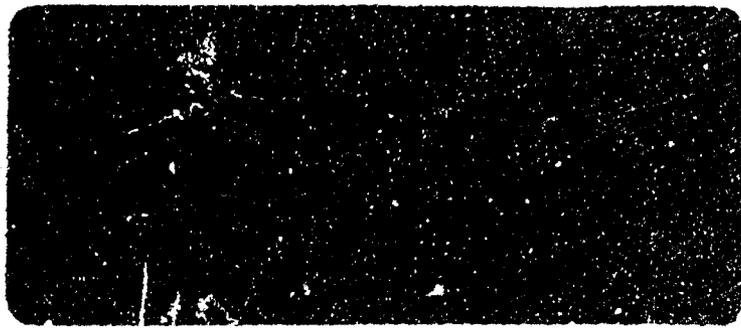


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CHINESE 'THOUGHT REFORM'
AS A SOURCE OF PERSPECTIVES
TOWARD WESTERN CORRECTIONAL PRACTICE

By

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A paper presented in a subsection on "Thought Reform: Trans-Cultural Comparisons" of Section H, "Trans-Political Studies." First International Congress of Social Psychiatry, London, August 17-22, 1964.

Western thinking about Chinese "thought reform" ("brainwashing") has moved from a demonological to a relatively more disenchanting and objective discussion in recent years (Bauer, 1957; Biderman, 1962; Biderman and Zimmer, 1961). At first, the extremely averse perspectives from which the Chinese practices were viewed restricted thinking about relations between "brainwashing" and Western practices of reform and therapy. The term "brainwashing" was applied only to practices of which one disapproved (cf. Winokur, 1955; Meerloo, 1954). When serious comparative considerations of "brainwashing" did take place, however, the normative outlook from which Chinese "thought reform" had been viewed gave uniquely valuable perspectives on Western practices (Bluestone, 1964; Chodoff, in press). The sympathetic regard of Western observers for what they regarded as victims of the Chinese practices contrasts with difficulties observers have in identifying with the subjects of their own correctional procedures.

Directly Relevant Sociological Literature

It is notable that none of the several early studies of Chinese thought reform brought to bear the theoretical perspectives or findings of the body of social science literature dealing with what on its face is the most closely related, well-studied social situation; namely, Western penological literature. This is particularly noteworthy in that the Communists explicitly defined the captivity condition of political and war prisoners as a penal reform situation.

The bulk of the corrections literature proceeds with a strong normative bias, but one opposite to that operative in the "brainwashing" literature. It is inmate resistance, rather than cooperation, that presents its problematic element; the failure of inmates to change rather than their susceptibility to efforts of the captor to induce changes.

The social science literature dealing with penal reform situations (see Ohlin, 1963; 1960; Sykes, 1958) by and large has emphasized the intractability of inmate behavior just as the studies of "brainwashing" emphasize its malleability (Biderman, 1963). Much of the literature on the prison explores extensively the illegitimate culture and covert organization of the prisoner and their effectiveness in thwarting the efforts of official authority and "corrupting" (Sykes, 1956) these efforts so as to serve the values and purposes of the inmate elite. The penological literature dwells on the kinds of compromises prisoners make with authority and their compromises of authority--topics analagous to the neglected aspects of "brainwashing" episodes we have pointed out elsewhere (Biderman, 1962) as being much neglected.

Another obvious point of comparison worthy of note is the frequent use of a trichotomous classification of imprisoned offenders that is very similar to that used in the prisoner-of-war and "brain-washing" studies: collaborators, apathetic-withdrawn, middle group, and active resisters (Schein, 1961, Lifton, 1961). The assignment of institutional populations to these categories frequently approximates the proportions Wolff (1960) assigned to collaborator, the withdrawn middle and the resister categories in studies of political and war prisoners.

The importance of the normative emphasis taken in the analysis may be indicated by the new light which was shed on penal institutions when sociologists such as Clemmer (1940) and McKorkle and Korn (1954) introduced greater consideration of inmate perspective into the field, and more refinedly, by the work of Goffman (1957) which approached the problems of the confined person with what approximates an inmate's bias. In comparing the former with the latter approaches, it might be ventured that the more detached efforts toward understanding the inmates' perspective succeed in uncovering a great deal of information regarding the mechanisms and intensity of resistance to official authority and illegitimate inmate organization, while the more complete identification with this perspective illustrated by Goffman gained such insights but also was more sensitive to the crushing manner in which inmates experienced the force of institutional pressures. Cressey and Krassowski (1957-58) earlier exploited comparison of American prisons and Soviet slave labor camps to the same end.

