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# Consciousness, Solidarity and Hope as Prevention and Rehabilitation<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

This paper grapples with the question of how progressive criminologists might approach working with people who have committed violent or predatory crimes, or are 'at risk' of doing so. Progressives have often been uneasy about 'intervention' with people who offend: but in the face of the destructiveness of violence, especially in some parts of the world, a posture of simple non-intervention won't suffice. I suggest three central principles – which I call consciousness, solidarity and hope – that may guide us in developing ways of working with offenders that are both progressive and effective.

### **Keywords**

Intervention, prevention, progressive criminology, rehabilitation.

### **Strategies for Intervention**

In this article, I want to discuss some issues that have been on my mind for some time, and that I've been wrestling with in a variety of ways over the past few years. I've inflicted some of these ideas on my colleagues and friends in the US before, but I've decided that it's now time to inflict them on an international audience.

Many contemporary criminologists speak eloquently of the dangers of the 'power to criminalize'. But we also have to remember that, in the kind of global society we now live in, predatory and brutal crime in the streets and in the homes are also very real things. In fact many of us have argued for a long time that predatory and brutal behavior is one of the predictable costs of a predatory and brutal social order. And that means, among other things, that those of us who want a more just and secure society must necessarily confront the question of what to do about the people who are sufficiently damaged or demoralized by the conditions of their lives in this society that they inflict serious harm on others. We have to confront, in short, the issue of what in mainstream criminology is called 'intervention'. And I think that in the community of progressive scholars, practitioners and activists, our response to the issue of intervention is now an uneasy one.

Two quite different perspectives have characterized the progressive attitude toward 'intervention' with people who've committed crimes or are 'at risk' of committing them. Both of them are based on important truths: but both, I think, are ultimately unsatisfactory.

On one side, there is a progressive tradition of scholarship and activism upholding the value of some kinds of rehabilitation or 'treatment'. In fact, it's a tradition that I've often been part of. Like a lot of other criminologists on the Left, I've been very critical of the conservative idea that there's nothing we can do to help people who 'offend' to turn their lives around for the better – and so all we can do is lock them up and essentially forget about them. It's hard to overstate how much that argument has fed into the growth of mass incarceration as our main response to crime, perhaps especially – but not solely – in the United States. And so I've felt it's very important to kick back against the idea that 'nothing works'. On several occasions I've looked hard at the evidence on various kinds of intervention programs and argued that some things do work – at least a little – and that investing in those things is a much better use of our resources than doing what we've mostly been doing. I've been buried up to my ears in that research literature again recently (see Currie 2013), and I'd make the same argument again today.

But that's, of course, not the whole story.

As I said, I think the argument that some kinds of conventional intervention can work is, within limits, correct. But the limits are very real. And in the haste to fight back against the conservative argument, we have sometimes fallen by default into supporting things that we shouldn't support – or at least lumping all kinds of things together in our defense of what works, without looking too hard or asking too many questions about what some of those interventions actually involve or how, if at all, they fit with a genuinely progressive vision of justice.

On the other side, there is a very different progressive tradition that's deeply skeptical – at best – of the whole idea that any good can come of programs that claim to treat or rehabilitate people. There is now a longstanding and eloquent critique from the Left of the very notion of rehabilitation, leveled most recently by Pat Carlen and others (Carlen 2013). There is a very strong current of 'non-interventionism' on the Left: a sense that the main task for progressives is to get the state and its justice system off people's backs. That view is also rooted in some hard truths about the incompetence and overreach of much of what passes for rehabilitation or treatment. But this tradition also often ducks the question of what to do about the very real plague of predatory violence around the world.

Last year in Oakland, California, a city of only about 375,000 people near where I live, over 100 people lost their lives to violence, almost entirely people of color, mostly young, who were killed by people very much like themselves. Progressive people around the world were rightly appalled by the spectacle of over a thousand people, very disproportionately black and poor, who died in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005. But violence, mostly concentrated in the same kind of communities, has taken a toll in lives equal to several *hundred* Katrinas over the last generation in the United States alone. And beyond the death toll, there is the pervasive victimization by violence that doesn't kill you but that makes your life scary and intolerable. There are many places in the United States – not to mention India or Brazil or Mexico or South Africa – where women are afraid to go out of their houses to school or work for fear that they'll be attacked by men. But then again, they may also be afraid to stay *in* their houses because they're afraid they'll be attacked by the men who live there. No one who follows the news can fail to have been appalled by the stories of extreme violence against women in some of those countries in the past year or so – stories that represent just the tip of the iceberg. What do we do about the men who commit that violence?

