



TOTAL INSTITUTIONS



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Preface

For the past decade, *transaction*, and now **Society**, has dedicated itself to the task of reporting the strains and conflicts within the American system. But the magazine has done more than this. It has pioneered in social programs for changing the social order, offered the kind of analysis that has permanently restructured the terms of the "dialogue" between peoples and publics, and offered the sort of prognosis that makes for real alterations in economic and political policies directly affecting our lives.

The work done in the magazine has crossed disciplinary boundaries. This represents much more than simple cross-disciplinary "team efforts." It embodies rather a recognition that the social world cannot be easily carved into neat academic disciplines; that, indeed, the study of the experience of blacks in American ghettos, or the manifold uses and abuses of agencies of law enforcement, or the sorts of overseas policies that lead to the celebration

of some dictatorships and the condemnation of others, can best be examined from many viewpoints and from the vantage points of many disciplines.

The editors of **Society** magazine are now making available in permanent form the most important work done in the magazine, supplemented in some cases by additional materials edited to reflect the tone and style developed over the years by *transaction*. Like the magazine, this series of books demonstrates the superiority of starting with real world problems and searching out practical solutions, over the zealous guardianship of professional boundaries. Indeed, it is precisely this approach that has elicited enthusiastic support from leading American social scientists, many of whom are represented among the editors of these volumes.

The subject matter of these books concerns social changes and social policies that have aroused the long-standing needs and present-day anxieties of us all. These changes are in organizational lifestyles, concepts of human ability and intelligence, changing patterns of norms and morals, the relationship of social conditions to physical and biological environments, and in the status of social science with respect to national policy making. The editors feel that many of these articles have withstood the test of time, and match in durable interest the best of available social science literature. This collection of essays, then, attempts to address itself to immediate issues without violating the basic insights derived from the classical literature in the various fields of social science.

As the political crises of the sixties have given way to the economic crunch of the seventies, the social scientists involved as editors and authors of this series have gone beyond observation of critical areas, and have entered into the vital and difficult tasks of explanation and inter-

pretation. They have defined issues in a way that makes solutions possible. They have provided answers as well as asked the right questions. These books, based as they are upon the best materials from *transaction/Society* magazine, are dedicated to highlighting social problems alone, and beyond that, to establishing guidelines for social solutions based on the social sciences.

The remarkable success of the book series to date is indicative of the need for such “fastbacks” in college course work and, no less, in the everyday needs of busy people who have not surrendered the need to know, nor the lively sense required to satisfy such knowledge needs. It is also plain that what superficially appeared as a random selection of articles on the basis of subject alone, in fact, represented a careful concern for materials that are addressed to issues at the shank and marrow of society. It is the distillation of the best of these, systematically arranged, that appears in these volumes.

THE EDITORS
transaction/Society



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INTRODUCTION

On the Totality of Institutions

SAMUEL E. WALLACE

All institutions of a society—the church, family, courts of law or care-giving centers—have some power over the individual. The family, for example, provides a place for its members in the society and raises its young within certain traditions. The church sanctions events by ceremony, and educators advance one person, withhold another from the higher reaches of knowledge. Each institution has power, and apparently each institution seeks more—and more.

When any type of social institution—religious, educational, legal or medical—begins to exercise total control over its population, that institution begins to display certain characteristics: communication between insider and outsider is rigidly controlled or prohibited altogether; those inside the institution are frequently referred to as inmates—subjects whose every movement is controlled by the institution's staff; an entirely separate social world comes into existence within the institution, which defines

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the inmate's social status, his relationship to all others, his very identity as a person.

In part total institutions are created because we feel some individuals in our society need to be given, forcibly if necessary, a new identity; for example, those whom we think would harm others. We also create total institutions to care for those whom we feel are incapable of taking care of themselves. Total institutions, because they can apply so much pressure on the individual, are also created to educate or train designated members of the society. And finally, we allow those who wish to retreat from the ordinary world to withdraw behind the doors of their own selected total institutions. Regardless of whether individuals voluntarily enter such institutions or not, and regardless of the reasons for which they were created, institutions which come to control their inhabitants' lives are remarkably similar.

But how much control is enough before we call an institution a total institution? Concentration camps, slavery, prisons, mental hospitals, army barracks and convents are prime candidates for the label, but boarding schools, colleges and universities, centers for social action and personal therapy, and camps for cadres of revolutionaries should not be overlooked. Total institutions are not a separate class of social establishments, but rather specific institutions, which exhibit to an intense degree certain characteristics found in all institutions. The issue is not which institutions are total and which are not, but rather, how much totality does each display?

