SOCIAL ATOM: AN ALTERNATIVE TO IMPRISONMENT*

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Each time I enter the prison gates, I am struck by the quietness of the place. It feels akin to the silence of a tomb where life meets death. I remember when I began consulting how frightened, enraged, and saddened I was at seeing this place. I was overwhelmed and frightened at the harshness and desolation of prison life; and, now, after spending four weeks a year for the past three years working with the male inmates in psychodramas, I am amazed how I no longer allow myself to fully experience the "place." In order for me to continue working with the men, I have to "control" what I feel, see, and experience; and I believe that is what is required of most people inside the prison walls. It is necessary to deny the reality of the moment to continue existing there. To me, being in prison is experiencing living death. It is an institution so conserved and controlled that to survive one must live in the past or future. The present has no room for relationships, spontaneity nor creativity. Time takes on new dimensions, and the notion that "each man does his own time" although relevant to every human being is a stark reality in prison.

It pains me to experience the aseptic environment and to be with men who exist with so few "rights" that we in a democratic society have learned to take for granted. I see people looking and acting like robots, and I feel helpless and angry. Although I have grown to understand and appreciate the dilemma of the penal system, I still experience it as one of the most dehumanizing, degrading and destructive institutions I have ever experienced.

Inside the prison walls exists a delicate and subtle balance of power between the inmate and prison officials. It exists for the purpose of controlling feelings, maintaining order, and, thus, surviving. The inmate and prison officials live in a caste system, each with their ascribed roles, i.e., the keeper and the kept, the violator and violated, the punisher and the punished. They have a symbiotic relationship that has been in process for generations. To ask who has the power or who is the keeper is an academic polemic. The entire system is isolated from and closed to the rest of society.

It is a lonely place for inmates and staff. When 1400 men are encaged, feelings must be controlled, and nothingness is felt to excess. Men go through

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the motions of living. As Carl E. Hollander expressed, "Men become human-doings, not human-beings." Sexual feelings must be ignored, rage suppressed, anger channeled, love feelings controlled and intense sadness dismissed. It is as if everyone knows that if feelings are made conscious, the entire system is in jeopardy and someone will end up dead. The issue is survival! The emptiness of prison life is camouflaged by the men. What at first appears to be quite spontaneous and creative interactions are later discovered to be conserved behavior that has been passed down for generations within the prison walls. The men experience most of their life through memories, daydreams and fantasties of the future. They rehearse their expectations of life over and over. Intimacy, learning, and growth, all by-products of creativity, cannot exist in this environment. In order for this to exist, inmates and officials would have to cross caste lines and re-establish a new social order.

My husband and colleague, Carl E. Hollander, and I have been contracting with the Federal Bureau of Prisons to provide sociatric services to inmates at "Prisonville," a central United States prison. We met with an average of seventy-five inmates for two consecutive weeks two times a year for the past three years. The men with whom we met were inmates assigned to the prison's Drug Abuse Treatment Program. Although each man had been convicted and incarcerated for a variety of offenses, they all had been involved with drugs, e.g., through possession, transportation, sales, and/or addiction. We worked for a day and a half with an average of 12 men.

Initiating a relationship with the men would have required twice the time it actually involved were it not for the Drug Abuse Treatment Program Director, whom I shall call George. George had established so much respect among his staff and the inmates that based upon his word we were allowed optimal entry rites into the caste system of "Prisonville." George was the key to the program and a sociometric leader. Subsequent to the first and second groups with whom we met, the communication networks carried the word throughout the dormitories that we were "out front," "square-business" people. In fairly rapid time we were seen as non-caste members. We were not part of them nor part of the staff, but rather, visitors, friends, and people from "off front-street" beyond "the bricks" who had something different and powerful to offer without any conditions or hidden games that might render them impotent or vulnerable to the penal system.

We returned to "Prisonville" six months after our initial visit. There had been racial unrest and rioting over the summer interim, new men were added to the program, others had made parole, and the familiar faces had paved the way for our visit. The majority of people in our first group had entered into psychodrama sessions during our last visit and had tacitly begun to identify those group members who "needed a psychodrama." Very little orientation was required upon our return. The process of warming up preceded us, their

ambience was warm and welcoming. There was a large volume of interest in the "outside" world, our clothes, and our lives in general. They shared with us the changes that had occurred within the prison as a result of the riots, how they were feeling about themselves, and how much time they each had before appearing before the parole board.