In the face of those realities, I don't think nonintervention is an intelligible or acceptable option, morally or politically. People really *do* engage in behavior that is destructive, predatory and

exploitative. They do things that violate the most basic human rights, dignity and security of other people, and that can add up over time to erode the social fabric of whole communities. They engage in behavior that's fueled by values that go against what most of us as progressives believe and that we couldn't in a million years support. They do 'offend'. And in the process lives are destroyed – both those of victims and those of perpetrators, and their families. In the hardest-hit communities in the United States, as in a great many poorer countries, it's safe to say that *most* people are scarred in one way or another by the experience of violence.

That's true also, to a lesser degree, in other advanced societies and, again, it's true in spades for some of the most afflicted countries of the developing world. In all of these places, of course, there are plenty of people who don't really care about the resulting damage all that much, because it mostly happens to people whose lives are considered largely expendable. But that can't be *our* position. Instead, I think that we as progressive criminologists need to come up with strategies of intervention that unflinchingly confront the reality of violence and predation but do so in ways that fit our progressive values and our democratic aspirations – strategies of intervention that mesh with our vision of the kind of societies we want to build. And part of that strategy has to involve creative efforts to change the hearts and minds of the people who are doing the damage, or are likely to in the future.

That's of course only one part of a progressive strategy against violence and predation. Another part, surely, has to be structural: we need to affirm that without broader social change that addresses the glaring social deficits and systemic inequalities in the communities I'm talking about, nothing else we do will get very far. So we need to keep insisting on serious employment policies and antipoverty policies, on a vision of economic development that distributes the gains from growth and technological advance more equitably, on confronting the roots of inequalities of race and gender, and more. But that's not the only realm we need to work on.

The kind of predatory global capitalism we now live under has deep cultural and psychological effects as well as structural and material ones. It's a system that, to put it bluntly, screws people up and makes them dangerous and uncaring. And we need to respond effectively to that uncomfortable reality. We need, in short, to work with the people who are doing the violence or are 'at risk' of doing it: we need to 'intervene'. But that puts us squarely up against the question of what we, as progressive criminologists, want intervention to accomplish – want intervention to *mean*.

I don't think we want it to mean just the extension of the kinds of things we now typically do in the name of treatment or rehabilitation. Again, I'm not suggesting that nothing good now happens in this vein. There are some good programs, in many places around the world, that are worthy of our support. But too much of what's now offered up as rehabilitation, or treatment, or as preventive work with high-risk people, is at best not enough, at worst bogus and even scary. Too much of it falls under the heading of what I call 'conformist' intervention. By that I mean that ultimately what it's about is trying to help people we deem to be at risk, or who have already gotten involved in the justice system, *fit in* to the existing society around them.

Conformist intervention is about getting people to accept the typically bleak conditions of life that have put them at risk, or turned them into 'offenders', in the first place. As a corollary, it teaches them to locate the source of their problems mainly, if not entirely, in themselves. So 'rehabilitation', for example, comes to mean trying to train vulnerable people to navigate what are often chronically marginal lives and stunted opportunities; and we then measure the 'success' of these efforts in very minimal and essentially negative ways: they commit fewer crimes, do fewer drugs or different drugs, maybe get, at least briefly, some sort of job. And even if the job is basically exploitative and short-lived and their future options are slim and their present lives are still pinched, desperate and precarious, we still count that as all good – as evidence of programmatic success.

But the problem with this kind of intervention is twofold. First, it doesn't really *work* – at least not very well, and not very reliably; second, even to the extent that it does work, it fails the test of living up to anything approaching a genuinely progressive or democratic vision of what we want people's lives to be. And these two things are connected. Much of what I'm calling conformist intervention, even when it's done right – implemented thoroughly – is at bottom pretty minimal. It aims at best for relatively minor changes to what are very often deeply disadvantaged, stressed and troubled lives – lives that may have been stripped of meaning, purpose and opportunity. Conformist intervention makes no attempt to alter any of the larger surrounding circumstances that shape those lives for the worse. So it's actually fairly miraculous that these kinds of interventions 'work' as well as some of them, sometimes, do.

