

DONALD CLEMMER'S CONCEPT OF PRISONISATION

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Summary. Prisonisation is a concept that has permanently entered the conceptual apparatus of prison science, while the phenomenon itself has become the subject of numerous studies by criminologists and penitentiaries. The author of this concept was the American sociologist and prison officer D. Clemmer, the author of the classic monograph "The Prison Community," the first such comprehensive work that presented the social aspects of prison life. The article presents the essential elements of the concept of prisonisation as a dynamic process during which inmates adapt to the conditions that occur in prison.

Key words: prisonisation, prison, adaptation

I.

The issues of the social structure of prison, and in particular interpersonal relations between prisoners and between them and officers of the prison administration, as well as social climate of prison, have attracted the attention of researchers, especially criminologists with a sociological orientation, since the early twentieth century.

A breakthrough in this respect was the monograph by D. Clemmer, *The Prison Community* [Clemmer 1968], published in 1940.¹ Its author was not only a sociologist but also a penitentiary administration officer. In his research, supported by many years of observation and practical experience, D. Clemmer focused on the analysis and description of the broadly understood prison culture, as well as closely related social processes that take place in a penitentiary institution. In particular, D. Clemmer analysed such issues as the phenomenon of leadership in prison, the occurrence of social stratification in a prisoner community, as well as the formation and functioning of informal primary groups. He also comprehensively described the way of life of inmates and their habits, as well as various social control measures used to achieve conformity on the part of prisoners.

One of the most important observations of D. Clemmer was drawing attention to the changes that take place in the attitudes and behaviour of inmates with time in prison. To describe these changes, D. Clemmer used the term "prisonisation," assuming that it is a dynamic adaptation process during which inmates adapt to the conditions in an isolation institution. Taking this position, D. Clemmer assumed the determining influence of the structural factors of the prison, which shape

¹ Two years earlier – in 1938 – D. Clemmer also published an article *Leadership Phenomena in a Prison Community*, see Clemmer 1938.

both the attitudes and conduct of inmates during imprisonment. In his work, D. Clemmer also described those elements which cause this process as well as those which exacerbate or moderate it

According to D. Clemmer, prisonisation is similar to assimilation, in the sense of a slow, gradual, more or less subconscious process during which the individual learns sufficiently the culture of the social environment in which they reside. D. Clemmer assumed, however, that despite the closeness of both these phenomena, "prisonisation" is a better term, as it more fully reflects the proper sense of the analysed phenomenon, which is the inmate's adaptation to prison conditions. In justifying his position, he referred to a similar process of "Americanisation," that is the assimilation of immigrants to the American culture and everyday lifestyle.

Taking the above into account, D. Clemmer defined "prisonisation" as a process in which the prisoner adopts, to a greater or lesser extent, ways of life, customs and principles and norms of general penitentiary culture [Clemmer 1968, 298–99]. At the same time, according to the broad definition adopted by him, "prison culture" is the social organisation of prison, both formal and informal, formed by habits, behaviour system, traditions, history, everyday ways of life, codes, legal regulations, rules which constitute guidelines and procedures for prisoners, their ideas, opinions, attitudes towards relatives and family members, the need for education, work, rest and recreation, government, the prison system itself, politics, judges, other prisoners, penitentiary administration staff, types of crime, sex, love, etc. [ibid., 294–95].

It might seem that the above definition lacks an indication of an essential element of prison culture, which is the informal prison code. However, such a view would not be correct. It should be noted that, according to D. Clemmer [ibid., 152], the basis of this informal code are mores, which he considers, following W.G. Sumner [Sumner 1995, 3],² as standard practices and traditions which are viewed as those leading to social well-being, if they compel an individual and incline them to conformism, and at the same time are not subjected to any authority. Mores are natural procedures that have become compulsory [Clemmer 1968, 152]. At the same time, D. Clemmer, when constructing his definitions, clearly distinguishes between mores³ as well as folkways and customs,⁴ the latter two

² Specifying the definition of mores, W.G. Sumner pointed out that these are ways of behaviour that are widespread in society in order to satisfy human needs and desires, they penetrate and control the ways of thinking regarding all life necessities, when returning from the world of abstraction to the world of action, giving directions and getting a mental revival. Before any beginnings of reflection, mores are regulators of the political, social and religious behaviour of an individual [Sumner 1995, 59–60].

³ In the broad definition of prison culture, D. Clemmer does not use the word "mores," but only "customs" and "code." On the other hand, the definition which I describe as synthetic includes "mores" and "customs" explicitly, but the word "code" is missing.

⁴ Following W.G. Sumner, D. Clemmer assumes that natural ways of proceeding, that is customs, are related to the ways of satisfying needs. They are selected for their benefit. Habits, that is routine activities and practical skills, by becoming common phenomena transform into customs. People learn them through tradition, imitation and succumbing to authority. They are formed outside of

associated with such aspects of everyday life in prison as, e.g. rituals related to eating meals, with the manner of their illegal preparation, way of dressing, work, etc. Under this broad concept, D. Clemmer also classified forms of communication, various kinds of relationships, group interactions, and social role-playing [Clemmer 1968, 164–71].

