

1950

## Crime in a Discordant Culture

James Melvin Reinhardt

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

James Melvin Reinhardt, *Crime in a Discordant Culture*, 41 *J. Crim. L. & Criminology* 32 (1950-1951)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

## CRIME IN A DISCORDANT CULTURE

James Melvin Reinhardt

James Melvin Reinhardt, Professor of Sociology, University of Nebraska, has contributed previous articles to this JOURNAL. Author of numerous articles in the fields of criminology and sociology. Co-author: *Principles and Methods of Sociology; Current Social Problems; Problems of a Changing Social Order*. Author: *Social Psychology*. Lecturer on criminology subjects to F.B.I. National Academy since 1945.  
EDITOR.

Much has been written about poverty, slums, and parental neglect as contributory to delinquency and crime. These are important, but they do not operate in isolation. Rangoon has poverty, Bombay has slums, and some "Appalachians" neglect their children, but the crime rates are reportedly low. One interested in the environmental genesis of criminality would do well to look to the confusional behavior inherent in the wider cultural life. The illegal adventures of the "oversanguine temperament," driven by an extravagant optimism and a feeling of feverish energy may be attributed to "hypomania," but his prototype can be found among "legitimate" promoters, even candidates for high office who achieve wealth and influence by making promises they can not keep.<sup>1</sup>

A half orphan "breaks and enters" on the day following the sale of his mother's household goods to satisfy the "legitimate" demands of a "loan shark," whose interest charge is 80 percent; and a young man takes to the road after his father's little business has been squeezed to death by the "legitimate" operations of a strong armed competitor.

The human nervous system that gives a baby its laugh is also a nursery house for grudges, anxieties, and fears. There are no ready-made protective devices against destructive forces from the social world. Hence, a nervous system with the innate capacity for perpetual renewal gets tangled up in the behavior variants of the cultural life. This fact is clearly revealed in the scientific literature from juvenile courts, prisons, and mental hospitals.

The things we do, for instance, frequently have little moral relation to the things we say about what people ought to do. The juvenile often is caught in this "interstitial" zone of conflict, and the emotional consequences are sometimes tragic. This theme is too long to develop here. Its significance, however, may be illustrated.

The radio, for instance, with all its beneficent achievements is a generator of emotional conflict. As I see it, the telling failures of the radio are not in the silly little jingles and pietistic evocations jammed between "Goodbye" and "Dry Those Tears." These are on the order

---

1. See Wilson and Pescor: *Problems of Prison Psychiatry*.

of self-eliminating skin diseases, and if my little polling technique is worth much, people don't listen to them anyway. Seven out of ten G. H. fans turn off or engage the censor for sixty seconds of his program.

The real radio pathology lies deeper. It is in the ingenious devices employed to appropriate sacred institutions, noble professions, moral values, respectable titles, high hopes, and the formative dreams of children to "cheap" commercial ends. It is more than that: it is in the "get rich without work" philosophy made to dazzle the imagination of people—some of them young children—who would otherwise be devoting themselves to learning the basic tasks of life.

Take for instance such lavish displays as the radio wedding ceremonies. The "commercials" are woven into the magic spell created by "tender" music, imaginative descriptions, anticipatory moments animated by touching accounts of the first meeting, falling in love, a marriage proposal, and the little "gives" and "takes" of a "timid" boy and a "blushing" girl.

Again, a cigarette is identified with youth's noblest ambitions, and whether one smokes or not, it is a mark of distinction to have the right brand in the house. It protects the household also against the suspicion of being narrow-minded or lacking in altruism. It is all very wonderful, too. There is no "hangover" and the mayor of the town joins in the crusade. Nothing is forgotten. The beautiful "Ave Maria," as well as not, may be wedged in between the "T-Zone" and the "medicine man."

It isn't enough just to entertain the people in the studio audience either. They must be brought into the act. Young and old alike must tell the world, in unison, that a "treat" is not a "treatment." Beyond this, and for "sententious" reasons, endless amounts of time and energy are expended upon efforts to finish extravagant sentences, add last rhymes to silly quatrains, to guess answers to stupid questions, to name that "song," to identify a voice, and on and anon, "world without end." Perhaps never before has so much been given to so few for so little.

This is bad business. It plows deep into the moral fibre of the social life.

