

Harrison Kotik

Professor Feldman, Professor Rodriguez

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Erasing Misconstruction – An Analysis of Doran Larson’s “Why Scandinavian Prisons Are Superior” Through the Lens of David Spade’s Mutual Aid

In the United States, we have been conditioned to seek “justice” and “retribution.” Our idea of these concepts tends to be that people are rewarded for things we deem as good, and punished for things we view as bad. There is perhaps no aspect of our country in which the latter is more clear than in our prison system. While the idea of a system that exists as a form of punishment to those who do wrong seems to be an obvious and intuitive one, it is not the only way of treating those who break the law. In Scandinavia, for example, the prisons focus not on punishing inmates, but rather rehabilitating them. Doran Larson, an English Professor at Hamilton College, describes the advantages of Scandinavian “open” prisons via his article “Why Scandinavian Prisons Are Superior,” which was published in the reputable magazine, *The Atlantic*. David Spade, in his essay “Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival,” describes his notion of mutual aid, a process in which people take direct responsibility in building a more socially survivable environment. The intended purpose of my essay is to explain and advocate for the benefits of rehabilitation-focused prisons, as well as to display what this reveals about the United States’ unhealthy obsession with retribution in the form of punishment. I will then be explicating Spade’s notion of mutual aid as a means of implementing these aforementioned rehabilitation-focused prisons through both direct assistance as well as educating the general public to correct misconceptions and bring about long-term change.

The initial question regarding this topic, of course, is the question of what exactly an “open” prison entails. Doran Larson, in his article, describes what he implies to be a quintessential open prison in Helsinki, Finland. Despite serving time for crimes such as theft, assault, or even murder, prisoners are permitted to “leave the prison grounds each day to do the township’s general maintenance or commute to the mainland for work or study” (Larson). In addition to this, prisoners are allowed to spend time with their families, so long as they are being electronically monitored. Larson goes on to describe that many other prisons in Scandinavian countries allow prisoners access to recreational activities such as pool and table tennis. In addition, each prisoner is assigned a contact officer to not only monitor the prisoner, but additionally help them improve and progress towards returning to life as a free citizen. Interestingly enough, this was implemented not for the benefit of inmates, but for the benefit of the officers, as a means of helping officers “avoid the damage experienced by performing purely punitive functions” (Larson). Larson explains that many corrections officers whose job is to do nothing but punish and enforce strict laws can often end up with serious mental health issues, and as a result have low life expectancies.

Prior to delving into mutual aid and how we can implement such a system in the United States, it is essential to establish exactly why a more open prison system would be beneficial to us in the first place. An argument I will pose here is that open prisons will foster not only a more humane society, but additionally a more productive one in the sense that rehabilitating prisoners will make them more productive members of society. In Larson’s article, he makes a point to claim that “[o]ne might wonder just where is the ‘prison’ part of this Scandinavian open prison. Where are the impenetrable barriers? The punishing conditions that satisfy an American sense of justice?” (Larson). This statement, though brief, speaks volumes about the way Americans have

been conditioned to view those who commit crimes; our desire for “retribution” leads to a self-imposed dichotomy between “citizens” and “prisoners,” and as a result we often ignore the fact that prisoners are human as well. Additionally, punishing those who do wrong can breed resentment towards the system as a result of the punishment, without any real education as to why the crime committed is wrong or immoral. As such, many convicts can end up as repeated offenders. Etienne Benson, in his American Psychological Association article, “Rehabilitate or punish?” addresses the concern over the punitive philosophies of American prisons, referencing the Stanford Prison Experiment. This experiment displayed to us, according to Benson, that “psychologically healthy individuals could become sadistic or depressed when placed in a prison-like environment” (Benson). Another experiment is described in which supermax prisons – or highly secure prisons in which most inmates' time is spent in solitary confinement. This research displayed that

“many prisoners in supermax units experience extremely high levels of anxiety and other negative emotions. When released--often without any "decompression" period in lower-security facilities--they have few of the social or occupational skills necessary to succeed in the outside world” (Benson).

Studies like this display to us the flaws present within the U.S. prison system. As it stands, the present system does not prepare inmates to return to the outside world, but rather renders them more likely to resent the system and increase their chances of returning to prison due to the current system's clear lack of ability to properly prepare inmates for the outside world upon release. Once again, it can be argued that this American sense of retribution as a form of justice is unhealthy and counterintuitive to the ideal goal of a prison system. Rather than teaching criminals the errors of their ways and helping them, we simply attempt to be “tough on crime”

and punish those who break the law. Larson asserts that a substantial number of prisoners are “uneducated, riddled with unresolved traumas and ill-treated mental health problems, drug and alcohol addictions, and self-esteem issues far too often bordering on the pathological” (Larson). In addition, many of these people were never able to receive adequate care for their conditions. Larson additionally claims that the identity of “criminal” is forced upon prisoners until it is ingrained in the way they view themselves, ultimately perpetuating negative behaviors. He is quite critical of the United States’ tendency to punish as an automatic response to misconduct, implying that allowing these people the chance to examine themselves and providing them with proper care would grant them the skills needed to live productive lives.

