

1956

A Social-Psychological Analysis of Prison Riots: An Hypothesis

Frank E. Hartung

Maurice Floch

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

Frank E. Hartung, Maurice Floch, A Social-Psychological Analysis of Prison Riots: An Hypothesis, 47 J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci. 51 (1956-1957)

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.

A SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF PRISON RIOTS: AN HYPOTHESIS

FRANK E. HARTUNG AND MAURICE FLOCH

The authors are, respectively, Professor of Sociology in Wayne University and Head Psychologist in the Detroit House of Correction. Dr. Hartung has published a number of studies in the field of "white collar" crime and in the philosophy of science. He was a member of the Michigan Corrections Commission, 1951 to 1953, and is Executive Secretary of the Michigan Corrections Association.

Dr. Floch is a part time instructor in Criminology at Wayne University. He has published articles in this and other journals on such subjects as alcoholism, drug addiction, traffic law enforcement, the lie detector, and correctional treatment.

This article was originally presented to the section on criminology of the American Sociological Society, at the University of Illinois, September, 1954. Since it went to press, according to the authors, Lloyd E. Ohlin has cogently suggested that the collective type of riot occurred in prisons in which there was "a movement in the direction of reasserting traditional penal organization and procedures," as well as certain administrative changes we have not mentioned: *Sociology and the Field of Corrections* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1956), pp. 22-26.—EDITOR.

I

A greater number of prison riots occurred during 1952 than in any previous year. A study of them suggests that there were two main types. First, there were those whose origin appears to have been mainly in what can be regarded as the historical causes of prison riots. Second, there were those whose origin appears to have been mainly in a combination of certain penal advances and the nature of the maximum custody prison. For the sake of convenience, they may be referred to as the brutal and the collective types of riots, respectively. Were there sufficient time, it would be possible to indicate some details of origins, as, for example, the 1952 riot in one state prison which some people think was fostered and encouraged by top prison officials. The allotted time, however, allows us to concentrate only on the collective type, in a highly simplified analysis, in addition to devoting a few words to the brutal type.

It should be indicated here that the brutal type of riot has often occurred in the past and will probably continue to occur as long as the conditions which historically have occasioned it continue to exist. These conditions are:

1. Poor, insufficient, or contaminated food.
2. Inadequate, insanitary, or dirty housing.
3. Sadistic brutality by prison officials.
4. Some combination of the first three.

The overwhelming majority of prison riots of the past may be attributed to this type of causation. Although prisons have been greatly improved in the past twenty years, both physically and administratively, there still are some in several states in which the most elementary physical needs of the inmates are hardly met. The difficult physical conditions of existence result in a continual state of unrest among the prison-

ers which is communicated to the custodial staff which, in "self defense," resorts to disciplinary measures of various kinds. A vicious circle exists which apparently cannot easily be broken by either side. The prisoners' unrest is shown in different ways: grumbling, violations of the prison's rules, self-mutilation, assaults upon the guards, attempts to escape, and, occasionally, a riot. It may well be that the riots of the collective type, which are the subject of this paper, triggered some of the 1952 riots based upon rotten food, overcrowding, or official brutality.

It seems that the conditions leading to the brutal type of riot were largely absent from the collective type, which first occurred in 1952. This type appears to have had its origin in a combination of sociological and social psychological circumstances which indicate that it is of a quality different from the riots in the past. It is more important from the viewpoint of social psychology in particular and the state in general, than the older type is. It stems directly from the specific nature of the prisoner-community, and is a good illustration of what can happen when the collective social forces of a community are not integrated into collective goals for the community. This type of riot appears to have been the result primarily of the following combination of sociological and social psychological components:

1. The nature of the maximum custody prison.
2. The aggregation of different types of inmates within one prison.
3. The destruction of semi-official, informal inmate self-government by new administration.

