

Everett Cherrington Hughes

## Memorandum on Total Institutions

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Flashback

# Memorandum on Total Institutions

by Everett Cherrington Hughes

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

DATE August 8, 1957

TO Dr. Erving Goffman  
FROM Dr. Everett C. Hughes

I have just read your little monograph on the characteristics of total institutions. It is great stuff. I would like to make a few running comments. This is a subject in which I have been interested for a long time and in the last few years I have several times given a lecture to my institutions class on institutions which have an element of restraint. This is not the same as your total institutions but, of course, the total institutions all do have an element of restraint. One is free to walk out of the monastery, I suppose, although it is not and has not always been true that he could do so, even if one were willing to go out naked. The school boy in a boarding school is, of course, under a certain kind of restraint. Perhaps he would not be detained forcibly, but then again he might be. And of course girls are always climbing down drain pipes to get out of boarding schools and convents. Every little boy in school who looks out of a window at the cows in the field knows that he is not really free to get up and walk out. Likewise in the turpentine camp in the south the Negro workers were certainly no more free to leave than when they were on the chain gang. At least so it is said. This is a matter of degree, that is, of constraint, or restraint if you like. Sometimes people in mental hospitals are restrained and even in some mining camps

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they have been restrained, as of course they can always be on board ship if something goes wrong. So perhaps we have two concepts here, that of institutions in which there is some small measure or a large measure of restraint or constraint for one class of people to stay there. They are not completely free to come and go as is the case of the grand central station which you mention. The other dimension is that of totality; although, as in the case of the concentration camp or the totalitarian state, totality and restraint tend to go together. As a matter of fact I suppose one might think of almost all institutions in this perspective. There is some group of people who are, as it were, captives. Although it might be in some cases hard to say which is which. I was once held strongly captive by a class. It was a discussion group in one of our courses here. I really had nothing more to discuss and nothing was happening from the floor. So I said, well I guess we just better go home. One student spoke up and said, oh no, you don't, we have this hour coming to us. I stayed to hear what he had to say and to discuss the interesting question whether he had really something coming to him. It was rather fun, but I was in a measure captive. In the case of the mental hospital and the school we know of course more or less what group are the captives. This brings up another item here, which perhaps you can fit into your dimensions. That is the extent to which some one category of people in any group of institutions is there of its own will and accord. Children may love school, but they are there because their parents and perhaps the community at large wants them to be there. The arrangement is not of their making. If there is a contract, there is a third party to it, and to this extent the functionaries of the school are like those of the mental hospitals, engaged in what you call "people work." As a matter of fact many of the situations of life involve a functionary doing something to or for someone else on behalf of a third party. This seems to be the case with most of your total institutions, although perhaps not so in the case of the company town, or the turpentine camp. The turpentine camp, however, is a marginal case for it differs from the chain gang in that there have been no formal court proceedings. Very often the sheriff, I understand, did actually advise Negroes to go and to stay at a turpentine camp if they knew what was good for them. So that even in the case of certain total institutions where there appears to be a direct contract between the inmates and the functionaries in charge – in this case the employer – still in some sense there may be a third party in the offing.

I am sure you will catch all of these ideas quickly and will improve upon them. At least it appears to me that we have several dimensions here: 1) totality itself; 2) restraint, that is, the dimension of relative unwillingness of the inmates to be there; their lack of control over whether they are to be there or not; 3) and third, the question of agency. What are they there for, who are they there for, who are the parties involved, who is acting on whose behalf? This raises the question of mandate

and of licence which are themes in the paper I will read on occupations at the society meetings at the end of this month.<sup>1</sup>

