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THE DYSFUNCTIONAL DIALECTICS OF THE PRISON

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According to the functionalist perspective, the survival of an organization is a matter of functions performed. A dialectical framework allows us to deal with the fact that durability is not necessarily connected with functionality. Organizations may be built on retrogressive accommodations which amount to dysfunctional dialectics. The prison represents an example in that it has developed as a polarity of commonweal and service organization, and is divided against itself. The coercive structure results in compliance patterns of an alienative nature. The basic dialectical units are roles which divide prisoners by emphasizing power relationships. Staff authority is weakened by a process of dialectical retrogressions. The prisoner subculture represents a dialectical defense against threats to individual self-images. The staff system will tend toward an organizational retrothesis made up of conflicting role realms of custody and treatment. Logical meta-control possibilities include permanent external control, organizational revolution or abolition of the organization.

According to the functionalist perspective, the survival of an organization is a matter of the functions performed. Even the conflict theorists tend to argue that someone is being served. The essential difference between the two approaches to institutional analysis lies in the answers given to the question: beneficial for whom? Employing a functionalist explanation, Toby (1964) has emphasized the symbolic functions of punishment as a source of normative affirmation and group unity, even while recognizing that, from a strictly sociological point of view, no one is completely "responsible" for his own actions. Impressed by the durability of the prison in the face of two centuries of documented failure, Reasons and Kaplan (1975) have recently offered a summary explanation, arguing as follows: "It is assumed that the prison continues to survive because it is functional for certain segments of society that may be either not served or ill-served by alternatives to the prison" (Reasons and Kaplan, 1975:363). They list as latent functions the maintenance of a crime school, providing pupils for the criminal justice system, the politicization of the "dangerous classes," self-enhancement of the inmate, provision of jobs for over 75,000 persons employed in corrections, satisfaction of authoritarian needs, slave labor, reduction of unemployment rates, provision of human guinea pigs for research, "do-gooderism," operation of a safety valve for radical tension--and birth control.

Much of the functional analysis comes perilously close to an admission that the prisoner is essentially a scapegoat and to a functional justification for treating him in this way. Reasons and Kaplan (1975:372) conclude as follows:

Taken together, these eleven latent functions, largely unintended and unrecognized, suggest that abolition of the prison may not be as certain as some reformers suppose. Assuming the eventual disappearance of prisons as we know them today, what would its consequences be for these functions? What can correctional reformers offer as functional alternatives? Are functional alternatives necessary?

Another possibility is that these institutions may be "reasonable" without being "functional." Thus, one might take the position that prisons are simply part of the prevailing power structure, can be seen as rational in terms of the class interests of the powerful. This is the position assumed by most conflict theory. The conclusion, however, does not follow necessarily from the premises. Despite the prevailing mythology, power does not confer omniscience. The influential do not always know where their own interests lie. The truth is that institutions tend to gain a life of their own and can be resistant to the manipulations of the most Machiavellian social strata (Ball, 1971).¹

We are accustomed as a habit of thought to the inference that, if someone has acted in a given way, he must have had a "reason" for it. The functionalist searches for the systemic purpose served while the conflict theorist tends to search for the special interests served. Since Freud, however, we have known that these "reasons" may be less than self-evident, even to the actor himself, and that one's "motives" may actually do him ill. It has become clearer that many actions are not "motivated" at all but are rather habitual responses or matters of social conformity. More importantly, we now have reason to suspect that a significant proportion of human behavior is "frustration-instigated," involving highly stereotypical forms of aggression, regression and resignation, and that such behavior approximates as sort of social fixation (Ball, 1969).² I wish to suggest that our contemporary correctional systems represent social reactions based to a greater extent upon frustration than upon motivated self-interest. Our actions have resulted in dysfunctional organizations; by a process of reification (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), we have become mental captives of our own correctional institutions. Paradoxically, the institutions are even more durable than would have been true if they had been planned in truly functional terms and more dysfunctional than would have been the case had they been the result of a classic conflict situation.