It is worth noting that this distinction between mores and customs seems to be fully valid. We cannot lose sight of the fact that mores take the form of norms or rules, and are a common practice that forces an individual to conform. For the most part, mores consist of prohibitions that indicate what is not allowed; they are sanctioned, and consequently, become a coercive force resulting in conformism. Mores are rules. Contrary to mores, the custom is not sanctioned; it is not a rule, but only a habit or a routine action. As a result, breaking it does not lead to negative judgments or penalties, so no one forces its observance. A custom is thus not characterised by duty as opposed to mores [Sumner 1995, 3–60].

It should be noted that similarly, the differences between mores and custom were recognised in the philosophy of law by H.L. Hart [Hart 1998, 83–85]. He indicated that in the case of a habit, deviation from the general standard does not have to be a reason for a critical assessment. On the other hand, in the case of a rule (more), it can be critically assessed. What is more, deviation from the standard is generally considered a good reason for disapproval. Critical appraisal of deviation is treated as legitimate or justified in the sense that demands for compliance with the standard are justified when the deviation is punishable. A habit is nothing more than the fact of the observable behaviour of the majority in a given group. For a habit to occur, no member of the group needs to think or even know about universal behaviour. It is even less expected that group members would teach others the habits, or strive to maintain them. In the case of rules, there has to be someone to consider the behaviour as a standard to be respected by the group as a whole.

It is worth noting that the findings of D. Clemmer coincide with the results of earlier research carried out by H. Reimer.⁵ According to this author, the behaviour of a prisoner is shaped mainly by tradition, a social hierarchy of prisoners, mores, attitudes and mythology, which are developed in opposition to the current order and the law, and therefore to the representatives of the prison administration, which embody this order and the law [Haynes 1949, 436–47]. Similar views were expressed by N.S. Hayner and E. Ash [Hayner and Ash 1940, 579] and M.G. Caldwell [Caldwell 1956, 655].

consciousness, therefore they are not a product of human intention or reason. The custom regulates the whole range of human activities, bathing, ablutions, cutting hair, eating, drinking, but also fasting. These are standard routines, becoming more and more arbitrary and prescriptive over time that can become morals. Cf. Clemmer 1968, 164–65; Sumner 1995, 6–31.

⁵ As F. E. Haynes notes, these were one of the first studies of prison life using the participant observation technique, see Haynes 1949, 432–40.

II.

As mentioned above, D. Clemmer saw the process of prisonisation as a specific illustration of a more general process of assimilation that occurs when people collide with a foreign culture. In the case of prisoners, the result is the internalisation of the criminal perspective, as well as their immunisation to the influence of the conventional system of values. According to D. Clemmer, none of the prisoners can somehow remain “intact” and not be influenced to some extent by the informal social structure of prisoners and, as a result, not be prisoned. In other words, every prisoner is subject to this process. The very fact of being imprisoned in the environment of a penitentiary facility exposes each prisoner to the influence of specific universal properties of an incarceration institution. This situation assumes, among other things, acceptance of inner roles by prisoners, their understanding that they do not belong exclusively to themselves and that nothing depends solely on them. On the contrary, it is only the environment in which they find themselves against their will that can support them in achieving and satisfying their daily natural needs.

Justifying the view mentioned above, D. Clemmer pointed out that after crossing the gate of a penitentiary institution, a prisoner automatically becomes an anonymous person, one of many among other prisoners. Their names are replaced with numbers, and they are given and wear the same clothes. Shortly after admission, they learn that all power rests in the hands of the prison director, and they learn the official ranks and titles of penitentiary officers and other staff of the prison administration.

Besides, they learn the new “prison language” very quickly, regardless of whether or not they use it in everyday interactions. Even if a newly arrived prisoner adopts the attitude of “standing on the side-lines,” distancing themselves from the social structure existing in a penitentiary institution, then within a few months they begin to think and use the specific jargon of prisoners to define other inmates, activities or events that occur in the course of regular, day-to-day interactions in prison.

Acceptance of the inner role imposed on the prisoner. Accumulation of new meanings and concepts to define events and various types of everyday behaviour. The accumulation and assimilation of knowledge in the field of prison organisation. Development of new habits and customs, e.g. in the field of eating, dressing, working, sleeping. Adaptation of prison language. A final recognition that they are not owed anything as prisoners. All these elements taken together constitute, according to D. Clemmer, different aspects of prisonisation, i.e. a process that affects all prisoners.

As D. Clemmer emphasised, even if each of these factors affects every inmate differently, their impact is so significant and highly harmful that it may contribute to the fact that the prisoner has problems with adaptation to the living conditions of the free world after leaving prison.

