HACKS
BLACKS
AND
CONS

Race Relations in a Maximum Security Prison

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Waveland Press, Inc.
P.O. Box 400
Prospect Heights, Illinois 60070
(312) 634-0081

A wave of violence, frequently with racial overtones, has drawn the attention of the nation to its prisons. In response to these outbursts some advocate more repressive institutions; others argue for the abandonment of prisons in favor of some more humane alternative. I am of the latter persuasion. Six years of experience in prisons, first as a guard and later as an observer, have convinced me that brutality and violence are the inevitable products of the current system of corrections. Further, I have become convinced that humanitarian reforms within prisons effect no substantial change in the level of brutality and violence, although they perhaps substitute psychological for physical measures. The material contained in this monograph—a study of race relations in a reform-oriented prison —provides, I believe, abundant evidence for each of these assertions.

A radical transformation of the correctional system is in order. But how likely is such a transformation in a society in which nearly half of the prisoner population are members of oppressed minorities? The analysis of race relations in the prison shows prisons to be a reflection of the society they serve. A humanization of American corrections thus presumes a humanization of American society. While not optimistic about the possibilities of humanization, I hope that this work will, at least in a small way, contribute to its realization.

Unfortunately, but necessarily, the people to whom I am most indebted must remain anonymous. These are the men—the hacks, the blacks, and the cons—of "Eastern Correctional Institution." Without their acceptance and cooperation the research could not have been done. To protect them I have chosen not to identify the institution or any of its personnel. All names used in this report are fictitious, and any resemblance to names of people working or confined in prisons is coincidental.

It is with a deep sense of appreciation that I acknowledge the assistance of Professors Harold Pfautz and Dietrich Rueschemeyer of Brown University, and Colin Loftin of the University of Maryland. While at times painful, their criticism was always constructive. Even more helpful than their technical assistance, however, was their unflagging support and encouragement.

Several people shared the tedious task of typing field notes and various drafts of the manuscript. To my mother, Mary Carroll, and to Sarah Zacks, Beth Underwood, and Gloria Tewhey I extend my warmest gratitude.

Words alone can never repay Carol, Jennifer and Gretchen whose emotional support sustained me through the difficult years of research and writing.

And, finally, there is Jeanne C. Moore whose unconditional love and gentle strength have, in the last several years, guided me in the way of wisdom and acceptance. To her, I dedicate this reissue marking a new chapter in our lives.

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1 Introduction

"Nothing is more powerful than an idea, and they have the idea that they are victims of a racist society, repressed by racist pigs and racist institutions."[1] These are the words of Russell G. Oswald, former Commissioner of Corrections for the State of New York, who regards the issues posed by black prisoners as the most awesome challenge he has faced in his twenty-five years in corrections. Four months after he had spoken these words, Oswald confronted the issues head-on. On September 19, 1971 he ordered the New York State Police to retake the Attica Correctional Institution by assault. Thirty inmates were killed, most of them black.

More recently, following several weeks of disorder in Florida's correctional system, a white inmate filed a suit asking for a return to racial segregation in the state's prisons.[2] Commenting on this suit and the disorder that preceded it, Louie Wainwright, Director of Corrections, said: "It is an extremely hazardous situation. White prisoners are begging to be locked in cells because of the increasing aggressive activities by blacks."[3] Superintendent K.D. Conner of Florida's Sumter Correctional Institution observed that in a racially integrated prison, "the tension is directed more against the other race than against the staff."[4]

These are only two incidents in a wave of racial disturbances that has swept the nation's prisons in recent years. Most often this conflict has come to public attention in the form of violent disturbances in which black inmates are pitted against a predominantly white prison staff. The observations by Florida officials make clear, however, that these dramatic confrontations are only the tip of the iceberg. Beneath these outbursts, contained and hidden by the walls of the prison, are a myriad of conflicts that involve black prisoner against white prisoner as well as black prisoners against staff.

Despite the obvious racial tension in prisons, there has been no sociological analysis of the problem. Research in race relations tends to be guided by a melioristic interest. By and large it has concentrated on whatever has seemed to be the important problem of the moment. As the spotlight of public attention has illuminated one problem area after another, the focus of research has shifted. Thus, in succession since World War II research has concentrated on integration in the armed forces, discrimination in business and industry, residential segregation, school desegregation, and most recently urban violence. The importance and scale of these

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issues dwarfed the problems surrounding the forced racial integration of the 600,000 incarcerated adults.[5] Moreover, until 1970 the prisons seemed to be islands of tranquility in an ocean swept by racial turmoil. Thus, while there have been a few studies of racial discrimination in law enforcement, there have been none of race relations in the prison.