That kind of intervention can't address the most powerful forces affecting the lives of the people they're designed to help. And it also can't *inspire* the people whose values and behavior we want to change; and therefore can't offer a compelling alternative to the attractions of street crime, or the lures of drugs, or the rewards of successful violence. It can't reliably counter the devastating sense of powerlessness and meaninglessness that often overwhelms people with the kinds of problems and the kinds of circumstances that often get them into the justice system in the first place.

The rewards offered by simply accepting your place in the society around you, with its meager opportunities, its gutted social supports, and its corrosive everyday stresses, are also not enough to compete with the pull of the predatory, profit-oriented individualism that animates the drugs/crime nexus around the world today. And that helps explain why even pretty good programs often don't make much difference in most people's lives or behavior.

To counter those things, you need something much more compelling. You need a transforming vision that can take offenders or potential offenders outside themselves, take them beyond their immediate troubles and beyond that regressive and predatory culture that often enmeshes them: something that can provide a larger sense of meaning and purpose that can inspire and mobilize them.

### **Transformative Intervention**

So against that kind of 'conformist' intervention, I want to counterpose what lately I've been calling 'transformative' intervention: in other words, intervention designed not to try to fit people into the existing structure of the society around them, but to engage them in the process of transforming themselves by working to *challenge* the conditions that now diminish and distort their lives. Transformative intervention involves helping people to move beyond the individualistic, often exploitative, often uncaring cultural orientations that now suffuse their communities – and our society as a whole – and to begin to relate differently to themselves, to those around them, and to the larger community (and the planet): to nurture alternative ways of looking at the world and their place in it that, among other things, will be less violent, less predatory and less exploitative.

What are the elements of the kind of alternative way of looking at the world I'm talking about? What do we want to teach people, if our aim is something different than merely trying to get them to accept lives of quiet desperation without acting up too much? I think our strategies of intervention ought to try to nurture three fundamental values – or fundamental orientations – in particular. I call them consciousness, solidarity and hope.

### **Consciousness**

By 'consciousness' I mean the understanding that their troubles and frustrations have causes *outside themselves* – that they are rooted in the systemic injustices and deprivations that are inflicted on them by the society around them. Consciousness in this sense is about gaining the

understanding that the things that make you angry, the things that make you desperate, the things that make you lose control, have a lot to do with your particular location in a society where life chances and living conditions are profoundly shaped by race, by class, by gender, by age. Put another way, it's the capacity to recognize that it's no accident that the population of our prisons and our youth institutions comes overwhelmingly from certain places and not others. It's no accident that, in the community where you live, there are no good schools and hardly any decent jobs – but a lot of 'law enforcement'. It's the ability to absorb the lesson that the real 'enemy' is not your own inner flaws, or your girl friend, or the other guys on the next block, but the social arrangements that put *all* of you in a bad place.

Note that this principle runs exactly counter to the one that so often dominates our current approach to intervention and rehabilitation. The models of intervention that we now mostly find in our systems of social control – in juvenile institutions or drug treatment, for example – usually urge people to locate the source of their troubles in themselves: in the 'bad choices' they've made, their mistaken thinking, their lack of personal responsibility. People who are deemed to be delinquents or addicts are taught not to 'externalize' their problems. But I'm saying 'externalizing' is precisely what we should encourage. The beginning of the possibility of real transformation lies in being able, as C Wright Mills (1959) famously put it, to link 'private troubles' with 'public issues'. Nurturing that ability to link their private angers and despairs with malfunctioning or negligent or exploitative institutions is absolutely central in helping people to move beyond their immediate problems and beyond individual solutions, to think about how those problems are embedded in larger social structures, and to begin to think about how those structures might be challenged.

Much of the violence that pervades the streets and the homes of the poor in both the developed and the developing worlds can be seen as a turning inward of the pains, frustrations and angers generated by systemic deprivation and inequality. A big part of the job of a progressive strategy of intervention is to help people learn to channel that response *outward*, toward the structures that are causing the pain in the first place.

### **Solidarity**

The second principle in a progressive strategy of intervention is closely related to social consciousness: it's what I call 'solidarity'. By that I mean that you come to see those around you – the kid in the other gang, for example – not as a natural enemy who is somehow 'other' and whose rights and humanity are accordingly diminished, but as someone who is actually very much like *you*, and whose life is shaped and constrained by the same larger forces as yours is. That other kid is not an implacable enemy or competitor whose disrespect toward you has to be met with violence in order for you to preserve your own standing and security. That other kid is, at least potentially, your brother or sister – your potential comrade in arms in common action against the real sources of your problems.