According to D. Clemmer, this process may not concern so strongly those imprisoned for a short period, as they do not integrate with the prison culture, or they do it to a lesser degree. Thanks to it, after being released from prison, they can start life anew and conduct it in a way that takes into account the requirements, values and norms of conventional society [Clemmer 1968, 300].

III.

As mentioned before, according to D. Clemmer, every prisoner becomes the subject of the process defined as prisonisation, and every and each of them feels this process. However, not all prisoners are affected by this process to the same degree. This degree depends on the inmate's characteristics, e.g. susceptibility to the influences of the prison subculture. Therefore, D. Clemmer formulated seven factors that increase the risk of prisonisation to the greatest extent. These are as follows: 1) prisonisation degree is associated with a longer sentence, which is associated with a more extended period of serving the sentence; 2) personality instability may increase the likelihood of a higher degree of prisonisation; 3) a greater degree of prisonisation may also be influenced by the lack of contact with the outside world; 4) a similarly high degree of integration of the prisoner with the primary group may result in a higher degree of prisonisation; 5) blind acceptance of dogmas and customs as well as prison rules of primary groups; 6) chance or coincidence, i.e. there is a much higher probability of increasing the degree of prisonisation if the convict is placed among prisoners of similar orientation and views; 7) the risk of a higher degree and extent of prisonisation is also closely related to the participation of the prisoners in gambling and atypical sexual behaviour.

On the other hand, D. Clemmer formulated seven fundamental factors which have an impact on the lowest or lesser degree of prisonisation of an inmate, or in any case, significantly inhibit or block the development of this process. They include: 1) a short sentence, and, consequently, a short period of being subjected to the influence of universal factors of prisonisation; 2) having positive relationships in the run-up to incarceration; 3) continuation of positive relationships with people from the outside world; 4) refusal or lack of skills to integrate with primary or semi-primary prison groups; maintaining balanced contacts with other inmates; 5) refusal to blindly accept dogmas and the norms of the informal prison code, in certain situations be ready to cooperate with the prison administration and maintain identification with a free society; 6) opportunities for being placed among fellow inmates who are not highly integrated into the prison subculture; 7) not engaging in abnormal sexual or gambling behaviour and being willing to engage in serious work and recreational activities provided in prison.

IV.

Prisonisation is a concept that has permanently entered the conceptual apparatus of prison science, while the phenomenon itself has become the subject of numerous studies by criminologists and penitentiaries. The latter, looking for the sources of this process, developed for this purpose three research models, i.e. the deprivation model, an import model and an integrated model combining the assumptions of the two previous ones. Due to the framework of this article, describing the assumptions of every model is impossible, hence the issue is only indicated here. It should only be pointed out that with the use of each of these models, attempts were made to explain the causes and ways in which prisoners adapt to the conditions prevailing in a penitentiary institution. As examples, the most representative studies are pointed out in literature [Wheeler 1961, Leger 1978; Atchley and McCabe 1968; Irwin and Cressey 1962; Gillespie 2003]. M. Kosewski analysed the concept of prisonisation formulated by D. Clemmer [Kosewski 1977]. At the same time, in Polish literature, the process of prisonisation is usually narrowed down to the aspects of assimilating to the prison subculture [Małek 2009; Przybyliński 2006; Sarzała 2013; Górski 1984], which is only one of the components of the broadly understood prison culture. The prisonisation process, like that presented by D. Clemmer, has been captured by M. Ciosek [Ciosek 2001, 214]. This author pointed out it means “assimilation of prison culture, mainly the norms of the existing informal code of prisoners’ conduct,” which, in the author’s opinion, is to contribute “on the one hand, to the alleviation of prison ailments, and thus better adaptation, but on the other hand, it may contribute to the integration with informal groups and the uncritical acceptance of crime.”

CONCLUSIONS

Prisonisation is a concept that has permanently entered the conceptual apparatus of prison science, while the phenomenon itself has become the subject of numerous studies by criminologists and penitentiaries. The author of this concept was the American sociologist and prison officer D.D. Clemmer, the author of the classic monograph “The Prison Community”, the first such comprehensive work that presented the social aspects of prison life. The article presents the essential elements of the concept of prisonisation as a dynamic process during which inmates adapt to the conditions that occur in prison.

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KONCEPCJA PRIZONIZACJI DONALDA CLEMMERA

Streszczenie. Prizonizacja to pojęcie, które na stałe wpisało się w aparat pojęciowy nauki o więzieniach, a samo zjawisko stało się przedmiotem licznych badań kryminologów i zakładów karnych. Autorem tej koncepcji był amerykański socjolog i funkcjonariusz więzienia D. Clemmer, autor klasycznej monografii „Wspólnota więzienna”, pierwszej tak obszernej pracy, która przedstawiała społeczne aspekty życia więziennego. W artykule zaprezentowano istotne elementy koncepcji więzienia jako dynamicznego procesu adaptacji osadzonych do warunków tam panujących.

Słowa kluczowe: prizonizacja, więzienie, adaptacja

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