Influence of the "Brainwashing" Literature

While literature on correctional institutions had scant influence on considerations of "brainwashing," the latter have influenced the former. As is to be expected, reference to "brainwashing" studies has contributed to sensitization of workers in this field to sources of institutional and milieu pressures on inmates, rather than with inmate organizational and psychological resistance. This influence is also apparent in Goffman's (1957) assimilation of both the "brainwashing" and correctional situations with others into a more general sociological category for analysis, the total institution. Reference to the former studies in his work almost exclusively deal with the destructive impacts of institution on prisoner rather than the opposite influence with which his work is equally concerned. While the one-sided but unusual normative emphases in the "brainwashing" studies may therefore have had some useful corrective value for social science development, regard for more neglected aspects of inmate organization and behavior may also be of value, for example, in providing some guides for distinguishing between those forms of organization and resistance that are naturally nascent among an oppressed, captive group and those which are parts of the distinctive traditional cultures and social compositions of particular institutionalized groups.

Additional Considerations

Regardless of the valid similarities and dissimilarities that may exist between "thought reform" in Communist China and various Western

practices of correction and therapy, these new perspectives suggest some additional important questions about the latter:

1. Chinese "thought reform" rests ostensibly upon a highly explicit and fairly simple view of the nature of man, the social determination of his character, and of his proper social roles.

2. It involves an explicit Weltanschauung that stresses macro-sociological sources of the subjects' unacceptable behavior and posits an associated ethic as appropriate to his social position, while much Western practice based upon psychiatry has stressed microsociological determinants and involves implicit or explicit microsociological ethics.

3. Most Western reform practices are based upon less unitary, less simple, less explicit normative social theories. Kitsuse (1964) describes the great similarity to Chinese practice in the Japanese correctional procedure, naikan, but point to decided differences in the way in which the "identity crisis" is verbally resolved. Yet, most practices of personal reform seek intensive emotional reactions of the subject to an induced self-awareness of his departures from the model of the "good person" posited or implicit in the practice. Clearly, strong and genuine emotional reactions, including feelings of guilt, can be engendered equally by practices which involve divergent and often contradictory verbalizations regarding what a person should feel strongly about (cf., Szasz, 1961, 1963).

4. Consideration of the findings of longitudinal studies of effects of "thought reform" (Lifton, 1961; Schein, 1961; Biderman, 1962) also illustrates the misplaced confidence the practitioner may have of the effectiveness of his procedures when his observations of his subjects are restricted to an environment structured and controlled in accordance with assumptions similar to those underlying the practice.

Implication for Practice

While new insights can be gained by regarding subjects of correctional efforts as "victims" rather than as "patients" or "beneficiaries," the successes of the practices considered here depend upon the practitioner having the conviction that the changes he is evoking are sound and profound. Consequently, such insights as might be derived from the perspectives taken here presumably can be either valuably chastening or destructively disabling for the practitioner depending upon his confidence in the moral worth and practical potency of his endeavor.

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13. ABSTRACT			
Studies of Chinese Communist "brainwashing" practices proceeded with little reference to Western literature on penology and correction. When serious comparative consideration of Western and Chinese reform efforts did take place, however, the normative outlook from which Westerners had viewed Chinese "thought reform" gave uniquely valuable perspectives on Western practices. Several illustrations are given of how the examination of deplored reform practices can provide valuable, chastening insights regarding the meaning and effectiveness of reform efforts that one values positively. The sympathetic regard of Western observers for those they considered victims of the Chinese practices contrasts with difficulties practitioners have in identifying with the subjects of their own correctional procedures. The explicit positive valuation which was placed on the efforts of subjects to resist "brainwashing" contrasts with the tendency of practitioners to regard resistance as obduracy. The literature on "brainwashing" emphasizes the malleability of attitudes and behavior as contrasted with the emphasis on the intractability of inmates or patients typical of Western correctional literature. Despite great difference in theories applied by practitioners, similar emotional reactions are experienced by their subjects.			

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