

Book Review

The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic. By David J. Rothman. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971. Pp. xx, 376. \$12.50.

Reviewed by Kai T. Erikson†

It is by now a thoroughly familiar concept, in the social sciences at least, that the way in which a society identifies and cares for its deviant members offers a fair index to its basic character.¹ It is more than perverse curiosity, then, that tempts historians and social scientists to study that portion of the human record. In much the same way that Freud looked at pathology to learn about the nature of health, others look at the deviant fringe of a society to get some sense of the values lying at its center.

One problem is that societies often come to regard their methods for controlling deviance as ancient in origin, logical in form, perhaps even inevitable in the nature of things. Americans, for example, have tended to view incarceration in penitentiaries or asylums as the obvious method for dealing with deviants.² It is important to be reminded now and then that men invent both the definition of deviance and the social machinery for dealing with it. Professor Rothman's excellent book is an attempt to describe this process of invention and application during one critical moment of American history.

Rothman outlines his inquiry in the opening sentences of the book:

[W]hy did Americans in the Jacksonian era suddenly begin to construct and support institutions for deviant and dependent members of the community? Why in the decades after 1820 did they all at once erect penitentiaries for the criminal, asylums for the insane, almshouses for the poor, orphan asylums for homeless children, and reformatories for delinquents?³

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1. This insight, for example, figured prominently in the work of Emile Durkheim and has become a standard article of sociological faith. See, e.g., E. DURKHEIM, *THE DIVISION OF LABOR IN SOCIETY* (1933), *SUICIDE* (1951), and *THE RULES OF SOCIOLOGICAL METHOD* (1938).

2. Cf. K. Erikson, *WAYWARD PURITANS* (1966). See particularly ch. 5.

3. D. ROTHMAN, *THE DISCOVERY OF THE ASYLUM* xiii (1971) [hereinafter cited to page number only].

In addressing himself to these questions, Rothman undertakes two related tasks: First, to demonstrate that a revolution in ideas about social control had indeed occurred; and second, to explain its motivating causes.

While I am no historian, it seems to me he has made the first case convincingly. Until the American Revolution, Rothman says, the colonists operated with a theory of human nature and an approach to deviance that did not require much in the way of special institutions.⁴ Most men lived comfortably with the thought that every human community was bound to have its share of luckless, needy, strange, or dissolute persons: This was the natural condition of human life, part of God's design for the universe. The colonists therefore found it completely fitting that people who stumbled into trouble should be absorbed into the everyday life of the community and be tended by their neighbors, although the notion of "neighbor" was somewhat circumscribed.⁵ The poor could be subsidized in their own homes, the incompetent placed under supervision in sympathetic households, the errant chastised in the stocks or at the whipping post, and the homeless young apprenticed to tradesmen or taken in by local families. From time to time, of course, serious acts of wickedness required that the community execute or banish an offender. Occasionally a community might protect itself from future harm by excluding strangers with improper credentials or poor manners. But on the whole, people did not seem to feel that deviant or dependent individuals represented a real challenge to the integrity of the community. Their presence was not viewed as symptomatic of something fundamentally wrong with the social structure.

Rothman seems to assume that a single ethic about deviance and dependency characterized colonial thought for the entire eighteenth century. While other historians may question his view, such analysis should not undercut Rothman's main point—that a profound shift in attitudes toward deviance occurred as the Jacksonian generation surveyed its responsibilities and opportunities. All at once—Rothman's phrase is apt—Americans appeared to abandon the grim de-

4. See, e.g., the discussion of workhouses and almshouses at pp. 25-29.

5. Dependent neighbors made up the ranks of the poor. The town recognized a clear obligation to them and officials were not especially concerned with possible malfeasance. . . . Local communities, however, did not accept responsibility for the needy outsider, no matter what his moral condition, and they drew up complicated statutes to exclude him. Poor relief was a local system, towns liable for their own, but not for others.

P. 5.

terminism of their largely Calvinist past and to feel that everyone, no matter what his condition or station, was redeemable. It was an age of energy and optimism, dominated by the conviction that society could engineer its own destiny, and for the first time it seemed reasonable to believe that perennial problems of crime, illness, and poverty could be solved.

