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## Historical Archives

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# Prisons Must Go

**Jacob. L. Moreno\***

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“Is that what you suggest? We should open all prisons and let all the prisoners out? The gangsters? The murderers? The kidnappers? Let them return and flood the community? Is that what you believe, that we should abolish the prisons? And make the community an open battle field?”

Yes, this is exactly what I believe – because this is exactly what happens. You forget that every day our prison gates are opened, and criminals return to the community. Prisons make matters worse. If we would not send the man convicted of crime to prison, if we would leave him right here, the community couldn’t be worse off than it is today with its present prison system. We would at least be forced to consider the problem anew and perhaps try out other remedies that would cost less than our prisons and would appeal to common sense.

I know that you like many others cling to the idea that prisons can be reformatories. This is an illusion. The prison community is a diseased social structure. The denial of sex relations, of liberty, of congenial occupation and normal physical activity affect [sic] the body, mind and morals of the inmate and breeds anti-social attitudes. Prisons are cesspools of crime and viciousness which infect all who come into contact with them. They are clearing houses for organized crime. In the eyes of the community the convict is a dangerous and degenerate animal. In his own eyes he is a victim of an unjust social order. Prison reform is futile. All so-called reforms, educating the prisoners, and socializing the prisoners are petty gestures. Reform is futile as long as it does not give the prisoner an

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opportunity for normal and healthful living. This can be accomplished by abolishing prisons entirely. The prisoner is given no tangible help in adjusting to the social structure.

The convicted man stands in need of association with persons who will be a therapeutic force in reconstructing his character and attitudes. Such forces can hardly be found within groups where every member is also an offender. Within the prison, each man has something in common with the others: he has to stay for a longer or shorter time. During his stay there, the other prisoners are his closest friends. His influence on the other men is most often his knowledge of the technique of criminal activities. The more he knows about crime, the greater his power within the group and the friendships he makes become of such enduring character that he himself, even if he wills to do so, cannot break off from these men when they meet outside prison walls later.

We would not consider placing tubercular patients with lepers or diphtheria [sic] cases, but this is what is done today in prisons. Men convicted of every crime mingle and teach each other whatever branch of activity they are most versed in. Not only is this true, but they frequently succeed in building up gangs in which each has a highly specialized function and in which each man has to play the role he is best able to perform for anti-social ends.

We often overlook the fact that the modern idea of imprisonment conflicts with the creative philosophies of civilization. Under Roman law imprisonment did not exist. A man found guilty of crime was either fined or executed. It is un-Christian. Monasteries were voluntary houses of refuge where the sinner could find help and peace, but he entered for life. He never returned to the community to live there as before. But the criminal does. We have adopted the idea of segregation from the monastery but have discarded the monastic idea of free choice and separation for life. We distorted the monastic idea. Prisons are also undemocratic. They are in discord with the fundamental principles of democracy, equality, and opportunity. We can restrain a criminal from committing further crimes as long as we keep him in prison, but if he is to return to the community eventually, then segregating him for a long or short period will not make a better citizen of him. We can cure him only through giving him a normal life. The answer lies in adjusting the criminal within the community.

The first problem is to think about how to adjust the community itself, for the emotional balance of human relations in the community is continuously challenged. Romeo and Juliet illustrates how delinquency and crime crop up as soon as the balance of conflicting groups is impaired. The family of Montague showed a harmonious social structure, as did also the family of Capulet. But when Romeo falls in love with Juliet, the old feuds between Montague and Capulet revive and these, in turn lead to suicide, murder, and civil war. In other words, we must learn how to properly adjust relations between persons and groups in the community. The criminal is a by-product.

We all have a sense of proportion for things that do not fit together. A red rose may fit a particular dress and bring out the personality of its wearer more strikingly but may be totally unfit for another dress. We say that the criminal is

an unfit, unfitted for the community. But just as one criminal may not fit into a particular group, he may be found to fit well into another group, which we must discover. We may discover for almost everyone a niche, a little group in which he can live a balanced life.

The greatest force shaping conduct is the small coterie of persons whom we love and respect and from whom we receive love and respect. The family is a master example of such coteries. It is for each of us like an invisible prison around us, committing us more or less to act in a certain manner. The family is a psychological prison without walls.

We have found from the study of the groupings that children form among themselves that through the assignment of a child to a group in which it finds its balance, that is, proper expression of its desires and at the same time restrained prevents the development of anti-social attitudes. Why should we not learn from this technique, which is so useful for the child and apply it everywhere in society. The assignment of the potential or the actual offender to a group of persons in which he finds a better balance of his desires than in the groups he has lived before can control his conduct and guide his relationships from the very moment of his conviction.

The crux of the matter would be to find for each convicted man a remedial social group composed of selected persons to whom he would be accountable. It should work with him like a good family ordinarily does. We could thus develop a technique of "socialized probation" consisting of assigning the offender to a balanced social group. Repeat offenders would be assigned to groups that are progressively more strictly supervised and controlled. Socialized probation would work like a sieve, culling out those who were found to be unadjustable to the open community. After several trials, these offenders would have to be imprisoned, but for life, and not just temporarily as is now the case, and in institutions built for people who would live out the rest of their lives within them.

Criminals are made in the community. They can be cured only in the community. Prisons must go.

Society must choose between two possible procedures: either the criminal is eliminated from the community forever, never to return to it, or he remains in the community to be cured there. The community, then, has to be adjusted at the danger spots.