Erving Goffman in *Asylums* considers total institutions to be those that bar social intercourse between insider and outsider and where insiders work, play and sleep in the same place, with the same co-participants, under the same authorities and in terms of the same overall plan. While these traits are basic, their importance should not obscure

the dynamics of institutions—how the same institution changes its totality over the years, both increasing and decreasing, and how two different institutions may display their totality in different ways. This point can be kept in mind by treating totality as part of the syndrome of characteristics of institutions—by thinking in terms of the degree of totality found in institutions, rather than in terms of total institutions.

Yet by any name those institutions that have total or near-total control over their inhabitants' lives are abominations to humanity. Once the absolute corruption of absolute power has come to dominate an institution, even the most benign establishments brutalize everyone in their midst. Hospitals cease to care for the ill and become huge boarding homes for the unwanted. Prisons mirror the worst features of the underworld community, instead of rehabilitating or even simply punishing wrongdoers. Students are trained in conformity to meaningless rules rather than educated. Even the godly find their sanctuaries turned into prisons.

In an earlier era we did not care, were ignorant about, or even encouraged the development of total institutions, for in all cases it was felt they controlled only those who could not control their own lives anyway. There is a direct connection between the value we place on human life and the social institutions we create. Social science has not only documented this connection, it has also supported the contention that many “madmen” are truly said to be “manmade.” The visiting room of an institution frequently symbolizes both of these observations.

In what the insider may call the “furniture display room,” and what the staff may call the “reception lounge,” insider and outsider social worlds touch, if only for an instant. Since staff must be protected from outsider pressure, inmates and visitors alike must help maintain

the institutional front, to at least tacitly agree to maintain the fiction that all is what it seems to be. Even the stage on which this performance is enacted expresses that institution's totality. Buildings are designed without reference to their user's wants or needs, except as individuals conform to the institution's stereotype of them. Prisons are designed for the security of guards, wardens and citizens, without consideration for even the personal security of their inmates. Mental hospitals are constructed to impress the public and to permit their staffs to administer them efficiently, not to provide their residents with comfort or even the chance at recovery.

In an earlier era we may have been limited to the outsider's view of total institutions, but social science has deprived us of any such excuse. We allow totality to develop in an institution today, so that it may do the dirty work for us good people—to paraphrase the title of Everett Hughes' excellent article. And we continue to support such institutions even after research has shown that "good" inmates of total institutions are like the staffs that administer them, fit candidates only for a total society.

How can we avoid totality—whether in our society, our social institutions or our relationships with each other? One way is to first understand total institutions; hence this reader.

"Sanctuary or Prison—Responses to Life in a Mental Hospital" is the first of these studies of total institutions. It examines the degree of totality that a particular mental hospital exercises over its patients, raising the issue of the individual's relationship to an institution which, we hope, is becoming less of a total one.

A key feature of totality in an institution is degradation which strips the entering individual of his former identity and begins his instruction in "the way we do things around here." When such "programs" take place among persons

who are denied previously satisfying relations with members of the opposite sex, the predictable result is homosexuality. The second and third articles examine such sexual practices, pointing out how male and female penal institutions differ in the control they exercise over their inmates. Whether these institutional differences result from our Victorian attitudes about women or whether it stems from female acceptance of culturally prescribed roles, the two articles document the difference in totality in two otherwise similar institutions.

Totality within an institution is not the result of malevolent administrators or the product of inappropriate responses by institutions to the societies of which they are a part. Institutions are total because we make them so, a theme explored by Julius Roth in "The Public Hospital: Refuge for Damaged Humans." He points out one cornerstone of institutional totality, namely that we simply don't want those persons whom we send there. The name given to their ailment scarcely matters as such labels are all too frequently a code for our real feelings of wanting many patients to remain permanently in the "mental hospital."

Institutional architecture also frequently reveals our basic attitudes. This is borne out in Sim Van Der Ryn's examination of the design for the living space for one of America's less frequently mentioned captive clients, the university dormitory student resident.

Institutions are probably most vital—which is perhaps the opposite of total—when they are fully responsive to the needs of all their users. Just as universities might make greater strides were they to educate rather than control—in *loco parentis* or otherwise—so Cynthia Krueger's study suggests that schools of nursing might better teach their students to nurse rather than to concern themselves with the private lives of their students. Although some nursing schools characteristically act on the assumption that good

girls make good nurses, Krueger's data calls this assumption into question.

An institution that exercises total or near total control over the lives of its population is also one that is extremely difficult to escape. Perhaps the low probability of escape should be accepted as one of the basic indications of totality. Whether the investigator focuses upon rehabilitation—which ironically seems designed to strip away that which the institution put there in the first place—or through some other program, the chances of escape from a total institution are minimal indeed. Dorothy Miller's study suggests just how little and how late most rehabilitation programs really are.