Once upon a time honest work done with dignity and self-respect was a "joy forever." It was considered an elemental aspect of the "American Way." The "American Way" can wait while we "give that woman \$1,200 cash." And for what? For nothing more than the astounding disclosure that "... The world will not long remember what we say here . . ." was said by the immortal Lincoln at Gettysburg.

The radio of itself is not evil. It is an instrument of power insensitive to how it is used. Commercially sponsored radio programs are not nec-

essarily bad. Perhaps, after all, it is the high level performances that sharpen one's sensitivities to the evils.

Less glaringly, but with fearful effect, these "split" moral "in (de) finitives" expropriate the ends of justice and invade the enchanted places of our most cherished institutions. Here is a young man serving a sentence in a state reformatory for putting his name on a worthless check. At the time the offense was committed he was a homeless, penniless boy wandering the streets of a strange city. Shortly after he entered the reformatory two young college men attempted to blackmail a wealthy philanthropist. The amount demanded ran into the thousands. These young men were sons of prominent, well-fixed families. The blackmailers never entered a penal institution. The matter was "hushed up" and the education of our blackmailers was hardly interrupted.

What has this to do with our young forger? Nothing at all except for the fact that he is human, and being human has a nursery house for grudges: "They're makin' goats out'a us fellas . . . go straight, my eye . . .!"

So the walls of the reformatory crumble before the on-slaughts of "respectability." On some fine day the warden will knit his brow while the judge of an impartial court of justice sentences a second offender. His chance to reform having gone by default, he enters a penitentiary.

I am not suggesting that this sort of moral conflict in childhood and adolescence is the direct or immediate cause of all or even most crimes. I am suggesting that it has a very important causal relation to criminal behavior and that it bears directly upon problems of prevention and reform. This conclusion rests upon case studies of numerous delinquents and criminals in and out of institutions over a period of several years. In many instances these studies involved intimate and confidential personal interviews which led into the secret places of the heart. Not in a "deep therapy" sense was this done, and it was without the exercise of esoteric symbols. This kind of criminological study reveals many warped and twisted personalities, caught early in a cross-fire of values from which there seemed from the individual's point of view, no legitimate escape. Strangely enough, these unhappy experiences are often shown as the products of "rational" judgments of "respectable" men.

The trouble here inheres in the contradictory nature of our standards of "respectability" and the accustomed techniques used in the efforts to conform to these standards. Thus, in many instances original capacity and basic necessity for "one-ness" within the self hasn't a ghost of a show.

The official whose salary was eight thousand a year, and who banked one hundred sixty-eight thousand through business turned to his own

firm, while he sent "petty thieves" to the penitentiary, was a divided self; but he was held together by certain "rationalizations" of "value" inherent in our conflicting culture. It may be shown that the very system of rationalizing that preserves the integrity of the official contributes to the formation of the thief. The "rationalizations" are a form of "Hoyle"; and truth, honesty, thieving and so forth are defined "according to Hoyle."

Perhaps the chief tragedy in the situation arises from the fact that a considerable proportion of the population is never in the position to act "according to Hoyle." They frequently start life as the children of the poor; handicapped by the lack of family prestige and without any naturally protected stairways to the coveted goals of "respectability." These often beat against impenetrable walls; and failing to gain entrance may take flight to the world of pure imagination where events can be juggled at will; or they may—but rarely in modern society—become submissive patrons of privilege; and again they may, as often they do, seek entrance to the "city" by condemned roads.

Not infrequently the failures already characterized come from homes of wealth and social security. The parents of such children are uneasy and constantly fearful of invasion from the cultural "backyards." These are, of all children, perhaps the most unfortunate. The parental attempts to keep them in rigid exclusiveness tends to cut off all avenues to normal childhood enjoyments. In such instances children may seek outlet in the "byways and hedges." But it is done, at first, quietly and on the sly. These children of the "byways" are *real* children to the cramped child of the "reprimand." They may use rough language on occasion. They are not always particularly clean, but they know how to get down to fundamentals. So our sheltered and hedged-in child slips away to play. He slips home again by the back door. Somewhere down under the periphery of consciousness brews a rebellion. The strain of a divided-self becomes too heavy to bear. He finally throws off the yoke of "exclusiveness" and openly flaunts the badge of "irrespectability." Specialists are called in to examine the child—not the parents and not the community. Finally, a perfectly good juvenile court judge sends him back to his "perfectly good" parents, but he doesn't stay. He goes "the way of all flesh" and there is talk about a "black sheep."