

DEMOCRATIZING PRISONS

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Experiments in prison reform have often included efforts to democratize prisons. Such experiments were especially popular during the progressive era. Today, democratization efforts are congruent with management literature that describes employee participation and total quality of management initiatives through which organizations try to improve the quality of their products and services. Prison democratization can combine opportunities for staff involvement with enhanced prisoner participation. Inmates can be afforded a greater role in classification and programming decisions, and in determining policies that affect the quality of prison life. Such participatory approaches help to normalize prison life and contribute to the resocialization of offenders.

In 1924, a town in West Virginia wanted to become the site of the first federal reformatory for women. To attract this prize the town donated 202 acres of prime pasture adjoining a river, a railroad, and a neighboring farm that became available at distress prices.

The Alderson Reformatory opened on February 22, 1928, and on that date its 200 inmates adopted a constitution setting up what they called "cooperative clubs" in each of the prison's 14 cottages. The constitution said that the inmates resolved "to improve the life of our cottages, thence [of] the whole institution, and finally [of] the families and communities to which we hope to return." The inmates also declared that they would show themselves "capable of taking responsibility" and earning "the trust reposed in us" (Harris, 1936, pp. 344-345).

The way the Alderson cooperative clubs worked is illustrated by the minutes of a typical session, which read (in part) as follows:

Our meeting of the Co-operative Club was held Monday, October 19, 1931, with Lulu chairman and Carrie secretary, and was opened with the Sentence Prayer in concert. We took in six new members who were: Mary, Virginia, Charity, Georgia, Maude, and Willie.

This article is a revised version of an address given at the Scottish Prison Service College, Polmont, June 24, 1993.

THE PRISON JOURNAL, Vol. 73 No. 1, March 1994 62-72
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Our Secretary, Carrie, read the pledge to them and each signed it, and it was witnessed by our Warden [correction officer]. The minutes of the last meeting were read, and stood approved.

The opening of business was to elect a new Committee girl. When the votes were counted, Annie had the most and was made our new Committee girl. She thanked the Club and said she would do her best in every way she could.

As several of the girls had gone home, new ones had to be put on the different assignments as follows:

1. Lights	Lulu and Blanche
2. Promptness	Carrie
3. Courtesy	Mabel
4. Cleanliness	Blanche
5. Librarian	Elizabeth
6. Entertainment	Annie

Also, the Fire Drill was reorganized. . . .

Reports were asked from the different Committee assignments; there were no complaints. . . .

We talked of the Hallowe'en party, and Annie was given the assignment for Entertainment.

No further business, the meeting was voted adjourned. (Harris, 1936, pp. 348-349)

The inmates at Alderson willingly undertook civic obligations, and they farmed out assignments to each other. They made decisions about the running of their cottage and expended effort to implement these decisions. They elected representatives to groups concerned with activities in the institution as a whole and staged events that made for highlights in the daily regime of the prison.

A second valued innovation that was taken seriously at the Alderson Reformatory was the Classification Committee, which met two mornings of each week. The concept of the Classification Committee had been imported from another institution, but Alderson's version was self-consciously democratic. In the words of the warden of the prison,

An important departure from the procedure followed [elsewhere] is the inclusion in our classification meetings of the warden of the cottage where the inmate under consideration is living. In our small units the head of the cottage comes to know her group intimately, and the fact that she is expected to make a verbal report on the personal peculiarities and difficulties of her charges at these formal meetings undoubtedly tends to sharpen her observation and quicken her interest. She cannot confine her attention to a few even if she would lean in that direction, for she has a pride in being able to answer the searching questions asked about the progress or retrogression of all her wards.

It is not a priori obvious whether democratization or participatory trends in society are relevant to prisons, or whether prisons can afford to ignore them. Some otherwise progressive countries have chosen the second option. That course of action was adopted in Yugoslavia, for instance, when there was a Yugoslavia. There, industrial enterprises were in theory self-managed, with workers making production decisions and allocating budgets (Blumberg, 1973; Zwerdling, 1980). Apartment complexes were run by tenants. Health decisions were made in municipal conclaves of providers and consumers. But prisons were run with paramilitary staff hierarchies. There were inmate groups, but they were described as gripe sessions, which is a far cry from self-management.