Solidarity, in other words, is about the recognition that you're in the same boat with others around you – not just people in your own gang or your own block, but a much wider circle or circles of people all facing similar deprivations and injustices – even if they are a different color, or gender, or speak a different language, or have just arrived from another country, or live on the other side of town. And as a corollary, that if you really want to attack those injustices and deprivations at their source, you will need to work *with* those others, not against them in a kind of Hobbesian war of each against all.

Again, to me this is crucially important because it goes directly against the predatory individualism – the 'me first' attitude – that so powerfully suffuses contemporary capitalism around the world: an orientation that leads you to view other people as targets rather than

comrades; as opportunities for material or sexual gain rather than as members of a common and respected community.

That sense that you're on your own in a pervasive struggle against others around you is fostered by the bleak conditions of life in many American communities and, in my experience, it is absolutely fundamental to how many of the people who wind up in the justice system think about the world. I remember very vividly how enormously saddened I was once when I was interviewing a sixteen year old girl who was a fairly major crack cocaine dealer back at the height of the crack epidemic in California in the late 1980s; she told me how slowly but surely as she grew up she had come to realize that, as she put it, 'you for your own and your own self only'. She had come to learn that nobody was going to help her – not family, not friends, certainly not any public agency – and that successful navigation of the world around her meant learning to trust no one and to rely on yourself alone.

One of the best descriptions I know of the way in which these attitudes have spread in our time is in the work of Steve Hall, Simon Winlow and Craig Ancrum in their book *Criminal Identities and Consumer Culture* (2008). They look at communities in the North of England that used to be solidly working class places – places that may have been poor but still had a deep-rooted ethos of collective solidarity born of the common experience of industrial work. When that was lost because of de-industrialization, the predatory individualism of consumer capitalism rushed in to fill the cultural vacuum. And that's a culture that facilitates people thinking that it's perfectly okay to rip off others in the community with impunity and without remorse.

Solidarity as a way of orienting yourself to the world involves a new kind of conception of responsibility. It's not the same as the mantra of personal responsibility that dominates our present political culture. It doesn't say you are responsible, and you alone, for your troubles, or that you're solely responsible for fixing them – which is what most 'therapeutic' interventions in and out of the juvenile and adult justice systems now tell you. But it does say that you're part of a larger community, or set of communities, and that you have responsibilities to those communities just as they do to you. Part of the responsibility of the larger community to you is to treat you as a full-fledged human being with rights to security, opportunity and dignity. But then you have a responsibility to insist on the same rights for everyone else, and to practice that principle in your own life.

Nowhere is this principle of solidarity more important than when it comes to gender. I think it hardly needs saying that the culture of predatory individualism that now suffuses many of the most violence-ridden communities, both in my own country and around the world, is also typically a profoundly sexist culture that routinely denigrates and exploits women and, at the extreme, makes it virtually impossible for women to live their lives, in the home or on the street, without more or less constant fear.

## **Hope**

So social consciousness and solidarity are two fundamental elements of what I'm calling 'transformative' intervention. The third is what, at the risk of sounding a little hokey, I call 'hope'. Hope might at first blush seem like a fairly unusual criminological concept, but I think it's actually central in understanding crime and understanding how it might be enduringly prevented – in progressive ways. Hope is important because in its absence people can feel as if what they do or don't do *doesn't matter*: that consequences are not very important. It can also breed a focus on short-term personal gain and comfort as opposed to making the harder effort to become a fully contributing member of a larger community. Hope – in the sense I want to use it – is the opposite of the sense of hopelessness, the sense of simply not giving a damn, that I think is such a central part of the mind-set that breeds violence and self-destruction.

When I talk about the importance of hope, I don't mean hope in the sense of a mindless conviction that, if you just have a positive outlook on life, everything will turn out just fine. I use it in the sense that Vaclav Havel (1991), the former Czech president and writer who passed away not long ago, once put it, which has stuck with me ever since I first read it. Havel makes a distinction between 'hope' and 'optimism'. He says optimism is the belief that everything is going to be okay, that all will work out for the best. Hope, on the other hand, is the conviction that you know what the right path is and that you can strive to make things happen that you believe need to happen: that you can work to realize your values and that this work will matter. And hope in that sense is closely related to the social consciousness I talked about before. It's rooted in the understanding that the conditions around you – conditions that you've come to understand have a lot to do with why you've been hurting yourself or hurting others – are not inevitable facts of nature but are human creations and are at least potentially changeable through your own actions in concert with others. Hope doesn't presume that doing this will be easy, or that change is certain. But it does rest on the conviction that common action against the forces that are distorting your life and destroying your community is possible, that it's a worthy thing to dedicate yourself to, and that it can make a difference.