Such a paradox is difficult to deal with in the terms of our linear logics of "interests" and "functions." It may, however, be approached in dialectical terms.³ The dialectical framework in its traditional form represents a paradigm of development by which a material or ideational innovation (thesis) produces a material or ideational reaction (antithesis) and an integrated combination (synthesis) of both innovative and reactive tendencies, which then represents an innovation (thesis) triggering the continuation of the dialectical process of change. Although the dialectical process is not linear, it is, in its Hegelian formulation, seen as progression, each synthesis representing a transcendence of the paradox created by the opposition of thesis and antithesis. It is, however, equally possible to accept a given development as dialectical in nature and to view it as a dialectic of retrogression. Such a developmental sequence begins with a fundamental schism in which an extant or potential unity is shattered. The fractionated entity is now divided against itself, each segment negating the possibilities inherent in the other. Rather than a transcendent synthesis breaking through to a higher level of development, the result may be a "retrothesis," a retrogressive accommodation by which the entity involved falls into a less satisfactory functional state. A series of such retrogressions may be described as a process of dysfunctional dialectics.⁴

Paradoxically enough, the process of dysfunctional dialectics may result in the most durable of institutions, for the durability is a fundamental consequence of the power rather than the value of the dialectical processes at work. Power and value are independent dimensions and must not be confused. The prison offers an excellent illustration of these dynamics. There is considerable evidence to the effect that correctional facilities are actually aggravating the problems they were designed to solve. And although one may argue that such facilities are supported because they provide either service or the illusion of service, is this really sufficient to explain the durability and rigidity of the venerable institution? A different perspective emerges from an examination of certain dialectical propositions which may be derived from recent research.⁵

Dialectical Propositions

Dialectical Proposition 1: the prison is a polarity of commonweal organization and service organization divided against itself. Blau and Scott (1962) have made a point of the distinction between these two forms of organization. The distinctive characteristic of the "commonweal" organization is that it is designed with the general public as "prime beneficiary." Examples of such organizations include the military service and fire departments. A "service" organization, on the

other hand, is designed to serve a particular segment of society, usually termed the "clients." Examples include hospitals, schools and mental health clinics. Other types of organizations such as "mutual benefit association" (e.g., political parties, unions and clubs) and "business concerns" (e.g., industrial forms, banks and wholesale or retail stores) have different prime beneficiaries. The importance of a taxonomy based on prime beneficiary lies in the fact that organizational performance can be conceived in terms of contributions to the intended beneficiaries of the organization. The confusion with respect to prime beneficiary has led to a muddle in functionalist thought regarding the prison.

The historical trend from a view of the deviant as a sinner in need of expiation through penance in "penitentiary" to his current designation as a socially damaged individual in need of "rehabilitation" (Barnes and Teeters, 1959:285-264) has led to a shift in the implied prime beneficiary of the prison. From a formal emphasis on the protection of the public, we have moved to a formal emphasis upon the treatment of the offender. From a position which stressed the right and even the moral duty of the public to balance the scales of justice through retaliation, we have come to a position which argues that the purpose of corrections is to provide law-abiding attitudes, skills and opportunities to the offender. The fact that we have recently begun to swing back toward the former perspective (Jacobs and Steele, 1975) is another example of the historical oscillation between the two poles.

Thus one reason for the relative ineffectiveness of the contemporary prison lies in a basic dialectical contradiction still at the heart of the organization. On the one hand we seek "justice" through some balancing of the scales in which the social order is restored by the symbolic punishment of the offender. This is a deeply rooted impulse; it can be defended as a reaction critical to social integration (Toby, 1964). On the other hand, we are moved by urges toward the "salvation" of the criminal and the idea of his reformation. These two orientations have always been at odds; they spring from a contradiction between those theories which are "society-oriented" and those which are "individual-oriented" (Michael, 1973).

Dialectical proposition 2: as a coercive structure with a primary goal of order and with compliance patterns of an alienative nature, the prison builds into its internal structure a "boomerang" effect of non-cooperation and active resistance (Etzioni, 1961:3-39). Here we have another clear example of the dysfunctional dialectics by which coercive policy calls forth resistance, necessitating additional coercion. With each escalation, attention is deflected from the treatment goals and the possibility of rehabilitation is reduced. One result is an

organizational decension into a thesis-antithesis relationship between the staff structure (formal thesis) and the opposition of the prisoner subculture (informal antithesis).