As the warming up proceeded, the men suggested themes and people who might work as a protagonist in a psychodrama. Anxiety began to rise, particularly among the new members who had not seen a psychodrama. Consequently, the level of physical activity increased. Men left more frequently to go to the lavatory and/or to get coffee in an adjacent room. More comments surfaced about the suspiciousness of the people who might be in the one-way mirrored, viewing room. Unlike previous meetings, the process of warming up to work became circular until resistance was obvious. A decision to focus upon a theme and protagonist met repeated impasses. Finally the process was identified and confronted. One member who appeared most angry and tense announced the dilemma: a young and newly hired correctional officer from the educational unit had emerged from the one-way mirrored, viewing room as several members of the group were leaving for coffee. The officer intercepted each of the men and chided them for their "juvenile" behavior; he alluded to me as a "dike" and expressed his prejudice that women had no right to be in a male prison tantalizing and frustrating the men. He dismissed us as untrustworthy and warned them that outsiders were not to be trusted; our program would make "sissies" out of men; and if they needed someone to talk to, he was available.

The men were furious. However, they knew that an open confrontation would probably result in a "shot," a transfer to B-House (solitary), or a "set off" for any member of the group. They knew the young, twenty-two-year-old officer was desperate and trying to "get in" with them to establish himself as a "good guy." New to the institution and working alone, the officer did not yet understand the caste system within which he was working nor his role in it.

They finally called him into the room. He stood in the doorway, looking red-faced and very nervous. The inmates in a polite and direct manner told him they did not like what he had said. He responded with, "That's stupid . . . get off my back," laughed, and left the room.

We used the projective chair with various members of the group assuming the officer's role. This process allowed the men a catharsis of their anger, and they were able to experience the young officer's dilemma.

There are 400,000 men and women confined in 4,737 prisons in the United States.[1] Most of the federal prisons are located in rural areas, and the major industry for the town is the prison.[2] Ninety-eight percent of the guards are white and come from the rural area. The inmates, by contrast, come from

urban areas; 50% are Black, 10% Puerto Rican, Indian, and Mexican-American, and 40% are White.[3] There is a consensus among inmates that a Federal "joint" is more humane than a "state joint," and they will do anything to avoid doing "state time." In general, men in a federal prison are not beaten arbitrarily, the physical environment is clean, food is healthful, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons does exercise authority to insure "humane treatment." The city, county, and state penal institutions are not responsible to a national organization or bureau; and for the most part, these institutions are insulated from the city, county, and state government official scrutiny.[4] For these institutions to gain visibility, they must adopt a crisis process. For example, Attica, New York, became a household word in September, 1971, when 34 prisoners and 11 hostages were assassinated during a riot.[5]

Society would rather forget prisons exist, and yet we feel responsible. This ambivalence is expressed by the message given the prisons ". . . punish those people and make them fit to come back and live with us." An entire society sociometrically rejects and physically isolates 400,000 people; and, as expected, they (the prisoners) periodically disrupt our society.

Manocchio and Dunn in *The Time Game: Two Views of a Prison* depicts a vivid picture of prison, its caste system, and the convergence of two opposing value systems, punishment and rehabilitation.

Sol Chaneles, a member of the President's Task Force on Prisoner Rehabilitation, 1972, concludes that "An establishment charged with the responsibility of enforcing the law and given the power to use necessary force and lethal weapons to achieve this purpose should not be entrusted with the task of reforming people who have violated the law . . . it is illogical for those whose authority is backed up by guns to be appointed moral instructors."[6] As long as the prison is society's instrument for coercion, repression and punishment, it cannot at the same time rehabilitate.

Chaneles believes "Basic rehabilitation means a restoration of personal dignity, a building up of purpose and skill, an awareness of one's freedom and how to exercise these voluntarily and constructively."[7] Although I agree with Mr. Chaneles's definition, I believe rehabilitation is providing people with viable social atoms that can allow them to experience their own spontaneity, creativity and personal power.

I invite you to read the literature, visit a prison, talk to a guard, interview an inmate, talk with a parolee, discuss the problem with a probation officer and talk to a judge. Rehabilitation is an impossible expectation given our present penal system.

SOCIAL ATOM

The concept of the *social atom* is one of the most beautiful and viable concepts I have ever experienced. Because it is difficult to describe as a

concept separate and apart from Moreno's concepts of tele, sociostasis, sociometry, and the psychodrama, I will offer definitions and summaries of the other concepts, but will focus on the social atom.[8] While in prison, we directed more than 100 psychodramas with the male inmates, talked with them about their lives, talked with counselors and guards about their lives, administered 3 sociograms, and read a great deal. Because of the wealth of information I have accrued, I have decided to limit myself to the concept of the social atom and the prison system, drawing from the above-mentioned experiences.