If we wish to move towards a superior and more humane prison system in the United States, it would be beneficial to take matters into our own hands. In his essay “Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival,” Dean Spade presents the idea of mutual aid as a means of creating positive change and constructing a better life for others. Spade defines mutual aid as follows:

“Mutual aid is a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable” (Spade 136).

In essence, mutual aid is the active, community-driven effort of working together to provide for one another by helping those in need. Spade asserts that this concept is not a new one, given that humans have cooperated together to survive and care for one another for as long as our species has existed. He claims that nearly all efficacious movements involve some form of mutual aid, citing the survival programs implemented by the Black Panther Party in the United States as a

prime example, which included programs such as free breakfast and medical clinics. In addition to direct benefits to those in need, mutual aid additionally builds an overall sense of solidarity and support. Spade describes this sense of solidarity as follows:

“By working together and participating in shared political education programming, members learn about experiences that are not their own and build solidarity. Doing explicit work around difference within the group builds the skills of members to practice solidarity and build broad analysis” (Spade 137).

Spade discusses the Sylvia Rivera Law Project as an example of this. This program aimed to provide legal assistance to people who could not afford it and identified as trans, gender-nonconforming, or who were simply people of color. In addition to this, mutual aid can raise awareness and education on a variety of topics. Spade states that people, for example, who participate “in a project to help one another through housing court proceedings will learn the details of how the system does its harm and how to fight it” (Spade 137). Mutual aid ultimately allows people to become better acquainted with different fields and systems, and it goes without saying that a more experienced and educated population is better for society. In addition to general knowledge about respective topics and procedures, mutual aid can also increase competence and build other important skills such as cooperation, and can additionally “generate boldness and a willingness to defy illegitimate authority” (Spade 138). Once again, these traits are integral to crafting a society that is proactive in helping those in need. One important distinction Spade makes, however, is the difference between charity and mutual aid. In order to clarify this distinction, Spade covers many of the implications behind charity, namely how the term “charity” is “used in various contexts to denote the provision of support for survival to poor people where that support is governed by rich people and/or government (Spade 140). He asserts

that charity insinuates that poverty is due to immorality, and as such implies that people must rise to certain subjective moral expectations if they are to receive assistance. Mutual aid, he claims, attempts to steer clear of these insinuations, ensuring that people are not excluded from help due to their extraneous circumstances which may result in some viewing them as “immoral.” The principles behind mutual aid, ultimately, can allow us to not only help others, but develop our citizens’ character to benefit society as a whole.

Now that we have established mutual aid, we can apply this lens of thought to many of the issues posed by Larson’s article. The argument here is a rather straightforward one – that applying acts of mutual aid can provide better alternatives to incarceration. Spade even mentions some of these himself, stating how programs such as drug treatment programs or programs that send convicts to social service programs rather than prisons. These would be excellent methods of rehabilitating convicts, rather than simply punishing them; at the very minimum, they would at least know what they did wrong – or at least why we deem it as wrong. These rehabilitation-focused programs can work to not only make society more productive by converting “convicts” to “functioning members of society,” but they can genuinely make a difference in people’s lives. However, I would argue even for taking things a step further than this. While I certainly believe that we should undoubtedly attempt to pursue the programs proposed by Spade in order to provide direct assistance and education to those in need, I also believe that mutual aid can be used as a means of tackling one of the major roots of the problem – the United States’ general misconceptions about prisoners and its aforementioned unhealthy desire for retribution. I believe that education-based mutual aid programs can be implemented to correct much of these misconceptions. If we are to implement these along with the programs described by Spade, not only will we provide immediate help to those who need it, but we can

educate and raise awareness in the general public, which can eventually lead to an official reformation of the prison systems via elected leaders of government. If one of the goals of mutual aid is to create change, then we can introduce these programs not only to generate short-term change, but to hopefully create a lasting impact on the way people are viewed and treated.

The goal of this essay is, of course, to identify a major problem in the United States and apply the lens of mutual aid as a means of potentially remedying this issue, but it is also an advocacy of awareness. This is an issue that is not given nearly enough attention, and one that is rooted deep within our nation's mindset. I believe that it is a mindset we can alter, but change ultimately starts at the ground level. Mutual aid, at its core, is a grassroots effort, but the impact of such efforts can go a long way into creating long-term change.

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