Dialectical proposition 3: the basic dialectical units of the prisoner subculture are "social types" or roles (Garrity, 1961) which divide prisoners by emphasizing power relationships centering around the significant aspects of prison life (McCorkle and Korn, 1954). Since the most significant aspects of prison life revolve around sexual, material and status deprivations (Cloward, 1960), it follows that roles will evolve in terms of these deprivations. Furthermore, since the organization is fundamentally coercive we would expect the deprivations to be handled in terms of alienative responses emphasizing power (Etzioni, 1961). This combination appears to account for the sexualization of roles within the prison and the fact that they are differentiated on the basis of aggression and domination (e.g., "wolf," "punk," and "fag"). It also accounts for the stress on economic roles which focus upon providing relief from material deprivation (e.g., "merchant," or "peddler") and political roles (e.g., "con politician") which operate to circumvent and manipulate the officially dominant staff system (Sykes, 1958). Other roles (e.g., "right guy" or "real con") also develop in connection with status scarcity and are awarded to those who support the informal antitheses although they may not take an active antithetical role. These are the dialectics of a "zero-sum" game in which no essential progress is possible or of a "negative-sum" game in which the total system actually loses. The sociopolitics of deprivation states tend to produce retrogression rather than "positive-sum" games in which cooperative effort produces a resource base for personal and systemic advance (Boulding, 1970). Such a system is a model of dysfunctionality.⁶

Dialectical proposition 4: staff authority is weakened by a process of dialectical retrogressions. The denial of staff legitimacy means that both treatment and custody staff are faced with immediate and significant problems of control (Cloward, 1960). In such a situation, one may usually resort to a combination of positive and negative sanctions. The structure of the prison, however, tends to reduce these possibilities to insignificance. Few privileges are available for use as rewards, and punishment is less effective in a situation in which the basic social sanctions have already been imposed. This results in a "corruption of authority" based on the formation of negative reciprocities (Sykes, 1958). The negative reciprocities become vested interests to those involved, and both prisoners and staff employ a variety of techniques to maintain the truce. The existence of these accommodations actually represents an organizational "retrothesis" by which some prisoners control large parts of the organization to their own personal ends. Although these negative reciprocities provide the

organizational basis for a precarious equilibrium (McCleery, 1961), the fact is that the organization has maintained itself by a process of negating itself.

Dialectical proposition 5: the prisoner subculture represents a dialectical defense against threats to individual self-images (Sykes and Messinger, 1960). Given the nature of the dialectical relationship between individual and society by which both are constituted, this rejection is particularly threatening to the prisoner's self-image. Candid self-evaluation is very difficult at best, but the prisoner is being pushed through a painful period of personal dissonance as he gropes toward new ways of relating to himself and others. He finds himself at one of those crisis points which punctuate the continuing dialectics of the life cycle (Erickson, 1963). The prisoner subculture provides a convenient escape for this dilemma, a basis for maintenance of the less developed self through a dialectical relationship with an antithetical prisoner system. Here one finds some protection from the physical and psychological dangers of prison life and can hold together a retrogressive identity built around rejection of and opposition to the conventional system (McCorkle and Korn, 1954). In short, the dialectics of the organization function in such a way as to put the self-systems of prisoners under great pressure with one way out--a form of "personal retrothesis." The prisoner's personal problems may become much more serious than they were before he entered the system.

Dialectical proposition 6: the staff system will tend toward an organizational retrothesis made up of conflicting role realms of custody and treatment (Garrity, 1961). In terms of selection, training and allocation of responsibility, custodial staff usually emphasize the commonweal functions of social defense while the treatment staff is organized to stress client service and rehabilitation. The two contradictory ideologies are projected from the larger society and polarized within the walls. Both structures then close upon themselves. The process of dysfunctional dialectics is apparent in the rigidity of reactions to environmental input, which typically include systematic denial of feedback, "tightening up" the system, harassing the bearers of bad news, administrative obfuscation, and "fire-fighting" from one crisis to the next (Michael, 1973). Seen in a dialectical framework, the organization appears to be locked in its own internal antagonisms.

Conclusion

The propositions outlined above are meant to convey forcefully the point that the prison is a complex social system fostering dialectical processes which are essentially dysfunctional. The prison is a

special case in that negative consequences dominate positive consequences to the extent that the system is a model of dialectical dysfunctionality and organizational failure. What is particularly interesting is the unusual durability of this organization. It is difficult to account for on the basis of arguments that survival depends upon functionality. Instead, it appears that the most dysfunctional aspects of an organization may be especially rigid and durable.

The rigidity of prison organization can be traced to power of the dialectical processes at work rather than to the integrative value of the processes. The staff struggles to maintain sufficient control over prisoners so that day-to-day operation is possible. Custody and treatment staff constantly maneuver for control of the formal organization, and prisoners find it advantageous to seek and hoard power within the informal system. Each group tends to deny legitimacy to the ends and means of the others, making cooperation difficult. Accommodation within these organizational structures then becomes a matter of countervailing power and socially negotiated reciprocities based on defense of vested interests rather than positive goals. Power is a primary concern and is mobilized with little regard for questions of functionality.

