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Prisons: Universities of Crime

Pëtr Kropotkin

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Leaving aside the great question of “Crime and Punishment” which occupies now so many prominent lawyers and sociologists, I shall limit my remarks to the question: “Are prisons answering their purpose, which is that of diminishing the number of antisocial acts?”

To this question, every unprejudiced person who has a knowledge of prisons from the inside will certainly answer by an emphatic *No*. On the contrary, a serious study of the subject will bring everyone to the conclusion that the prisons — the best as much as the worst — are breeding places of criminality; that they contribute to render the antisocial acts worse and worse; that they are, in a word, the High Schools, the Universities of what is known as Crime.

Of course, I do not mean that everyone who has been once in a prison will return to it. There are thousands people sent every year to prison by mere accident. But I maintain that the effect of a couple of years of life in a prison — from the very fact of its being a prison — is to increase in the individual those defects which brought him before a law court. These causes, being the love of risk, the dislike of work (due to an immense majority of cases to the want of a thorough knowledge of a trade), the

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despise of society with its injustice and hypocrisy, the want of physical energy, and the lack of will — all these causes will be aggravated by detention in a jail.

Five-and-twenty years ago, when I developed this idea in a book, now out of print (*In Russian and French Prisons*), I supported it by an examination of the facts revealed in France by an inquest made as to the numbers of *recidivistes* (second offense prisoners). The result of this inquest was that from two fifths to one half of all persons brought before the assizes and two fifths of all brought before the police courts had already been kept once or twice in a jail. The very same figure of forty percent was found in this country; while according to Michael Davitt, as much as ninety-five percent of all those who are kept in penal servitude have previously received prison education.

A little reflection will show that things cannot be otherwise. A prison has, and must have, a degrading effect on its inmates. Take a man freshly brought to a jail. The moment he enters the house he is no more a human being he is “Number So and So.” He must have no more a will of his own. They put him in a fool’s dress to underline his degradation. They deprive him of every intercourse with those towards who he may have an attachment and thus exclude the action of the only element which could have a good effect upon him.

Then he is put to labour, but not to a labour that might help to his moral improvement. Prison work is made to be an instrument of base revenge. What must the prisoner think of the intelligence of these “pillars of society” who pretend by such punishments to “reform” the prisoners?

In the French prisons the inmates are given some sort of useful and paid work. But even this work is paid at a ridiculously low scale, and, according to the prison authorities, it cannot be paid otherwise. Prison work, they say, is inferior slave work. The result is that the prisoner begins to hate his work, and finishes by saying, “The real thieves are not we, but those who keep us in.”

The prisoner's brain is thus working over and over again upon the idea of the injustice of a society which pardons and often respects such swindlers as so many company promoters are, and wickedly punishes him, simply because he was not cunning enough. And the moment he is out he takes his revenge by some offense very often much graver than his first one. Revenge breeds revenge.

The revenge that was exercised upon him he exercises upon society. Every prison, because it is a prison, destroys the physical energy of its inmates. It acts upon them far worse than an Arctic wintering. The want of fresh air, the monotony of existence, especially the want of impressions, takes all energy out of the prisoner and produce that craving for stimulants (alcohol, coffee) which Miss Allen spoke so truthfully the other day at the Congress of the British Medical Association. And finally, while most antisocial acts can be traced to a weakness of will, the prison education is directed precisely towards killing every manifestation of will.

Worse than that. I seriously recommend to prison reformers the *Prison Memoirs* of Alexander Berkman, who was kept for fourteen years in an American jail and has told with great sincerity his experience. One will see from this book how every honest feeling must be suppressed by the prisoner, if he does not decide never to go out of this hell.

What can remain of a man's will and good intentions after five or six years of such an education? And where can he go after his release, unless he returns to the very same chums whose company has brought him to the jail? They are the only ones who will receive him as an equal. But when he joins them he is sure to return to the prison in a very few months. And so he does. The jailers know it well.

I am often asked — What reforms of prison I should propose; but now, as twenty-five years ago, I really do not see how prisons could be reformed. They must be pulled down. I might say, or course: "Be less cruel, be more thoughtful of what you do."

But that would come to this: “Nominate a Pestalozzi as Governor in each prison, and sixty more Pestalozzis as warders,” which would be absurd. But nothing short of that would help.

So the only thing I could say to some quite well-intentioned Massachusetts prison officials who came once to ask my advice was this: If you cannot obtain the abolition of the prison system, then — never accept a child or a youth in your prison. If you do so, it is manslaughter. And then, after having learned by experience what prisons are, refuse to be jailers and never be tired to say that prevention of crime is the only proper way to combat it. Healthy municipal dwellings at cost price, education in the family and at school — of the parents as well as the children; the learning by every boy and girl of a trade; communal and professional co-operation; societies for all sorts of pursuits; and, above all, idealism developed in the youths the longing after what is lifting human nature to higher interests. This will achieve what punishment is absolutely incapable to do.