I would like to mention a few items of literature on this topic. Your bibliography is a good one. You might be interested in the thesis of Gordon Ericksen.<sup>2</sup> Ericksen did the thesis here in our department, and it is about a little barracks community of aircraft mechanics who were sent out to Africa just before we were in the War to repair planes en route to the east. The men went in “voluntarily.” It was a one-sex community of young people, from which any individual was in theory free to resign, but there was no place to go and no way of getting back home. Ericksen kept a diary there, while he did not have your kind of insight or analytical mind. Still the material is very interesting and would be useful for your analysis. The big thing that I would add to your list is the work which I consider best of all on the subject of concentration camps. It is the book by H. G. Adler, entitled *Theresienstadt*. I reviewed it for someone. I think it must have been *Commentary*.<sup>3</sup> Theresienstadt was the so-called “paradise ghetto,” established by the Nazis in Czechoslovakia as a place to intern Jews who were not German nationals; that is, the Jews of Czechoslovakia itself, Holland, and various other countries which were “protected” by the Nazis. Adler himself was in Theresienstadt for nearly the whole of its course and has written a most remarkable record. One of the points of interest is the phantastic system of “self-government.” Unlike most of the totalitarian or total institutions of which you speak, this one was established to destroy people. You do mention the concentration camps, of course. In Theresienstadt there was kept a circus illusion that the people who left were being transported to some mystical place in the east, where Jews would settle on the land and would be restored to moral health, after having been all these centuries parasites on the good people of Western Europe. Everyone knew this was a fiction, but no one punctured it openly. A system of self-government was set up, one of whose powers or duties rather was to make up the lists of those who would be thus transported to the east; that is, to Auschwitz’ gas chambers. Of course the people making up the list could find themselves on it next morning, when the approved list came back from the SS officer in charge. I think the Theresienstadt story adds something of a dimension to the whole business of self government and the phantastic bastard or perverse identification of inmates with their masters. As a matter of fact for some time there was an apparently ardent group of young people in Theresienstadt who formed something like the Hitler youth and who cultivated the true Germanic

<sup>1</sup> Hughes [1958, chapter 6].

<sup>2</sup> Ericksen [1947].

<sup>3</sup> Hughes [1956].

virtues by joy through sport. The book has not been translated, but perhaps you read German. Adler is working on some articles in English to give some of the main points of his work. The trouble is that he is trying in the English article to write an abstract sociology of the concentration camp. The book, which does this to some extent, is better for your purposes, because of the material in it. You can also find my review of it somewhere in 1956. That is in *Commentary*.

The company town is another excellent example of the total institution. Whether it be of the nice Hershey chocolate kind or whether it be a mining camp or a turpentine camp in the piney woods of the south. At one time I read a great deal on the subject and made some notes, which I would be glad to show you sometime when you come here. There were of course the model company towns such as Hershey and the Sunlight town of the Lever Brothers in England. There are some rather "nice" company towns in the northern frontier of Canada, although in most of them the totalness is quite apparent. In the "nice" ones such as Pullman, on which I once wrote something, there was an attempt to use totalness to make what the founder regarded as an ideal community. In this they approached in some respects the sectarian communities which were so numerous on the American frontier. In Pullman there was a free theatre, a free library, there were gondolas on Lake Calumet, where young lovers were to court one another and breed good workers. Something of the story how this broke up I have put in a little memorandum which I will send to you along with this. Someone has to follow out all of these leads. I think you might have done more with the phenomenon of the kangaroo courts. All of these total institutions seem to develop more or less some bastard judicial procedure for trying and punishing those who yield too much to the blandishments of those in formal authority. In prison of course this is quite common; the army has not been without the kangaroo court; and even when I was a student, there was a trial, a sort of mock trial of a fellow who went to classes on the day when we had all decided to call a one-day celebration and did it. This poor fellow was a divinity student. The boys captured him almost physically, brought him to the back door of one of the fraternity houses, where a group of students in masks and judges' robes solemnly condemned him to death. Of course it was all a joke and no harm was done to him, nor was there any thought of doing him any physical harm. Nevertheless it humiliated him or would have humiliated him if it had not been that he was such a true believer that he did not quite know what was going on. He probably thought it was a foretaste of what the cannibals of Africa would do to him in the mission field. However, the idea is this, that there is a secret law of people, of the masses of the underdogs, of the inmates; and that those who violate this law by yielding too much to the suppose higher law must be tried and punished by their peers. This is found to some extent in boarding schools. It is certainly found

in prisons. Whether it is ever found in a mental hospital or a TB hospital, I do not know. You mention Julius Roth and his work on the tuberculosis hospital.<sup>4</sup> Have you seen his notes kept during the time when he was last in hospital himself? At that time he took a document from Sutherland's book *The Professional Thief*.<sup>5</sup> He ran in parallel columns the things which happened to a newcomer in a prison and those which happened to a newcomer in a veteran's tuberculosis hospital.