II

To begin the discussion with the nature of the maximum custody prison, it is important to realize that this prison belongs to the past, even though most American prisons are still of this variety. It is generally recognized that the great majority of prisoners do not need this degree of security in order to keep them from escaping. Such prisons put maximum emphasis upon conformity to routine. Conformity is rewarded, initiative is punished. Each prisoner is under the scrutiny of a paid official every minute of the day and night, with the "count" and the "shakedown" being important features of the scrutiny. Each prisoner is counted about 14 times daily, and is liable to have his cell or his person searched at any time. They live in cells that range from 3½ feet wide by 7 feet long, to about 7 feet square. At stipulated periods they can walk in the prison yard, which is, of course, limited in area, and is surrounded by a concrete wall of from 18 feet to 30 feet high. Wherever they turn, this wall is always in sight, reminding them of the outside, reminding them that they are prisoners labeled "dangerous" by society, and tending continually to stimulate ideas of escape. Their day and everything within it is ordered for them, from the time they are awakened in the morning until the lights are extinguished for them at night. In addition, enforced idleness due to lack of work provides the prisoner with endless hours for introspection. It appears that lengthy custody under these conditions almost invariably brings some degree of emotional instability. This leads to a consideration of the second component of collective riots, namely, the mingling of different types of prisoners.

Maximum custody prisons enclose an aggregation of men who have failed to adjust

to the free society. If the complex problem of classifying the human personality is simplified, several types can be distinguished in almost any maximum security prison. First, there are what can be termed the overtly aggressive individuals. They have emancipated themselves from scruples against the use of force in dealing with their fellows, and can be identified in most instances by the crimes which they commit. In this category belong the various predatory habitual criminals, including the armed and unarmed robbers, burglars, forcible rapists, and other criminals of passion. Second, there are what can be termed the covertly passive individuals who, even though criminal, avoid the use of physical force against their victims. They exercise rather, guile, ingenious schemes, subterfuge, and even artistic techniques. In this category belong the confidence men of all varieties, check passers, embezzlers, exhibitionists, drug addicts, and certain sex offenders. The members of the second category do not present too much of a problem to prison administrators. They tend to fret and fuss while serving their terms, and will ask for various privileges, such as extra letters or extra visits, and assistance in solving marital and financial problems. They also tend to request changes in work assignments, and often ask for medical treatment. On the whole, however, they will do their time with resignation and will expend their energy in various kinds of petty connivances which will yield them perhaps additional food and comforts.

It is the first category, that of the overtly aggressive criminal, which presents the chief cause for worry to prison officials. The leadership of the prisoner-community comes from this group. The maximum security prison symbolizes for them the condition of being hopelessly confined, and against which they begin to struggle from the first day of their incarceration. Many of them find it difficult to become passive in the automatic, routinized life of the prison. They are a continuing source of disorder, especially if the facilities provided for leadership, work, and recreation are inadequate to exhaust their energy and challenge their imagination. They are able to endure the rigors of maximum custody imprisonment through various forms of self-expression. These are found in certain important work assignments, such as secretary-clerkship to key prison officials or recreational leadership, and in the status among prisoners which certain concessions bestow on an inmate. The greatest amount of self-expression seems to come from playing a leading role in the informal prisoner-community which develops in every prison.

The question may logically be raised at this point as to why maximum custody prisons were able to operate for years without riots. The answer is to be found largely in the nature of the informal prisoner-community. This community is a social organization that is independent of the formal table of organization which gives the legal social structure of the prison. Many of the prison-wise inmate-leaders were enabled, by the situation prevailing in these prisons for some years past, to obtain a great deal of self-expression. Although this may appear to contradict what was said previously concerning the routine of the maximum custody prison, it will be understood when some details are presented.

The informal inmate-structure was elevated to semi-official self-government in many prisons during the past decades. Inmate-assistants and inmate-clerks of key officials discharged many of the major custodial and administrative duties of prisons.

These included such matters as assignments to cells and to jobs, and the distribution of such privileges as trusty status, the sale of concessions in the lobby, and even to some extent the imposition of discipline upon fellow-prisoners. They could even find a substitute for women by practically commandeering the services of male prostitutes and "fruits" that are available in any prison. When one considers that, even if they are monosexual communities, many prisons have a population the size of a small city, it can be realized that such powers have great importance. They involve the major needs of a prison population. The persons or groups having charge of work and cell assignments, as well as privileges and discipline, control all these factors within the institution that make prisoners' lives either bearable or difficult.