Under the circumstances, one is less surprised to discover the extent to which few of the various factions really hold the values they profess. Studies of the prisoner subculture suggest that the system is based neither on long-term goals nor internalization of the expressed values and that violations of the "code" are common when there is an advantage to be gained. While less attention has been given to staff behavior, the problems of morale, high turnover, prevalence of various forms of "corruption" and other indicators point to low levels of functional commitment (Ball, 1975). In its extreme forms the prison sometimes resembles an institutionalized "state of nature", a Hobbesian world where as some prisoners say, "It's every man for himself." Few of the advantages that normally accrue from institutionalized cooperation may be observed in this form of organization.

Although we have some notions of the factors which inhibit innovative programs and make for rigidity of correctional systems (Grosser, 1960), these descriptions have not yet been integrated into a theoretical position. The problem becomes much clearer in terms of a dialectical approach. It can be seen that any changes (theses) at one point in the system (e.g., a new warden, an innovative educational program, or introduction of a promising treatment technique) will be met by counteractions (antitheses) in other parts of the system and that the product of these dysfunctional dialectics is a system retrogressively locked in upon itself. The prison, both for prisoners and for staff, is a place of defensive institutional norms and of behavior rooted in frustration rather than orientation to future goals. Policies

and practices which have evolved from such frustration-instigated behavior tend to become exceptionally rigid (Ball, 1968). Once organized, the system functions to reduce innovative (risk-taking) behavior (Ball, 1971). Dysfunctional dialectics may be operationally defined as situations in which organizational counterreactions tend to be more numerous, more powerful and more rigid than usual. Under such circumstances, flexibility and adaptation is doomed. The charismatic warden, the innovative educator, or the counselor with a novel technique will usually be "pulled back into line" by these "stabilizing" forces. Furthermore, since these defensive behaviors are an outgrowth of environmental pressure, and since additional problems increase the pressure, it follows that the more serious the problems confronting the organization (e.g., a large population, public animosity, inadequate budget, low staff morale, punitive programs, etc.) the more difficult will it be to effect the response necessary to progress.

What is to be done? It is at this point that the essential difference between a functional analysis and a dialectical analysis results in a totally different set of implications. The functional approach, impressed by the fact of organizational durability, concludes that some latent systemic purposes are being served and, therefore, that change must be viewed with suspicion. Even if dysfunctionality is admitted, the approach offers little in the way of suggestions for change. The dialectical approach, on the other hand, traces system durability to the power of convergent processes, making no assumption about the rationality or functionality of the processes. If the ensuing analysis indicates a balance of dysfunctionality, the framework suggests a means by which change may be implemented. The notion of dysfunctional dialectics suggests an extrasystemic approach.

If that organization which is most dysfunctional and most in need of change is the least likely to be modified from within, we must focus upon a combination of efforts which will reduce extrasystemic pressures on the organization. Only when these pressures have been sufficiently relieved is it possible to escape the vicious circle of dysfunctional dialectics. In terms of our theory, the next step would involve the design and introduction of a set of "metacontrols" capable of dealing with the organizational resistance and the entrenched pattern of dysfunctional reciprocities within a system. The logical metacontrol possibilities include (1) permanent external control, (2) organizational revolution or (3) abolition of the organization.

The first of these metacontrols is possible only under circumstances where public officials can cooperate with community representatives to insure an organization subject to continuing external input. This alternative represents a logical possibility but a sociological improbability. The history of prison reform is the story of the reform is the story of the repeated failure of such efforts.

The second alternative might involve a movement to an open organization. The system would be treated as an information-processing operation which develops and administers decisions rather than as a production unit which manufactures "output" in the form of rehabilitated prisoners (Michael, 1973:10). The models for these newer forms are now available, but they make social psychological demands which necessitate the development of greater interpersonal competence among correctional personnel. The organization designed for adaptability through open information-processing has been described by Bennis and Slater (1968) as an "organic-adaptive" model. It requires that a certain degree of uncertainty and role ambiguity be accepted as characteristic of the "real world," that "error-embracing" rather than error avoidance or error denial be rewarded, and that information-sharing, full feedback and "boundary spanning" be designed into the organization (Michael, 1973). Specific modifications include "job enlargement," "positive controls," "decision rules," "leadership expansion" (Argyris, 1964:275), the systematic use of "devil's advocates" (Janis, 1972), information disclosure, and programs which foster public participation (Bennis and Slater, 1968). The transition is toward "synergistic" forms which provide a matrix for "positive-sum" games in which all organizational "players" gain (Boulding, 1970:25).

