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Final Essay

### A Prisoner's Perspective on the Institution

Before I attempt to convey how my experience over the last nine years here in prison relates to sociology and also what sociologists might learn from me, I want my readers to know that I did, in fact, engage in behavior which deviated from the norms of the society in which I lived. I am not innocent; I deserve to be punished.

I am not so sure that the length of my sentence is productive. I am not so sure that my sentence, and all that goes with serving it, is what society would impose if it knew what I know.

A sentence serves at least two purposes: punishment as well as rehabilitation. I believe that society needs to devote serious consideration to what happens when a person is rehabilitated before fully serving his sentence. This is certainly something that would fall under the purview of sociological studies.

Is punishment imposed solely to rehabilitate, or does serving a sentence *beyond the point at which rehabilitation has been effected* serve another purpose, such as "justice"? If an individual were truly rehabilitated, would that person object to finishing out his sentence? If not, does serving the entire sentence—a significant cost to taxpayers—even after rehabilitation has been achieved, benefit society in any way? Does it actually place society at greater risk? The offender is no longer a risk to society once he has been rehabilitated. Is it of some benefit to the

victim if the offender completes the sentence? How does one measure the change in a person's soul? Isn't it necessary to consider the spiritual dynamic? Doesn't God need to be a part of the picture? These questions certainly relate to sociology. The function of religion in society, or, on the other hand, the conflict theorist's view of religion (as the justification for the status quo) is of interest to sociologists.

As I see it, the crux of the matter—the root of all that society and/or sociologists might label problematic—is the fact that there are too many people who have been convinced that society *creates* sacred beliefs. It all boils down to whether or not one is able to perceive divinely revealed Truth. Truth is not subjective—Truth is objective. Man does not create Truth; God has revealed Truth. Common sense dictates as much; science is in the process of proving as much. The Bible is no ordinary book. A Godless society—or, on a smaller scale, A Godless institution such as a state prison system—is a festering sore on society's corpus.

Granted, my statements open the door to the whole of more than one discipline and relate to questions that have been pondered for millennia. I have really done no more thus far in my discourse than make the point that I am spiritually oriented and believe my existence, as well as everyone else's, is for the purpose of serving a divine creator. How do I separate that from my discussion of what my experience in prison can offer the discipline of Sociology? The fact is, I cannot. I was born and raised as a Roman Catholic. I drifted away from what that religion teaches, in spite of eight years of Catholic schooling. Society's institutions are being challenged—have been challenged before my very eyes as I was exposed to more and varied cultures. Secondary socialization took place as the society I observed in my younger years (I am fifty-three now) caused me to question much of what my significant others transmitted to me. Sedimentation was disturbed by heavy, sustained drug use. I became part of the drug sub-

culture; my identity became tied to that sub-culture. I also became very curious about taboos, curious to the degree that I questioned society's right or ability to establish or enforce those taboos. I rebelled against the established social controls. I believed I knew better than society. At that time, I was unaware of the term "social accumulation," but I instinctively knew that something like that (social accumulation) was in play. Even so, in my pride, selfishness, and self-deception, I was able to discount the cultural universals. As a result, I now experience my current incarceration (I must do fifteen percent of eighteen years before I parole; I have done nine years thus far).

Indeed, my incarceration caused me to "wake up," so to speak. It made me realize that I must be doing something wrong. In the first year of incarceration, I understood that society did not want me amongst them. I was seen as a threat to them. I also quickly realized that I was far different in many ways than 99.9% of those with whom I now lived. After nine years, it still amazes me that it is a very, very rare occasion when I meet an inmate who shares my outlook, an inmate who recognizes that the law exists so that all of us can live in peace and prosperity. I know very few inmates who do not consider the correctional officers and the peace officers on the streets our enemies. It is perfectly clear to me, however, that those officers of the law exist for my benefit. Another amazing aspect of prison culture is that, even here on the "sensitive needs yards," every single man believes that violence is an okay method to resolve differences or perceived disrespect. Even more atrocious is the fact that the C.O.'s do nothing to try to change that culture and some even promote it. Doing so keeps them less involved in settling or preventing altercations and ensures job security.

I believe that only a small minority of society is aware of this situation. I know that before I came to prison, I was not aware of it. In addition, I know that the people I write to are

not aware of it until I make them so. In a nutshell, if an individual in prison was not fortunate enough to experience a successful primary socialization, his subjection to the prison sub-culture will, in time, likely force him to identify with it.

I survive well in prison because I am no longer searching for the meaning of life. I know the objective Truth as revealed by God. I know that the world does not revolve around me. I exist to serve God and my fellow man according to God's will. I refuse to compromise my integrity. Many inmates dislike me because of my refusal to compromise my integrity. I am driven to redeem myself, to be trusted and trustworthy once again. My goals sometimes seem almost impossible. At other times, it seems as if no one cares that I have these goals. I want, more than anything, to be a productive member of society. It seems so obvious to me that I will accomplish this only by recognizing what is the objective truth. The society that man creates does indeed act back upon him; however, that society does *not* create truth, nor is it able to force which choices a man will make.