Some remedial apparatus was needed, and one was readily found. A nation which had just freed itself from old ties found it easy to believe that people were the products of their immediate environment and their own efforts, and reformers began to hope that by relocating problematic individuals in new and controlled settings, a remarkable change could be accomplished. In a sense, then, the doctrine of predestination gave way to that of good works. And so the construction began—penitentiaries and insane asylums, reformatories and poor houses—on the basis of plans drawn to the finest details.⁶ In effect, the new structures were built not only to house a portion of the population but also to celebrate a completely new approach to human problems. The scheme was ambitious beyond belief: Its object, flatly stated, was to rehabilitate everyone whose lot in life was an embarrassment to themselves or to their community. Within the new institutions, each individual was to work out his own cure, safe and saved from the corruptions of the world.⁷

Rothman's second task follows naturally from the first. Having established that a real revolution in social theory and method had occurred, he then asks: What was there about Americans in the 1820's, 30's, and 40's that helps to account for this extraordinary shift? As Rothman points out there are ready answers to this question in the literature on the subject:

Another common interpretation of the rise and spread of the asylum . . . makes the innovation the automatic and inevitable response of an industrial and urban society to crime and poverty [T]his interpretation insists that coercion and not benevolence was at the heart of the movement, that institutionalization was primarily a method for regulating and disciplining

6. See, e.g., the discussion of prison architecture at pp. 83-84, and of mental asylums at pp. 137-38.

7. Rothman quotes G. SMITH, A DEFENSE OF THE SYSTEM OF SOLITARY CONFINEMENT OF PRISONERS (1833), a supporter of the reform movement who stressed the role of the prisoner in reform:

Each individual . . . will necessarily be made the instrument of his own punishment; his conscience will be the avenger of society.
P. 85, n.11.

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the work force. Society had to keep large numbers of the urban lower classes in line, in a social sense, in order that they would stay on the line, in a factory sense.⁸

But Rothman dismisses this view outright, perhaps even abruptly:

[T]his perspective is too narrow. It makes every spokesman and leader of the movement a tool, conscious or not, of the economic system; rhetoric and perceptions not fitting a production-oriented explanation are ignored. . . . Further, this view exaggerates the economic and urban development of the nation in the 1820's and 1830's, when the movement began, and pays no attention to the asylum's rapid spread from coastal cities to inland agricultural communities. Perhaps most important of all, it assumes that an urban and industrial society must depend upon caretaker institutions to control the labor force.⁹

By clearing the slate so decisively, though, he makes room for some interesting speculations of his own. The main thrust of his argument is that the apparent self-confidence of the new nation was accompanied by a dark undercurrent of doubt, a sense that the task of constructing a new order was jeopardized at the outset by signs of approaching disorder and disintegration. Seeking stability, the nation feared instability, and fearing instability, it began to see signs of it everywhere.¹⁰ Thus, the deviant and the dependent seemed more than a casual drain on private nerves and public resources: They were a threat to the Republic, a symbol that men could fail at even elementary efforts to control their own destinies. The task of the asylums, then, was to repair this damaged portion of the social order.

The methods chosen by the first generation of reformers also seemed to betray this same mixture of enthusiasm and fear. They were quite confident of their ability to repair the human wreckage that passed through their new institutions—so confident, in fact, that they greatly overestimated their success while the experiment was underway¹¹—but their exuberance was darkened by a deep concern that the new order could not survive without the virtues of the old. In one sense, at least, penitentiaries and asylums were an almost nostalgic effort to recover some of what had been lost—a sense of community, of family, of place. The new institutions were pictured, quite consciously, as

8. P. xvi.

9. *Id.*

10. Rothman's discussion of child-rearing guidebooks, which began to appear in the 1830's, cites a number of contemporary expressions of this generalized fear. Pp. 216-17.

11. P. 131.

shelters from a world beginning to split at the seams.¹² The mood of the experiment was ambivalent from the start, combining a belief that whole populations could be salvaged and the nation remade with a suspicion that society was being hopelessly eroded at its very foundations.

All of this should be understood as a sample of Rothman's views rather than a summary, because it is impossible to do justice to his argument in a sentence or two. Although most of his analysis is compelling, I do have some reservations.

First, as noted above, Rothman is clearly not impressed by the familiar argument that asylums, penitentiaries, and similar establishments grew in this nation as a response to industrialization. It is true, as Rothman insists, that one is hard put to discern so much as a trace of venality in the behavior of those men and women who led the movement toward institutionalization; and it is also true that the labor done by inmates in the new facilities did not greatly increase the Gross National Product. But perhaps that is not the point. It is no great novelty in human affairs for people of the most compelling good will to invent policies or institutions which are accepted by others for different reasons. Indeed, this is one contribution to common knowledge that the behavioral sciences can justly claim.