There is a substantial body of sociological research on the prison. Yet, in all of this research there is only incidental reference to the fact that prisoners differ in racial identities. As will become clear later in this chapter, this oversight may actually be a reflection of the fact that until recently racial identities have been of little importance to prison social structure. Whatever the reason, however, the fact remains that studies of the prison offer virtually no information regarding race relations.

In view of the gaps in our knowledge concerning race relations in the prison, the research reported here was undertaken as an exploratory case study. By delving deeply into the situation of one prison, it seeks to provide some understanding of how race relations are organized in prisons. More concretely, the aim of the study is to describe the structure of race relations as it existed in one prison during the period of study, and to identify the conditions that maintained the structure and that may therefore cause it to change.

Prison Social Organization and Race Relations

I have observed that few of the many studies on the prison have considered the fact that inmates and staff alike differ in their racial identities. This omission may be an oversight due to the theoretical orientation of this research. Or, in fact, it may be an indication that race is of minimal significance within the prison. In this section, after reviewing the literature on inmate social organization, I offer an hypothesis concerning this question.

Prison Social Organization

Since the publication of Clemmer's study of a Midwest prison[6] in 1940 there has developed a rich body of scholarly literature on the social organization of the prison. Most of this research concerns the informal social organization of prisoners. Two questions dominate these research efforts: (1) the nature of prisoner organization, and (2) the origins of this organization. Some studies depict prisoner populations organized as collectivities; others characterize populations as organized into primary groups; and a few studies portray prisoners as unorganized. With regard to the second

question some researchers view the prisoner subculture and social organization as emerging within the prison; others argue that inmate culture and social organization have their origins outside the prison. To a large extent the answers to these two questions are correlated. Those who portray prisoners as collectively organized in a symbiotic system are inclined to view this organization as indigenous to the prison. Those who portray prisoners as affiliated in primary groups usually argue that inmate culture is imported from outside the prison. In short, there are two models of inmate social organization: (1) a deprivation model and (2) an importation model.[7]

The Deprivation Model. The major premise of the deprivation model is that inmate culture and social organization are collective functional responses to the deprivations imposed by incarceration. Sykes and Messinger identified five such pains of imprisonment: loss of freedom, deprivation of material comfort, loss of autonomy, denial of heterosexual contact, and physical insecurity.[8] To this list McCorkle and Korn have added rejection by society.[9] Prisoners can never escape completely the impact of these deprivations, but inmate solidarity is one means by which the pain may be reduced for the greatest number. Thus, it is argued, there emerges within the prison an inmate culture, the major characteristic of which is a normative code of solidarity. The code enjoins prisoners to "do your own time," "don't rat," "don't bring heat."[10] These norms are articulated in a system of interdependent though not necessarily cohesive roles. "Real men" are those prisoners who exemplify the code in their prison behavior and enforce adherence to it. In opposition to "real men" are role types such as "merchants," "toughs," "fags," and "rats"—all of which stand in violation of one or more maxims of the inmate code.[11] Thus, the inmate social system stands in precarious balance between a collective solidarity founded upon conformity to shared norms and a state of complete disruption, a war of all against all.

Implicit in this model is a conception of the prison as a closed system, a total institution impermeable to influence from the outside. The inmate culture emerges through the interaction of prisoners within the walls and new prisoners are socialized into it.[12] Predisposing inmates to the socialization process is a ritual series of degradations that is part of the formal induction into the prison.[13] Through such defilements pre-prison identities are extinguished and a new identity, that of the convict, is conferred and continually affirmed.

Despite the hypothesis that prisoners are socialized into a pre-existing inmate culture, studies supporting the deprivation model have largely shown prisoner populations to be organized as collectivities rather than into primary groups. In Clemmer's study for example, only 18 percent of the population were affiliated in primary groups.[14] In Wheeler's study of

socialization, only 43 percent of his sample were involved in primary groups.[15] Likewise, in four of the five institutions studied by Glaser there was a tendency for inmates to remain uninvolved in primary group relations,[16] and in a federal narcotics hospital studied by Tittle[17] less than half of the male patients reported having one or more good friends.

