of dependence on authoritarian roles. They know they do depend on discipline in prison and have no illusions about inmate authority or the crude forms of power, the strong-arm stuff, exercised in the culture by the few who aspire to it. Hence though they can respect, however grudgingly, the exercise of authority that is necessary for running the place they are quick to resent as a diabolical liberty any extension of the coercive role beyond that minimum. So if prison is to be anything more than a lock-up, a completely different role is needed in addition.

This role is provided through the type of authority that springs, not from a position of power but from knowledge or skill in some particular sphere, and works through influence and leadership rather than coercion. This is where adult education has the advantage, for that is its traditional role. Not only is it identified with liberation rather than repression but its authority depends on mastery of a subject or skill in which the student participates for its own sake, but by participating learns to appreciate and share that type of authority. This aspect of learning can easily be overlooked in what is of necessity the first concern for order and security in prison. It is then left to the resources of the inmate culture, where it is likely either to centre on undesirable or criminal fields

of activity or on individuals who, though they may be proficient in perfectly respectable fields, are nevertheless influential upholders of the culture to which their authority is primarily subservient.

This point brings together the consideration of authority with that of values. If the aim is some cultural transformation, or transplantation, (which, short of a legislative clean sweep, it surely must be) then we need positively to cultivate this authority and leadership amongst inmates, both for its benefit to the individual and for achieving and spreading the values with which we are concerned. This does not necessarily mean using existing sources of leadership where these are too heavily invested with the prison culture. The born actor in the drama group, the loquacious and knowledgeable man-of-the-world in the Current Affairs class and the sophisticated copyist (or forger) in the Art class may be, for that reason, the least suitable members on which to rely. Nor should it be left to the more persistent and rule-conscious inmates to demand our attentions. But for any man who is amenable to this process educational activities, pursued for their own sake, serve both as a means for exploring and achieving common basic values and as a focus for the exercise of this type of authority.

There is a danger in making these emphatic generalisations on the theme of the sub-culture, that

too much weight will be attached to it. The term is not meant to carry any of the common meaning of subnormal or sub-human. Most of these men are very ordinary. They have and are capable of developing normal adult interests that are autonomous in the sense of not being merely reflections of personal problems or circumstances; their values and attitudes are contiguous with those of society in general; their aims and ambitions, so far as these can be assessed, seem strikingly conventional. But society generates these sub-cultures and the law, in this case, emphasises and strengthens the division. The role of education is concerned with reuniting. Therefore, provided that a man can reasonably participate in these activities there should be no question of his deserts. The court has awarded what he is held to deserve—a period of constraint, and there is legal provision for dealing with any further misdeeds. The question is: in enforcing that constraint do we by default accept and thereby reinforce his allegiance to the sub-culture? By showing too exclusive an interest in his propensities as a criminal that is likely to be the case. Or do we seek to challenge that allegiance in this other role, showing interest in him as a normal adult?

The claims made here for education are modest in that, by every man being encouraged to participate to the extent of his ability and interest, no spectacular results

can be anticipated; but they are sweeping insofar as they apply to the whole of society and not just to the branded criminal. There seems to be a career element in crime. Probably due to some process of maturation in the individual the culture begins to pall and there is likely sooner or later to come a parting of the ways. The greatest problem, of course, is his transfer and settlement on the other side of the cultural divide. But perhaps the parting would come sooner and the settlement be easier if he had developed some commitment, had enhanced his possibilities of achievement and judgement (or authority and value, in the terms used here), or even if he had lived in a common market of ideas rather than a vicious circle. Adult Education is in fact helping an increasing number of people over the threshold of retirement: it should help these.

It is, no doubt, a slow-acting medicine administered in small doses against the continual heavy draughts of prison poison, and if the teacher remains an isolated outsider, functioning perhaps once a week in an alien environment, he may well, whatever his skill and devotion, despair of making any lasting impression. But this is a false and wasteful position. For although his professional skill is indispensable and his membership of the larger outside body of education vital, the role here outlined is not specific to the teacher. It can be exerted as a pupil, for that

matter, and it certainly should not be outside the scope of the staff member who has also to play a coercive role. To suggest mixed classes of staff and inmates out of working hours but inside the prison is unrealistic, but at least it may be hoped that such a member, even though he may have no direct teaching contribution to make, should regard it as part of his duty to foster and support this role and actively to encourage participation by inmates. He should be in close alliance, a sharing of values and authority, with teachers and those more directly involved. After all, it can make his other role easier to perform and better understood as well. Nor is it specific to education in the more formal sense. Skilled group work and individual efforts—that may owe more to personal qualities or to intuitive sympathy and understanding than to fashionable intellectual concepts—also partake of it, and it has its place in the organisation of industry and other activities. Thus, with co-operative effort, the effect is cumulative, and it may be more than a mere antidote to the poison.

Adult education, then, has great and largely unrealised potentialities in addition to the immediate value to the individual of any particular study that he takes up. This obvious value has not been stressed here. Even so this is not put forward as a cure for crime; nor, essentially, is it a programme for penal reform. These old bastilles cannot suddenly be

turned into palaces of culture and recreation: indeed while punishment is demanded perhaps they should not be. But they might usefully be made to point the lesson that although society constrains and represses the individual it is within rather than against society that he is likely to find fulfilment. It is therefore a plea that we first re-examine our own attitudes within the present system: that we seek to give those facilities that tend towards fulfilment an emphasis at least comparable with that now given to constraint—not just in theory but in the day-to-day organisation of the prison, which is where such emphasis takes effect: and that in

despair at the old and in seeking new and perhaps more spectacular methods of treatment for some cases we do not let go by default this basic role of education for the many. For if it is now thought important for society that the ordinary man should learn more than the tricks of his trade, is it not even more important that the ordinary criminal should do so?

References.

- ¹ Hugh Klare: *Anatomy of Prison.*
- ² Frances Banks: *Teach them to Live.*
- ³ Report of Commissioners of Prisons, 1961, (Cmnd.1798).
- ⁴ T. Parker and R. Allerton: *The Courage of His Convictions.*
- ⁵ Alan Sillitoe: *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner.*

“My Lords . . .”

SIR—My purpose in writing is to congratulate you on your interesting journal, and to comment on the Bishop of Exeter's review of Lord Longford's *“The Idea of Punishment”*.

I found the book irritating but the review even more so. The Bishop seems oblivious to every bit of progress that has been made in sentencing policy over the past sixty years. In saying it is “a human duty to seek to impose a punishment which is as nearly as possible proportionate to the gravity of the offence and the culpability of the offender” he takes us right back to the nineteenth century.

His statement is just not true. Modern sentencing policy is much more flexible, more intelligent and more humane. No longer, as the Bishop thinks, does “society estimate the gravity of the offence by the tariff of punishments laid down by the legislature”. The court is not compelled to punish an offender however grave the offence, unless it be murder. Quite often it imposes no penalty at all. Very often it forgives and gives reformatory help in the form of probation. In the past five years a probation order has been made for every type of indictable offence against the person or against property except murder. When the court does punish, its aim is certainly not to exact “reparation for wrong-doing” but to protect society. This indeed is its prime function. It can sometimes afford this protection by reformatory measures and sometimes by deterrent ones. The whole idea of the ‘tariff system’ is on its way out and it need be regretted by none.

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