"Two most important questions asked throughout life are: 1) Who am I and 2) Where do I fit? An individual needs to appreciate his or her uniqueness from and commonalities with other people. Without this sense of separateness and togetherness, (s)he cannot acknowledge (her)himself favorably, nor can (s)he link with others in a meaningful way. Since ability to come to terms with (her)himself and others will directly correlate with her or his productivity and creativity, a person who has a low self-concept will not allow (her)himself to have meaningful relationships and will have difficulty learning. On the other hand, people need a specific number of people to whom they can meaningfully relate in order to experience their creativity and power. We need people to experience our creativity, and we need to experience our creativity in order to be separate from and with other people."[9]

I want to focus on those telic relationships that are most vital to us as human beings; the *psychological social atom*, the *collective social atom*, and the *individual social atom*.

The *psychological social atom* is the smallest number of people that each person requires in order to feel complete, i.e., in sociostasis. Each of us requires a different number of these relationships; and if we fall short of that number, our energies are directed toward filling the void at the expense of all other activities. These telic relationships are long lasting and enduring and serve as the underpinnings for our lives. They are vital to our creativity and survival. If a relationship is terminated, e.g., through death or an emotional divorce, an individual must experience the grieving process before another person can become a part of his or her psychological social atom. If an individual is unable to "grieve" and experience the process of termination, the "lost" person will be ever present in his or her fantasies, making it very difficult for a new person to come into his or her life. It is important for the person to separate the lost person from the role (s)he filled. (S)He needs to terminate from the person, not necessarily from the need for the role.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SOCIAL ATOM

The number of individuals in our *psychological social atom* is generally small, but changes depending upon our own spontaneity, creativity and

growth. These relationships are so vital that an individual will at times sacrifice his or her value system and integrity to maintain them. This was most evident in prison where 55 out of 60 men indicated in a questionnaire that a close friend had "turned them on to drugs," although they knew them to be harmful. In countless psychodramas, men worked on their psychological social atoms which were in "shambles." The following is an example.

It is March, 1974, and Steve has been in prison for three years; he is eligible for parole in six months at which time he has plans to enter a community college. He is now twenty-two years old and was convicted of possession of heroin in 1971. In his psychodrama, Steve says goodbye to the hope that his father will ever be able to love him in the way he (Steve) needs to be loved.

The scene is 6:30 a.m. in a small, one-room apartment in a western town, 1971. Steve was busted three weeks ago and withdrew from heroin "cold turkey" in a city jail. He was released on bond. He is to appear in court for trial in two weeks.

He looks at himself in the mirror and hardly recognizes the person he sees; his face is clean shaven, his blond hair is cut short, and he looks thin and clean. Scared and vulnerable, Steve realizes he has tried to look as his father would like him to look. Coming off heroin, alone, was torturous; he feels certain he will never use the stuff again.

Today he is going to work with his father at a construction site; his father used his contacts to get him the job. Steve knows that if he can hold a job and indicate to the judge that he has family support, there is a good chance that his sentence will be light or suspended. There is no one else to whom Steve can turn; the last ten years of his life were spent in an orphanage, he has no other family, and his "friends" are "strung out" on heroin. His father, an alcoholic, has maintained sporadic contact with Steve throughout the years. Having "forgiven" him for his cruelty, Steve is flooded with feelings of empathy and caring for his father. He feels hopeful that the two of them will finally meet eye to eye. Hopefully, his father will feed him breakfast; he is very hungry.

He knocks on the door of his father's trailer, opens the door, and sees his father's trembling hand holding a can of beer. His father mutters, "That job deal is off, no dope fiend could hold down a man's job. You're a damn fool for getting hooked on that stuff." Steve bolts for the door, gets a fix, and spends the next three years of his life in a federal penitentiary.

Steve was enraged at his father; but to admit this directly to him, "the only person he had in his life," was too great a risk. Intellectually, he realized his father could not give him what he needed; but emotionally, he kept hoping. Untrusting that anyone could or would ever give to him, Steve felt trapped.

Through the psychodramatic process, Steve was able to express his rage at his father, and in role reversal, "feel" his father's limitations and humanity.

He had to say goodbye and practice reaching out to those who could "give"; and he needed to free himself of his rage to allow his other feelings to flow spontaneously toward others. He needed a psychological social atom for his survival. For Steve to be without one was to be an addict, in prison or dead.