In sum, the deprivation model adopts a conception of the prison as a total institution. Life within the institution presents prisoners with a series of deprivations to which they adapt collectively by means of an indigenously developed code of solidarity. This code is articulated in a system of interdependent roles. While primary group affiliation may be present, the prevailing mode of organization is symbiotic rather than cohesive.

The Importation Model. A number of researchers have criticized what they regard as the restrictive scope of the deprivation model. While agreeing that inmate culture and social organization are adaptive responses to the problem of incarceration, these critics attack the conception of the prison as a closed system total institution. In essence, they argue that the quality of inmate adaptation is influenced by pre-prison experiences. From this perspective the existence of a well-developed and integrated inmate culture is an example of a latent culture.[18] It is one that has its origins and supports in groups outside the prison and is imported into the prison through the interaction of people from similar backgrounds in the face of common problems to which they must adapt.

Irwin and Cressey have provided the clearest statement of this position.[19] They argue that inmate culture is an accomodation among three diverse subcultural orientations: "thief," "convict," and "do right." Each of these orientations has its origins outside the prison. The "thief" subculture derives from the subculture of professional crime and extols the values of loyalty and trustworthiness. The "convict" orientation originates both in reform schools and the culture of the "hard core" lower class. The central value of this orientation is utilitarianism; "convicts" are oriented to achieving wealth, status, and power within the prison community. The "do right" orientation has its origin in the conventional values of the middle and working classes. In the prison it is characterized by an attempt to achieve the goals set for prisoners by the staff.

Irwin and Cressey hypothesize that in the typical prison the subcultural orientation of the "convict" is dominant, with those of "thief" and "do right" adjusting and accomodating to it.[20] As a result the prison population is organized as a congeries of cliques having diverse orientations and existing in some sort of balanced accomodation. Irwin, for example, has depicted convict social organization in California prisons in the following manner:

The convict population in California tends to be splintered. A few convicts orient

themselves to the prison social system and assume roles in regard to the prison, and a few others withdraw completely, but the majority confine their association to one or two groups of convicts and attempt to disassociate themselves from the bulk of the population. These groups vary from small, close-knit primary groups to large casual groups.[21]

Additional support for an importation model is found in studies of prisons for women. Ward and Kassebaum characterized the female prisoners at Frontera, California as organized into primary groups and dyadic homosexual alliances, with little collective solidarity existing between groups.[22] At the Federal Reformatory for Women in Alderson, West Virginia, Giallombardo found the cornerstone of inmate organization to be pseudo-marriages linked together in an elaborate substitute kinship system.[23] Both studies interpret this form of adaptation as the result of prior socialization into the traditional female roles of wife and mother. It is the dispossession of these roles and the consequent absence of security, intimacy, and affection that women experience as the most deprivational aspect of confinement. Organization into dyadic homosexual alliances and close-knit primary groups evolves as a response to these pains. Thus, an ascriptive identity, sex, is viewed as structuring what is defined as deprivational about prison, and structuring the manner in which prisoners organize to alleviate these deprivations.

In contrast to the deprivation model, then, the importation model does not view the prison as a closed system total institution. It interprets inmate adaptations to imprisonment as conditioned by factors external to the prison. Within the prison inmates are organized into primary groups and cliques composed of prisoners sharing similar orientations, with little collective solidarity between groups.

Contradictions or Complements? The deprivation and importation models commonly are viewed as opposed models of inmate organization. But such a view may represent undue polarization. Rather than being contradictory, these models may in fact be complementary. Each may be a representation of the sources and form of inmate organization as it exists under different conditions. Prisons vary greatly in the balance of deprivation and control they impose upon inmates, and the balance of deprivation and control is a crucial condition in the deprivation model. As the argument runs, the greater the deprivation imposed and the more rigid and oppressive the authority to which inmates are subject, the more likely there is to emerge within the prison a normative code of solidarity. The converse of this argument is that the less harsh the deprivations and controls, the less likely it is that a code of solidarity will emerge. A worthy hypothesis, then, is that collective solidarity among prisoners is directly related to the degree of deprivation and control to which they are subject.