Yugoslavia is an interesting example because it is a country where organizational democracy had been institutionalized in an effort to avoid substituting state autocracy for private managerial autocracy. In this connection, it is ironic that perestroika envisioned a similar trend in Russia, under the heading of privatization—workers acquiring shares of enterprises and electing managers to manage them.

Different societies have had different reasons for vertically rearranging organizations. In Scandinavia, for instance, it has been a matter of importing democracy from the streets into the workplace (Thorsrud, 1984). Elsewhere, the goal has fit most neatly under a heading such as human resource management (Likert, 1967). The premise is that people work more effectively when they are involved in making decisions that govern their work, and that organizations are more effective when they deploy the intelligence, wisdom, and judgment of all of their members, particularly those on the front lines—those in the bowels of organization. A second premise is that involvement brings a sense of ownership and buys loyalty, dedication, and commitment.

Another way of stating the human resource argument is that the classic hierarchical, top-down management model may have outlived its day, even on the assembly lines where it was born (Morse & Reimer, 1956; Special Task Force, 1973). The most recent version of this argument sees organizational democracy as the only means to achieve quality of products or services (Lawler, Mohrman, & Ledford, 1992). When we now produce quality cars, we advertise in commercials that we have had assembly line workers involved in the quality control process, as they do in Japan (Ouchi, 1981).² And if one can make this claim for assembly lines, the question arises how one can pretend to do quality social work, or nursing, or teaching, or police work, with managers attempting to second-guess the decisions that professional or paraprofessional employees make or subjecting them to detailed prescriptions and instructions. A second question is how one can expect workers in

that the prescription they implemented was their prescription, not that of someone sitting behind a desk in an office.

Some of the same colleagues and I later worked with groups of correction officers in four large prisons. Each group originated proposals for prison reform—two designed for their own institution and two for the system at large. The ideas for these proposals evolved in the groups after systematic dissection of problems that the officers thought needed solution. The proposals were worked through by subgroups who reported to a larger group and then wrote up the proposals with some editing assistance from us. The officers in these subgroups were those who had shown intense interest in the problems and their solution and had a substantial investment in their product. They would have become dedicated implementers of the ideas they originated, in the event of their adoption. But although some of the ideas were adopted, in only two cases did officers get credit for contributions (Toch & Grant, 1982).

At this point, one must mention one other important strategy for change that is relevant to prison staff—and to guards in particular. The notion in question is that of job enrichment, which means roughly what the words job ENRICHment suggest. Again, the concern is with how we can motivate people at work, and the suspicion is that pay, fringe benefits, and other material commodities do not suffice as incentives (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1993).

The assumption is that it is work itself that can motivate, provided that it is interesting and that it offers variety, complexity, feedback, and a sense of completion when it is done—that a person can go home at the end of a long day and say, "I have accomplished something which has contributed modestly to human betterment. I get a sense of satisfaction from these accomplishments." The presumption in corrections is that the tasks of guarding, counting, and escorting people may not provide such satisfaction, and that one may have to supplement traditional custody tasks by introducing other tasks, such as assisting prisoners or helping to rehabilitate them (Toch, 1978).

Some prison systems have followed the enrichment route but not across the board: They have enriched some of their custody jobs, but not others; they consequently ended up with two kinds of officers, the old kind and the enriched variety. This arrangement can work, but it also can become somewhat problematic, and occasionally, seriously problematic.

A case in point is that of the Norfolk (Massachusetts) Prison Colony, founded by Howard Gill in 1931. According to an article in *Corrections Magazine*, Norfolk was "a very special institution—the best hope of a whole generation of prison reformers" (Serill, 1982, p. 25). The article pointed out

but he does not listen to our views, and I cannot get to see him." Democracy in theory should not lend itself to zero sum games.