Probably all institutions attempt and will attempt to perpetuate themselves, thus Keniston's dream-nightmare, the eighth article, in which policemen are replaced by mental health workers, represents merely the mental health version of a more perfect total institution, one without any means of escape whatsoever. It could be otherwise—if we can land men on the moon, perhaps we can even introduce some humanity into the institutions we create; Eugene Talbot and Stuart C. Miller suggest one such alternative—"The Mental Hospital as a Sane Society,"

Change is difficult, for few persons easily give up power even when the exercise of it demeans all lives, including those who wield it; thus the revolution in mental health care stands in danger of faltering, as M. Brewster Smith points out in this reader.

Perhaps the only answer is to leave our contemporary institutions and build others elsewhere. John Bennett describes this process among one such group, the Hutterians of Canada, and indeed they do seem to have at least part of the answer. But to judge from Michael Brown's analysis of the history of America's most recent utopian group,

the hippies, our growing total society appears unwilling to let anyone escape. Totality breeds totality, and each increment of its growth further corrupts our human environment. When will we begin to seriously fight this form of environmental pollution?

*Sanctuary or Prison—
Responses to Life
in a Mental Hospital*

AILON SHILOH

It is unlikely that very many mental hospitals remain of the kind described 20 years ago by Ivan Belknap. At that time, hundreds of patients slept—winter and summer—on windswept porches or on bare concrete floors. All of the buildings were old, crowded, and hazardous. The food was tasteless to begin with and cold when served. The total daily budget per patient was 47 cents. On any day, patients had one chance in 280 of seeing a doctor. The basic therapy consisted of allowing the patients to sit on benches and stare at the blank walls.

That hospital represented the worst aspects of the custodial approach to treating the mentally ill, an approach requiring only that patients be kept alive and out of the way. While few hospitals would dare to provide that sort of barbaric custody nowadays, my own research in a large public mental hospital suggests that less obvious but no less pernicious aspects of the custodial approach are still central to mental hospitals today.

What does the custodial approach do to patients? Clifford W. Beers has caught it in an aphorism: "Madmen are too often man-made." Lucy Ozarin reached a similar conclusion: "After visiting 35 mental hospitals, the writer has formed the strong conviction that much of the pathological behavior of patients is a result of their hospital experience rather than a manifestation of the mental illness."

Many observers have tried to make sense of this phenomenon, but perhaps the best theoretical work on the meaning of the custodial approach has been that of Erving Goffman. In *Asylums*, Goffman used his research in a mental hospital to develop a theory of the world of the "total institution," a category that includes not only mental hospitals, but prison, the armed services, and so on. Goffman focused on the world of the inmate and the ways in which he transforms his experience with the social world of the hospital into a "structure of the self."

Goffman's major research was a one-year field study of St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C. Since he wanted to give an anthropologist's detailed description of patient life, he did not employ measurements and controls—which, in addition, would have undermined his rapport with the patients and staff. I have employed much the same method in my study of a Veterans Administration hospital.

Goffman defined the total institution as a place of residence and work where a number of individuals in similar situations are cut off from the wider society and lead an enclosed, formally administered life. The key fact of the total institution is that many human needs of whole blocs of people are under bureaucratic control. In the total institution, there is a basic cleavage between the small managing groups (the staff, in the case of a hospital) and the large managed group (the inmates, or patients).

The staff is concerned with surveillance; the inmates with conformity. Each group sees the other in terms of narrow, hostile stereotypes. Their association is marked by misunderstanding and mistrust. Communications from inmates to staff are channeled and controlled by the lower staff with the knowledge and consent of the higher staff. Communications from staff to inmates are also restricted. Characteristically, inmates are excluded from knowing any decisions taken as to their fates, a fact that provides the staff with a further basis for distance from and control over the inmates. All of these restrictions, Goffman believes, help maintain the mutually antagonistic stereotypes.

This split between staff and inmates is one major aspect of the total institution. Other considerations stressed by Goffman are the nature of the staff's work—their lack of motivation can lead to demoralization and to extreme boredom—and the relationship of the institution to the inmate's families, who are incompatible with the aims of the total institution. All of these factors are particularly important when the institution uses a custodial approach, when it may have no intention of releasing the inmates.

Goffman, having suggested the key features of the total institution, goes on to discuss the ways in which the inmates are "programmed." This process is fairly standardized. The new inmate is subjected to a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations and profanations of his self. The institutional machinery examines, identifies and codes him. He is stripped of his possessions and provided with institutional clothing. He is given test of obedience and placed under a strict surveillance program to teach him how to behave in his new role.

Particularly during this initial period the inmate's life is controlled from above by regulations, judgments, and sanctions. He must learn to follow the rules un-