There is a rather simple explanation for the development of this inmate self-government. Legislatures have always been loathe to appropriate funds sufficient for efficient management of prisons. Hence inmates came to be employed in various positions in order to assist major officials in discharging the most important functions. Once the practice was started, primarily because of financial reasons and secondarily in order to reward a few prisoners whose conduct inside the walls was good, it was widely adopted. From small beginnings the usual processes of bureaucratic growth produced, in a few years, a fairly well-knit, extra-legal self-government of prisoners.

A prison directed by inmates is not only a "big house" but an "open house" as well. One of the country's largest prisons was an "open house" in this sense. Women could be brought in for sexual purposes by paying a fee to the inmate leaders. The prisoner would be sent to the hospital; when his woman came to visit him there, the attendants would kindly enclose his bed with screens. When she left, the prisoner-patient would undergo a speedy recovery! Liquor was quite easily smuggled in. Even narcotics found their way into this prison in relatively large quantities. Inmates on favored outside-the-walls assignments were able to form friendships among citizens of the surrounding cities. Some were entertained by their girl-friends in the latter's homes. In addition, prisoners who had been racketeers in civilian life and therefore retained a measure of importance, were able to secure some very good concessions within the wall, which in many instances provided annual incomes to be envied by a modest citizen on the outside. Several inmate concessionaires earned as much as fifteen thousand dollars a year! In short, while this particular prison was a modern Bastille, it nevertheless provided an accommodation that did not put too much strain upon its denizens. One could establish a rather tolerable and colorful existence within its walls.

In return for being allowed to operate the prison semi-officially, the inmate leaders relieved the warden of the burden of discipline. If there was an individual prisoner who grumbled too much and too openly, he was "taken care of" by his leaders. If news of group discontent reached the warden, he suggested that the inmate leaders "knew what to do," and they did. They wanted no trouble that would endanger their positions. Thus the prison floated on an even keel for years, with no serious disturbance.

A few years ago the administration of this prison was replaced. It was then operated on sounder penal principles. The result was that conditions were at once drastically changed. The inmate clerks and assistants were shorn of their power, and re-

placed by paid, Civil Service personnel. Concessions were immediately and completely eliminated. All work and cell assignments were made by the custodial staff. The warden put the lid on smuggling of contraband; liquor and narcotics were reduced to a negligible minimum; and inmates were restricted to purely social visits with their female visitors. Discipline was exercised by the guards, not the inmates. The prison was thus transformed into the kind of place the public expects, namely, an institution for segregation and punishment. In short, the prison was directed from the warden's office rather than from the cell-block.

In this manner the semi-official inmate self-government which formerly directed the prison with the benevolent consent of the warden and his assistants was annihilated. This is a development that occurred in the 1940's in various prisons in different states. The sudden elimination of the informal self-government brought a drastic change in the status of the inmate-leaders. The control which they had exerted over their fellow-prisoners was lifted and nothing was put in its stead. All the convicts knew that the inmate-leaders had been shorn of their semi-official power. One result was that the "reform" prison administrations, even though penologically sounder, provided no incentives for the inmate leaders to exercise a disciplinary control over the other prisoners. The corollary of this was that the overtly aggressive individuals, who furnish the motive power for the collective type of prison riot which is the subject of this paper, became a destructive force.

One result of this development was that unrest increased by leaps and bounds in these "reform" prisons. Many people experienced in prison administration were of the opinion that disturbances were likely to occur at almost any time. Inmates also predicted that outbreaks were imminent. On this account many tried to be transferred to other prisons, complaining about the tenseness that had developed within the walls, and which increased rather than abated.

It is necessary to establish an important qualification at this point in order to delineate briefly the social structure of the collective type of riot. It is quite evident that not all of the overtly aggressive individuals play an equal role in it, any more than they all played an equal role in the former semi-official self-government. Some assume the leadership; as generals, so to speak, they play an active, directing role. Others—to continue the figure—serve as ordinary foot soldiers, and engage in the physical activity which marks a prison riot. It is important in understanding the collective type of riot to realize that the most stable and prison-wise of the aggressive individuals rarely appear in the open leadership of a prison riot. They remain, rather, in the background, and put forward those aggressive persons known as "screwballs," to lead the riot openly. The latter are men who enjoy the momentary notoriety, the fight on the barricades, the excitement of unconcealed defiance, and negotiations with prison authorities. The real leaders, many of whom are cool professional criminals, fan the flames from beneath; they are rarely visible to the naked eye. Prison investigations subsequent to riots never expose them. If anything, they might even claim a reward for having attempted to stem the rebellion. The open leaders of the riot comprise the main body of the overtly aggressive prisoners. They are the ones who apply the torch and otherwise engage in a wild orgy.