Some of the principles underlying a new model have been described by Steele and Jacobs (1974) in their discussion of "autonomous" correctional systems of small size, small staff and a minimum of "professional treaters." Although half-way houses, work-release programs and probation subsidies appear to represent steps toward the abolition alternative, the possibilities of organizational revolution may be illustrated by the C-Unit Project at California's Deuel Vocational Institution (Studt, Messinger, and Wilson, 1968). Here it must be emphasized that the C-Unit experiment produced the conclusion that even a relatively successful program will tend to "succumb to pressures for functional integration with other units' demands by the hierarchical prison system" (Steele and Jacobs, 1974:159). The fate of this and other radically innovative experiments illustrates both the problem inherent in a piecemeal approach and the importance of the matacontrol concept.

As to the alternative of abolition, it is worth more consideration. Even now many students of the prison feel that incarceration is necessary for perhaps less than fifteen per cent of those now imprisoned. For these prisoners, smaller organizations of a clearly commonweal character and custody emphasis may offer the only organizational solution. Power must be held by staff, but prisoners must have their rights protected by rigorously legal grievance procedures. There is little more to offer. The radical nature of the proposal will

undoubtedly postpone any implementation, but it is interesting that the "ideal prison" is a concept so little understood as to appear as a semantic contradiction. Where a functional approach tends to reinforce a conservative position with respect to the abolition of such a venerable institution as the prison, a dialectical treatment suggests that this alternative may offer the ultimate solution to the Gordian knot it represents. Whatever is done, we must face the facts created by the dysfunctional dialectics to which the organization is inherently prone.

Footnotes

¹Linear logic assumes a chain reaction moving in a straight line. Location of the "cause" explains the existence of a given institution. With a functionalist approach in which the "functions" are treated as both institutional source and end, the logic leads toward an implicit justification. Berger and Luckmann (1966) have analyzed this inferential sequence as a process of reification. Scapegoating is facilitated by such logic. Conflict theory is equally guilty, however, since the usual approach tends to locate the "cause" in some vested interest, substituting a scapegoating of the wealthy and powerful for logical analysis.

²The distinction between "motivation-instigated" and "frustration-instigated" behavior is itself an example of a dialectical approach. The first form of behavior, induced through a learning process, is flexible, adaptive and goal-directed. The second form of behavior, induced by stress, is a defensive reaction characterized by extreme rigidity. Either form may be institutionalized (Ball, 1968).

³Dialectics is frequently and mistakenly identified with conflict theory, largely because of Marx. It must be remembered, however, that the method as employed by Hegel has been the basis for a sociopolitical conservatism. The method can be applied from either perspective. Van den Berghe (1963) has specifically suggested that the dialectical method might be employed as a means to deal with the limitation characteristic. Method is in some ways less precise than causal analysis, but it shows promise of valuable application, especially to the explication of historical "negative cases" such as the prison. It is hoped that the present simplified treatment may succeed in a demonstration of theoretical and practical advantages to be gained through a dialectical approach.

⁴As Galtung (1961) has pointed out, the prison is an "organization of dilemma." We can attempt to make the dilemma understandable by locating "latent functions" or by blaming vested interests, but both of

these approaches avoid confrontation with the dilemmas themselves. In defense of the dialectical method, Perinbanayagam (1971) has emphasized Burke's insight that "what we want are not terms that avoid ambiguity, but terms that lead to the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise." A dialectical approach will necessarily introduce such terms. The language of the dialectic may irritate those who suffer neologisms badly, but it is no more obscure than the language of functional analysis or the rhetoric of conflict theory; it cannot be denied on that account.

⁵It will be apparent that the propositions to be discussed are most applicable to the prison in its ideal-typical state. The author, experienced in a variety of correctional settings, is sensitive to the diversity of these organizational forms. Nevertheless, the propositions which follow appear to be applicable to the correctional institutions generally. Research shows variation in the mode of manifestation, but the basic patterns are common, with variations essentially a matter of degree.

⁶The concepts of the "zero-sum," "negative-sum," and "positive-sum" interactions, derived from game theory, are easily integrated into a dialectical framework. These concepts permit us to make the necessary distinction between an organization which is functioning and one which is functional. Obviously, the former is possible without the latter.

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