A low degree of deprivation and control is likely also to result in increased primary group affiliation. Humanitarian reform in prison usually includes such measures as extended and less supervised visiting privileges, less restrictions on access to the mass media, increased time for recreation, and the modification of prison uniform and hairstyles in the direction of styles current in the outside world. These and similar changes increase the permeability of the prison and facilitate the prisoners' continued attachments to external reference groups and their affiliation in cliques with other prisoners sharing similar orientations. In brief, lessened deprivation and control may weaken collective solidarity and simultaneously facilitate involvement in primary groups and continued attachments to reference groups external to the prison.

A close examination of the data presented in the few comparative studies reported in the literature provides support for this hypothesis. Berk's comparison of prisoner attitudes in three minimum security prisons varying in degree of their emphasis upon a treatment orientation revealed that prisoner attitudes toward the staff and program were the most positive in the treatment institution, the most negative in the custodial institution, and intermediate in the mixed goal institution.[24] Berk himself did not analyze differences among the institutions in the extent of primary group affiliation. A recomputation of data he presents, however, shows that 84 percent of the prisoners in the treatment institution received one or more sociometric friendship choices as compared to 71.5 percent in the mixed goal institution and to only 46.8 percent in the custodial institution.[25] Thus, if inmate attitudes toward staff are taken as indicators of collective solidarity, Berk's data are consistent with the hypothesis I have offered.

A similar pattern was observed by Street, Vinter, and Perrow in their comparison of inmate organization in six juvenile homes varying in the degree of their emphasis upon treatment. They found that collective solidarity as measured by loyalty to other inmates showed little variation by institution.[26] However, inmates in the treatment institutions had the most positive attitudes toward the staff and program, whereas those in the custodial institution had the most negative attitudes.[27] Further, inmates in the treatment institutions were the most highly involved in primary groups; those in the custodial institutions were the least involved.[28]

A study by Wilson compared staff-inmate relations and primary group affiliation among inmates in three units within one prison.[29] The units were characterized by different patterns of decision-making and degrees of deprivation. He reported that staff-inmate relations were most cooperative and primary group affiliations among prisoners were the most developed in the unit characterized by participative decision-making and high privileges. Prisoners in the unit characterized by bureaucratic decision-making and low privileges were reported as evincing the highest degree of alienation from the staff and having the lowest degree of primary group involvement.

Most recently, Tittle has reported on a study of inmate organization in a federal narcotics hospital having about as much deprivation and control as a minimum security prison.[30] Tittle characterizes inmate organization in this institution as weak and fragmentary. Both males and females were rather highly involved in primary group affiliation, and measures of opposition to staff and loyalty to other inmates indicated the presence of only a modest degree of collective solidarity.[31] Moreover, among the male prisoners collective solidarity and primary group affiliation were negatively associated, suggesting that at least for this segment of the population these are distinct forms of organization.[32] Further, while cohort analysis provided only limited support for the view that inmates were socialized into an inmate culture,[33] there was rather strong evidence indicating that pre-prison experiences, especially involvement in an addict subculture were determinants of inmate organization.[34]

In sum, evidence from the few comparative studies reported is consistent with the view that the deprivation and importation models are alternative representations of inmate social organization as it exists under different conditions. Conditions of maximum deprivation and control produce a symbiotic organization among the inmates characterized by high solidarity, interdependent roles, and low primary group cohesion. Decreased deprivation and control remove the impetus for collective solidarity and facilitate continued attachment to external reference groups and involvement in primary groups. Hence, under conditions of minimal deprivation and control inmate organization is characterized by low solidarity, limited interdependence, and high primary group cohesion.

Prison Reform and Race Relations

I noted above that the fact of racial differences is seldom mentioned in sociological studies of the prison, and I raised the question of whether this omission is an oversight of previous researchers or an indicator that racial differences are of little functional importance within the structure of the prison. The preceding review of studies on prisoner social organization suggests that the latter possibility may in fact be true, that the significance of race within the prison is a recent development brought about by the coincidence of prison reform and black nationalism. Before proceeding further, however, it is necessary to consider the sense in which the terms race and race relations are used by sociologists.

A Social Definition of Race. It has been common in the past to treat race relations as if they were a special and distinct form of human relationships. A perspective such as this, however, attributes an intrinsic social significance to a physical construct. Such a position is untenable. Comparative