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Time To Debunk Crime

Ever since their profession was given a name, penologists have been confronted with a curious fact: Punishment works best with those who need it least.

A man who shoots his wife's paramour in a blind rage may never have committed a crime before and will never commit another as long as he lives. The same may be true of a man who, panic-stricken by personal debts, succumbs to temptation and embezzles funds from his employer.

Both are sent to prison because society cannot tolerate such violence and dishonesty, and as lessons to potential murderers and embezzlers.

Yet beyond satisfying certain needs of society and possibly of the criminals themselves, who may feel they have "a debt to pay," of what use is their punishment? Certainly not rehabilitation, for they are as fit to re-enter society on the day of their sentencing as they will be 10 years after it — and perhaps more so.

It is otherwise with the career criminal, the man who has been in and out of trouble since childhood and in and out of reformatories and prisons since he was a teen-ager. For him — and he is in the vast majority — punishment is a degrading and embittering and hardening experience.

Rarely is the career criminal able to admit his own guilt, or if he does, rarely does he accept responsibility for it. It is, as any number of sociologists and psychologists will hasten to assure him, society's fault.

(Strange how society is blamed for the tens of thousands of persons in prison, yet society gets no credit for the tens of millions who have never been and never will be in prison.)

Even rarer is it for this kind of criminal to feel any responsibility for the welfare of his victim or his victim's family, to vow that he will try to make amends for what he may have done.

This should be a part of

rehabilitation, yet our laws do not even have any provisions for encouraging the man who wishes to make amends.

Of late, a new dimension has been added to all the other problems of penology — political radicalization.

"Political radicalization is becoming more common-place in American prisons and the state authorities in charge of prisons are having to become more aware of the concept in dealing with prisoners who see their criminal offenses as strictly political acts," said Race Relations Reporter a week before the shoot-out at San Quentin in which "Soledad Brother" George Jackson was killed.

Jackson, the No. 1 "political prisoner" in America in some eyes, is now the No. 1 political martyr.

Wrote journalist Tad Szulc after an interview with Jackson, shortly before his death:

"The convict-politicizing process obviously meshes with the growing opinion among prisoners and outside radicals, including ideologically motivated lawyers and criminologists, that most crimes committed in the United States, particularly by minorities and poor whites, are essentially 'social' and 'political' in nature. This is so, the argument runs, because such crimes derive from sociological and political conditions in the country."

The same sort of nonsense was taken as an article of faith by the architects of the Communist revolution in Russia.

It is worth noting that not only have millions been imprisoned or liquidated in the U.S.S.R. for political "crimes," but that more than 50 years after the overthrow of czarist oppression, there are proportionately just as many bandits, burglars, rapists, murderers and garden-variety crooks in Russian jails as there ever were.

Crime is not as simple as some people, including criminals, would have us believe.