Covertly passive characters are there also. But they are mostly swept along by the

sheer force of the event. They are unwilling and often unhappy participants who would prefer to remain in their cells or on the periphery, if permitted. They dislike the entire business and would be grateful if left alone.

It will be seen from this discussion that the prison, when viewed as a social institution, is a complex social structure. It is our contention that the chief reason for the collective type of riot is the peculiar combination of components enumerated: the nature of the maximum custody prison, the commingling of divergent types of personalities, and the destruction of the semi-official inmate self-government with nothing to replace it.

We have attempted to be analytical in our discussion, and have tried to avoid any assessing of responsibility for the riots. Such an assessment is also beyond the limits of this paper. Our conception that the prison is a social institution, that it is a community of prisoners, is certainly not a new one. However, none of the discussions we have read of these riots give any hint that the prison is as much a community as any small city. Consequently the analysis presented here, which we regard as fundamental to an understanding of the riots, has not been given to the public. As far as we could discover, none of the prison officials who have written about the riots have undertaken anything approaching an institutional analysis. Perhaps one should not expect reporters, who have done much of the public writing about the riots, to be able to discern the institutional nature of the outbreaks. Various elective officials, suddenly qualifying themselves as penal experts, have attempted to blame the operation of parole for the riots. Such a claim succeeds only in shedding obscurity upon the causes of the riots, as seen from the briefest consideration of three matters. First, most of the riots in 1952 occurred in states with highly developed and nationally recognized parole systems, such as Illinois, New Jersey, Michigan, and the Federal jurisdiction. Second, a large number of the openly active leaders in the riots had sacrificed their parole privilege long before the riots. Third, none of either the brutal or collective types of riots occurred in a minimum custody prison.

Could anything have been done to minimize the chance of disorders, after the disruption of the inmate self-government? Aside from an enormous and impracticable increase in the guard force, there appears to be one policy that might have brought good results. This proposed policy is just about the opposite of that which was followed.

We have discussed this matter at length with several of our colleagues having long experience in the custody and treatment of inmates. They all concurred in this: that the first consideration in a prison is to provide a peaceful atmosphere. Order must be maintained, not simply because the public demands it, but so that rehabilitation, if it is at all attempted, will have a chance to take root. Without peace there is no possibility of any kind of constructive work with inmates. It appears, therefore, according to our hypothesis, that the major error of many prison authorities was an incorrect policy regarding the dissolution of the inmate semi-official self-government. It was correct to destroy that self-government, which should never have been allowed to develop. It was incorrect not to use at least some of its personnel afterwards, for the attaining of a good end. It may be recognized that this is a very important condition for peaceful relations within the prison. If our analysis is cor-

rect, then the collective type of riot was almost inevitable under the circumstances. Had they not happened yesterday they would have happened tomorrow.

There is at least one way of minimizing the possibility of the collective type of riot recurring, assuming that the fortress type of prison will be retained for the great majority of prisoners. This is by exploiting inmate-leaders *under official direction* so that they will once again have incentives for and a stake in a smoothly-operating, peaceful prison. It may of course be necessary for prison administrators to take an active although unobtrusive part in the development of inmate-leaders, so as to reduce the probability of the predatory criminal and the racketeer again rising to his former place of eminence in the prisoner-community.

Some form of inmate self-government, whether unofficial or official, is necessary for the maintenance of peace in a modern maximum custody prison. This conclusion is a corollary of the particular structure of the prison community. The question may be raised as to why no frequent riots occurred in the prisons of the nineteenth century, when no semblance of inmate self-government could even be conceived. The reason is that inmate movement was then so physically controlled and restricted that mass activity was impossible save at the cost of a large number of casualties, a price which the inmates were loathe to pay.