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 accomodations 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 metacontrol 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 ad-
mission that the prisoner is essentially a scapegoat and to a func-
tional 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 func-
> tions? 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 institu-
tions tend to gain a life of their own and can be resistant to the man-
ipulations 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, re-
gression and resignation, and that such behavior approximates as sort
of social fixation (Ball, 1969).[2] I wish to suggest that our con-
temporary 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 con-
flict 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 syntheis 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, usu-
ally 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 organiza-
tional 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 re-
garding 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 "rehabilita-
tion" (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 re-
cently 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 contem-
porary 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 im-
pulse; 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 contra-
diction 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 coer-
cive 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 or-
ganization is fundamentally coercive we would expect the deprivations
to be handled in terms of alienative responses emphasizing power (Et-
zioni, 1961). This combination appears to account for the sexualiza-
tion of roles within the prison and the fact that they are differ-
entiated 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 pro-
cess 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 situa-
tion, 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 nega-
tive 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 subcul-
ture provides a convenient escape for this dilemma, a basis for main-
tenance 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 opposi-
tion 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 cus-
tody 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 them-
selves. The process of dysfunctional dialectics is apparent in the
rigidity of reactions to environmental input, which typically in-
clude systematic denial of feedback, "tightening up" the system, haras-
sing 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 dialec-
tical processes which are essentially dysfunctional. The prison is a

special case in that negative consequences dominate positive conse-
quences to the extent that the system is a model of dialectical dys-
functionality and organizational failure. What is particularly inter-
esting 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 treat-
ment 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 coun-
tervailing power and socially negotiated reciprocities based on de-
fense of vested interests rather than positive goals. Power is a pri-
mary concern and is mobilized with little regard for questions of
functionality.

Under the circumstances, one is less surprised to discover the ex-
tent 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 or func-
tional commitment (Ball, 1975). In its extreme forms the prison some-
times 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 coopera-
tion may be observed in this form of organization.

Although we have some notions of the factors which inhibit inno-
vative programs and make for rigidity of correctional systems (Gros-
ser, 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 pro-
gram, 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 retrogres-
sively 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 be-
havior 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 situa-
tions in which organizational counterreactions tend to be more numerous,
more powerful and more rigid than usual. Under such circumstances, flex-
ibility and adaptation is doomed. The charismatic warden, the innova-
tive 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 pres-
sure, 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 dif-
ference between a functional analysis and a dialectical analysis re-
sults in a totally different set of implications. The functional ap-
proach, 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 en-
suing 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 intrenched pattern of dys-
functional reciprocities within a system. The logical metacontrol
possibilities include (1) permanent external control, (2) organiza-
tional revolution or (3) abolition of the organization.

The first of these metacontrols is possible only under circum-
stances where public officials can cooperate with community representa-
tives 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 re-
form 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 incareration 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 re-
inforce 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 inher-
ently prone.

Footnotes

[1]Linear 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, substi-
tuting a scapegoating of the wealthy and powerful for logical analysis.

[2]The 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, in-
duced by stress, is a defensive reaction characterized by extreme
rigidity. Either form may be institutionalized (Ball, 1968).

[3]Dialectics 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 theore-
tical and practical advantages to be gained through a dialectical
approach.

[4]As Galtung (1961) has pointed out, the prison is an "organiza-
tion 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 ambi-
guities neccesarily 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 fuctional analysis or the rhetoric of conflict theory; it
cannot be denied on that account.

[5]It will be apparent that the propositions to be discussed are most
applicable to the prison in its ideal-typical state. The author, experi-
enced 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.

[6]The 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 <u>functioning</u> and
one which is <u>functional</u>. Obviously, the former is possible without the
latter.

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