Therefore, we need to ask not only what philanthropic impulses drew the first generation of reformers to their splendid work, but also what conveniences were envisioned by the legislators who voted the funds and the ordinary folk who dispatched their kin (or more often someone else's kin) to the new facilities. In a society where people are increasingly judged and stationed by the work they do rather than by their family, community, or state of grace, failure to work (or respect its importance) becomes regarded as a form of deviance which requires correction. This view became prominent in 1820-1850, and is still found in American society today. In the Jacksonian age, people not only constructed new institutions to house deviants and created new professions to tend them, but also embraced a wider definition of what constituted deviance itself. For example, psychiatrists claimed new forms of disturbing behavior as a natural part of their jurisdiction, and orphan asylums welcomed clients whose parents were very much alive but providing unsatisfactory homes.¹³

It was a revolution in perception as well as one in practice, and I

12. Pp. 210-12.

13. P. 207.

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think it is fair to argue that the work ethic helped shape American ideas not only about what forms of behavior needed to be rehabilitated, but also about what methods were most suitable for that purpose. The indignation one might feel toward someone who stole the fruits of another's labor, the disgust toward someone who consumed his meager portion in a grog shop, the pity toward someone who was too incapacitated to take a respected place in society—all of these sentiments were rooted in the belief that a failure to sustain a lasting relationship to productive work was itself a severe social problem. And it led to solutions which emphasized work as therapy. In that sense, the relationship between the new approach to deviance and the emerging industrial order must be seen on a broadly cultural rather than narrowly economic screen.

My second reservation has to do with Rothman's conviction that the impulse responsible for the invention of asylums came from a national desire to rehabilitate the deviant and dependent. My criticism on this score is essentially the same as the one expressed above. It is in the nature of most historical investigations that the available data left behind is left by those prominent enough to command the public press and proud enough of their motives to leave traces of them in the public record. The first generation of reformers may have wanted more than anything in the world to help the unfortunate, but most social scientists will entertain a passing suspicion that support for the movement toward institutionalization came, at least in part, from other people, whose principal motives were to store inconvenient neighbors away in distant corners of the country. One significant reason for thinking so is that these institutions have outlasted the impulses that presumably brought them into being by more than a century, and they continue in much the same form today.

Rothman's account of the failure of institutional reform is as follows. After the Civil War, he notes, the brave experiment in reform gave way to an overt form of custodialism.¹⁴ People who managed asylums as well as those who employed their services began to view these institutions as great warehouses in which to store the human debris of society. The experiment in rehabilitation failed for a number of reasons. Most importantly, the passing of a single generation was enough to demonstrate empirically that the new programs did not work, even by the reformers' own standards: Penitentiaries were full of recidivists, insane asylums dealt principally with the chronically

14. Pp. 237-38.

ill, reformatories graduated large numbers of people into the criminal ranks, and those who spent a season or two in almshouses or homes of refuge drifted back to old haunts and familiar vices with alarming regularity.

These facts can be interpreted two ways. One reading, which appears to be Rothman's, is that the first generation of reformers reflected the true spirit of the Jacksonian era, while the descent into custodialism must be understood as another major shift in American values. But another reading is that custodial services are exactly what Americans wanted all along, and that this undercurrent was exposed the moment people like Pliny Earle, Dorothea Dix, and Isaac Ray were no longer available to provide a convincing ideological cover. Rothman acknowledges at one point in his argument:

Convenience had always been part of the reason for the asylum's popularity. . . . Nevertheless, in the first formulation of the asylum idea, the prospect of improvement, both of the individual and the society, was far more significant The abundant evidence of the close fit between the reform program and the actual appearance and arrangements of the institutions testified convincingly to the founders' sense of priorities.¹⁵

The founders' sense of priorities, yes. But founders do not a culture make, and it is wholly legitimate for us to doubt that these priorities were generally shared throughout the period. For example, the "appearance and arrangements" of the institutions—isolated rural settings, thick walls, individual cells, productive labor—would also serve the purposes of secure, orderly, self-supporting "warehouses." Just as one would not read Karl Memminger to discover why ordinary Americans in the middle of the twentieth century committed so many of their neighbors to state hospitals, one should perhaps be wary about reading Dorothea Dix to learn how the American heart was tuned during the age of Jackson. We must thank Professor Rothman for having provided the best study of the subject so far; but on the question of the "real" motive for institutionalization, it seems to me, we should end with a question mark.

15. Pp. 239-40.