The *collective social atom* is the smallest number of groups or affiliates of which an individual must be a member in order to feel complete. These collectives give the individual a link to the community, provide social alternatives, and provide a structure for within which an individual can be spontaneous and productive. Common collectives include the family, religious, work, educational, social, recreational, and professional. An individual may be affiliated with a number of collectives, but only two or three will be vital. A collective social atom could be represented as follows:

COLLECTIVE SOCIAL ATOM

If an individual terminates from any of his or her collectives, the collective must be replaced. The individual will experience a grieving process and search for another collective. It is important to appreciate the interdependence of the various collectives, i.e., what occurs in one collective affects another. The following is an example.

Larry is a young man of twenty who since the age of seventeen has ridden with the "Satan's Devils." He is serving a two-year sentence for the sale of heroin, and he calls himself a "speed freak." On the streets, Larry's collective social atom consisted of the "Satan's Devils" and a foster family, both of whom he "loves." He often says that wearing a leather jacket, carrying a chain, and walking down the street with his friends is the greatest thrill he has ever known. He feels powerful and knows that his motorcycle is nearby to take him anywhere. He doesn't necessarily need drugs but uses them to be a member of his "gang."

Larry also sincerely states he respects and loves his foster family. When with them, he feels tender and loving. He enjoys being with them and looks forward to his visits. He loves his life on the streets!

However, in prison, he belongs to no collectives and looks lost. He tries to reach out to others by telling them about his motorcycle stories of how he and his gang terrorized others. The inmates consider him a "fool"; and although I have no proof, he behaves as if he has been sexually violated. He does have a relationship with one counselor to whom he talks regularly. He is unkempt and depressed, reads books about motorcycles, and his twenty-year-old face looks like a face of a forty-year-old man. He is sociometrically rejected in his therapy group. He was allowed one psychodrama by the

inmates, and he has not been allowed to work again. He has stopped attending his group, even though this reduces his chances of parole. He wanders around the compound looking for a group to which he can belong.

The *individual social atom* is the smallest number of people required to maintain membership in a collective. Again, the number is generally small; and many relationships may be important in the collective—a few are vital. If for whatever reason, i.e., through death, termination, illness, or emotional distancing, an individual loses vital people in his or her collective, (s)he must replace them in order to maintain membership and/or be creative and productive in that collective. The search for completion of an individual social atom is more important than any other task of the collective. If the individual social atom cannot be filled, the individual will experience "death" in that system, i.e., not be able to function within it.

The following is an example.

In only 3 of approximately 100 psychodramas, men chose to work directly on their life in prison. Most chose to examine their past or future. Dave is one of these exceptions.

Even though Dave had been grouping for six months, he did not feel a part of the group. Frustrated at his attempts to communicate his thoughts and angry at the unresponsive group, he confronted them. He felt them to be insensitive to his loneliness and to his struggles to keep himself in control. Afraid he would end up in the "hole" for "blowing on a hack," he needed to talk but wasn't sure anyone wanted to hear. The men retorted that he talked so much he stopped making any sense; they could feel nothing from him except a barrage of words. When he was ready to "get down," they'd be there. The group decided to move into action.

Through the psychodramatic process, he was able to first deal with his position within the group and then re-experience an incident that had occurred on the compound. He could not "work" in the group until he had established "linkages." To form the relationships he so desperately needed, Dave had to reveal his feelings.

If a crisis develops in one aspect of the system, e.g., a death of a friend or loss of a job, reverberations will be felt throughout the entire system. Hopefully, the other units can "absorb" the shocks. If they are unable to do so, the person will be in a crisis.

Imagine the individual in the above diagram to be 65 years old and retiring; his work collective is gone. His friends are dying, children moving away, and the neighbor who has taken him to church every Sunday has moved from town. He lives alone with his wife. If his wife should die, he would be dead within a couple of months. Social atomic death precedes physical death. If he were unable to find replacements in his life, he would die, even if before the advent of the losses he had been in fine physical health.

An individual does not have to be 65 and aging to experience socio-atomic crisis and death. I believe most failure in schools, people in mental institutions, most suicides, murders, poor performance on jobs are a result of social atomic death or crisis. Individuals need to fit; and if they don't, they will die, physically or within a collective.