Again, this is very different from the Darwinian notion that you are responsible for taking on your own problems in isolation from others – that if you just make the right personal choices you can live a happy life – which is often a set-up for failure and subsequent despair. It's a way of affirming that working to create a different kind of world for yourself and others can provide a transcendent sense of meaning and purpose – a sense that may have been hard to find before. If you have that sense, it can be an enormously important source of motivation, and can get you through a lot. If you don't have it, life can become very bleak and purposeless very fast in the conditions under which many people live in the world today.

Without that sense of meaning and purpose, you can fall into what I called, when I was studying middle-class adolescents who'd gotten into serious trouble, a sense of 'care-lessness' – the bone deep feeling that you really don't care what happens to you or to anybody else (Currie 2005). The absence of hope puts you in a frame of mind in which anything is possible, no matter how destructive or self-destructive, because there is insufficient reason *not* to do it. Without hope in this sense, all courses of action become equally meaningful – or equally meaningless.

## **Conclusion**

Those, then, are three central themes in what I call transformative intervention. Again, you'll notice that they run parallel to, but in complete opposition to, the principles of what I called 'conformist' intervention. Where this vision of personal transformation centers on nurturing the social and political awareness of people who have typically been systematically deprived, neglected and exploited, the conventional, conformist approach aims to promote an *unconsciousness* about those conditions, a kind of willful blindness toward the forces that shape your life. Where the transformative approach stresses working collectively with others to change those external conditions, the conformist model urges people to look inward and to regard looking outward as an excuse. And where the fostering of a sense of hope and collective aspiration, collective challenge to life as it now is, is central to what I'm calling transformative intervention, the conformist model encourages acquiescence and lowered aspirations, the acceptance of constricted lives and shattered opportunities. I once interviewed a kid in a drug treatment program in California who said to me: 'The world don't change for you; you change for the world'. That, of course, was what the program had taught him to think. But the message of transformative intervention is: you can – and should – change the world, and in the process you will change yourself.

These three themes are principles, rather than practices. They're about the kind of worldview that I think we want intervention to encourage, to nurture. By themselves they leave

unanswered some very tough and complicated questions: questions about how, exactly, we might translate those principles into practice – into actual programs or strategic interventions – as well as where those interventions should be located and, very importantly, who can or should do this work? These are bigger questions than I can go into now, but let me just close with a couple of thoughts.

These ideas aren't completely new, of course, and somewhat similar ones have been put into practice before – especially in the movement around education and social justice. My own thinking on these issues has been influenced by the great Brazilian radical education theorist and advocate, Paulo Freire (1970) and Freire's ideas, or ones along similar lines, have also been a strong influence on people in the US and elsewhere who have tried to introduce a social justice orientation in the schools. My former students and colleagues Randy Myers and Tim Goddard have been studying several examples of alternative schools in the US that have tried to put similar principles into practice (Myers and Goddard 2013). There is a lot that criminologists can learn from this education and social justice movement and a lot of useful collaboration that may be possible. It isn't hard to think of creative ways to translate some of the themes of critical alternative education into settings that work more explicitly with offenders or youth 'at risk'.

We can envision, for example, creating what's essentially a critical political education curriculum for kids who are coming out of institutional custody – or at risk of going in: something that doesn't at all resemble the bogus and conformist 'education' that kids in youth facilities now most often get, if they get anything at all.

There are also some specific ideas about youth involvement in the community that I think can fit very nicely with the principles I'm talking about. One is to get young people involved in mapping the social deficits in the communities they live in – charting the lack of good schools, the absence of accessible health care, the over-presence of law enforcement, the lack of jobs, the overwhelming impact of the prison system. Kids who might otherwise be going off on each other or withdrawing into a chemical haze can be enlisted to gather information – by doing interviews, collecting critical official data, taking pictures, all of the above – that documents the patterns of neglect and exploitation that impinge on their lives; and then using that information as a platform for political action.

There are a lot of possibilities. The point is that as criminologists we need to begin thinking harder about them than we've done before, and begin to develop the kinds of concrete interventions that align with our best values.

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