Several types of direct participation are possible in prisons. One is to involve inmates in the day-to-day running of small institutions and small subdivisions of large institutions. The second is involvement of prisoners in specialized groups that are concerned with some aspect of prison administration, including inmate-staff task forces that deal with problems of topical interest. The third approach is to have prisoners individually participate in their own management, sharing critical decisions along the way, and reviewing their progress at key junctures in their careers. Needless to say, these approaches are combinable, and a prison system can aspire to offer as many avenues of participation as possible.

One important conception that achieved popularity in the 1960s saw democracy as a vehicle of personal reform or of "social therapy" (Jones, 1968). One learns to be prosocial by working with others and to govern oneself through involvement in governance. As one learns, one assists others to learn and is assisted by others in doing so. Some even argued that inmate learning and staff development must go hand in hand in institutional settings. Such was the belief of the psychiatrist Maxwell Jones, who said in more mellow moments that he didn't know who needed therapy the most, his colleagues or his clients.

There are many examples of programs such as the Alderson classification teams in which staff acquire new responsibilities that permit them to provide new services that benefit inmates. Staff develop because they learn and exercise new skills. Prisoners acquire new roles, new ways of interacting with each other and with staff. Such social learning benefits are available even where they are not explicit, as in groups concerned with bread-and-butter issues or issues of governance or policy, in which prisoners and staff can interact around shared or intersecting concerns.

One can orchestrate groups to achieve desired intersections: A group that deals with issues of visitation, for example, could contain inmates and staff with very large families or those who have recently married. The presumption would be that custodial and inmate perspectives could be softened by shared concerns about the maintenance of family ties, which would be a common goal for the group. The problem-solving exercise would be meaningful and consequential, and it could even lead to further cooperation if inmates and staff were charged with coordinating modified visitation arrangements or were asked to monitor the impact of innovations in visitation.

Problems can be addressed proactively before they arise to culminate in disruptive crises. Institutional violence prevention, as example, can be a subject of concern to staff and inmates that benefits from conjoint delibera-

one of sponsorship or facilitation. Staff members might arrange adjoining housing, for example, to permit a group of inmates to engage in some constructive activity or to create a social milieu that affords a commodity (such as privacy) the inmates might want (Toch, 1992). Or the staff may provide modest funds or facilities so that prisoners can engage in self-educational pursuits not otherwise available in the prison.

Active consumerism involves adult-to-adult transactions between prisoners and staff. It requires prisoners to do something to get something. And it lets prisoners engage in assessment, deliberation, and planning in determining their future. This process gives prisoners an enhanced stake in the outcome and motivates them to validate the choices they have made. The prison remains physically confining but becomes psychologically liberating to a limited degree. The experience is also one that prepares prisoners for more responsible participation in the opportunity structures of society at large.

NOTES

1. Alderson was not the first effort at prison democracy but is unique in its concern about staff members in the design of the experiment. The best known early democratizing venture was that of Thomas Matt Osborne at Sing Sing prison, which was a radical experiment in inmate self-governance. Osborne's Mutual Welfare League was initiated at the Auburn Penitentiary in 1914 as the Good Conduct League. In Sing Sing, it survived Osborne's tenure, and was abolished—after a riot—in 1929 (Tannenbaum, 1933).

2. This claim can be substantiated because the most current approach to human resource management—which is called total quality management (TQM)—was introduced to Japan after World War II by W. E. Deming (1986), and universally adopted in Japan before being re-exported to the United States. TQM advocates rank-and-file involvement in policy decisions and input from consumers in the definition of qualitative production goals. The approach has been experimentally introduced in many government agencies (see, e.g., Keehley, 1992; National Governors' Association, 1992), including some correctional bureaucracies.

3. A recent development in corrections has been the revival of arrangements in which release decisions are affected by prisoner participation in educational, vocational, or rehabilitative programs. One way in which this can be done is through use of presumptive parole certificates, which increase the probability of parole.

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