Over and over again, I heard from the men in the prison, "I'm glad I got busted; if I hadn't, I'd be dead now." Psychodrama after psychodrama revealed their social atoms to be almost non-existent. The prison is not conducive to forming intimate relationships, nor is it a place which can help the men maintain or establish social atoms in the community. Letters and phone calls cannot serve this purpose.

The psychodramatic process allows life to come into the prison. It provides an avenue for the men to deal with their social atoms, and to spontaneously experience their feelings, creativity, and alternatives for their lives. They learn that their incarceration, addiction and unlawful activity is directly related to their inability to fully experience themselves, develop social linkages, and find emotional intimacy with others. Recidivism in our prisons is high. As Chaneles reported in 1972, seven out of ten men imprisoned for five years return to prison after release.[10] The cost per inmate per year is $15,000.[11] Recidivism is in part a result of the sociometric isolation and rejection that an ex-offender encounters in society. Re-entering a community after an incarceration is frightening and difficult. The only viable option for many ex-offenders is to return to the networks, people, collectives and activities they knew before arrest. Like any of us, the ex-offender will violate his or her own value system and put his or her life in jeopardy to establish "a place to fit." It is as vital as food or shelter.

Imprisonment disrupts social atoms, provides minute opportunities to repair and/or establish a new social atomic system in the community and is, therefore, destructive to the individual and society. Individuals and institutions that are sociometrically rejected and isolated can only disrupt a society. They have no other avenue available to them to effect change. I believe that rehabilitation is providing people with opportunities to develop viable social atomic systems that can allow them to experience their own spontaneity, creativity and power.

Some people clearly need to be confined or they will do harm to themselves or others. However, the majority of inmates could, with support, begin the oftentimes painful and slow process of re-establishing themselves in a community, while "paying the penalty of their crime." The techniques and structures used to accomplish this can evolve from a convening of sociometric leaders of the inmates, prison staffs, and communities.

The entire correctional system is in a very delicate bind for they are being asked to be kind and to punish. They have received two diametrically opposed

directives from us which include two mutually exclusive processes: to punish and to rehabilitate. For the most part, prison staffs are having a difficult time even hearing the second message, "rehabilitate," because it is so incongruent with the existing system. This dilemma can be confronted by the following sociometric process:

1. Establish dialogue among the sociometric leaders of the inmates, the prison officials, and the communities.
2. This group would serve as consultants and be responsible to their respective legislative branches for legislative action.
3. The legislative branches, in turn, place the responsibility back on the sociometric leaders of the inmates, prison staffs and communities for implementation.

"The aim of sociometry is to help in the formation of the world in which every individual, whatever his intelligence, race, creed, religion, or ideological affiliation, is given equal opportunity to survive and to apply his spontaneity and creativity within it."[12]

APPENDIX A

1. *Psychodrama:* an action instrument that provides an individual and group with a structure to experience their own process of learning. Through the enactment of life situations, an individual is provided the opportunity to fully experience his or her individual process intrapersonally, interpersonally, and sociometrically. The structure allows for a warm-up, an enactment, and integration. Psychodrama is a process within which an individual can spontaneously experience a catharsis and find creative alternatives in her or his life.
2. *Sociometry:* science and art of human relations; the systematic measurement of interpersonal relationships; the greatest umbrella of group dynamics; the system of assessing interpersonal networks and linkages; the process through which socialization occurs.[13]
3. *Sociostasis:* social equilibrium, i.e., an individual's social atomic system is in equilibrium, complete. An individual is "driven" to complete his or her social atom to feel in balance. An individual experiences a viable position within his or her sociometric networks.
4. *Tele:* term coined by J. L. Moreno to describe a process through which individuals form relationships with each other at an intuitive level rather than using concrete data. The feelings for people may be positive, negative, or indifferent. It describes a process whereby an individual is experienced as (s)he truly is, not as someone needs to experience him or her. The process is reciprocated.

NOTES

1. Sol Chaneles, *The Open Prison*, The Dial Press, New York, 1973, pp. 51-52.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 55-65.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
6. *Ibid.*, p. IX.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
8. See Appendix A.
9. Carl E. Hollander and Sharon L. Leman, "Sociometry," *Sensorsheet*, Environmental Studies/Earth Science Teacher Preparation Project, Boulder, Colorado, 1973, p. 3.
10. Sol Chaneles, op. cit., p. 173.
11. *Ibid.*, p. XI.
12. J. L. Moreno, *Sociometry and the Science of Man*, Beacon House, Beacon, New York, 1956, p. 19.
13. Hollander, Carl E., "Psychodrama: A Living Process," unpublished manuscript, 1974.

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