Speaking now of the mental hospital attendant we had a student named Willoughby, who did a little master's thesis here on attendants in several state mental hospitals where he himself had worked as one.<sup>6</sup> His contention is that these men are not so cruel as made out, but that it is very important to them to have a quiet routine life so far as possible. Disturbances bring in the nurse; the nurse brings in the doctors; doctors mean investigations, inquiries and the suggestion that the attendant was wrong. Willoughby tells of some of the practices which attendants adopt to keep patients quiet. The quiet patients, within limits, is the good one. He told of the way in which they wrap a wet towel around the neck of a patient who appears to be restless and aggressive, and twist until he can hardly breath. They say nothing, but the patient is supposed to understand that things will get very, very painful indeed for him if he gets wild. Willoughby gives other cases to support his contention that the main object of the attendant in building up his own means of control is to keep the institution running, at least his corner of it, with a minimum of disturbance. Incidentally, therapy in any serious sense is a great disturbance of the routine. If one adds to this the general notion among many attendants that these people are not so much sick as immoral, it is easy to understand how they develop a very strong ethos, a very strong set of rules of their own about how to act, rules which do not square with those held, nominally at least, by those in charge of the institution.

All of these points bring up still another one which is an old one in sociology. There has long been the notion that an activity once it is institutionalized is thwarted by the institution itself. It is almost as if one were to say that achievement of a purpose and establishment of an institution are mutually exclusive. That is to say, in the strongest sense, that schools are inimical to education; prisons inimical to reform; and hospitals inimical to cure. Like most propositions of this kind it is not completely true, on the other hand it is true enough so that we need really to investigate it much more thoroughly than we have. To what extent is it possible so to organize mental hospitals that therapy might be carried on at the level at which the best conceivable

<sup>4</sup> Julius Alfred Roth (1924-2002) had not yet published at that time his major book on TB hospitals [Roth 1963]. See also the note 7 page 9 in Goffman's *Asylums*.

<sup>5</sup> Sutherland [1937].

<sup>6</sup> Everett Hughes refers to Robert Holmes Willoughby [1953].

therapist would wish to carry it on with a patient, let us say with a private patient? Let us think of schools in this connection. To what extent would it be possible to organize institutions which could combine great freedom of the individual to learn what he will with excellent free running examples and models of learning and intellectual activity on part of the teachers. One might say that such an institution – that is the arrangement which could satisfy my condition – would be socially frictionless (if it were possible to conceive an organization which is without friction). That is of course in itself a contradiction. But it would certainly have to be an arrangement with a minimum of discipline. As we know, Howie Becker's school teachers complain greatly of having to devote their time to discipline.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand it is quite likely that after having disciplined youngsters for some years most of the teachers could not possibly keep busy at anything like true teaching for more than a few minutes of each day. The effort would be excruciatingly painful. In colleges and universities even, if the youngsters were to work as hard at learning as we say we want them to do, it would again be painful and impossible for a large share of the staff. And of course when one does institutionalize an activity at least when one moves at all in the direction of your total institution, or of those which I say have some restraint in them, one must have a professional staff whether of the low order of attendants or of the supposed high order of teachers and therapists. When one has functionaries, one sets an upper, as well as a lower limit of activities of various kinds. That is to say, I believe it could be argued that the very fact of organizing a school cuts down probably the best work of the best possible student; that is to say, the best imaginable speed and rate of learning of the best possible student in the best possible situation. Institutions may perhaps be in and of themselves mechanisms for producing mediocrity, and mediocrity is itself some sort of frustration of the very best. In the case of many of your total institutions, let's say a good boarding school, it may of course produce a high level mediocrity, raising the general level of mental and educational activity of those who become its inmates. I suppose the dumbest, most resistant student at old Oxford learned more Latin than most people who didn't go to Oxford at all. Best possible students may have learned less than they otherwise would have done. In the case of the mental hospital I suppose it would be hard to say what society would be like without them. Apart from the burden on families and I suppose the actual danger to families and to people, the hospitals don't really do much. At least it seems to me that very little in the way of therapy goes on in them, and I suppose it is an open question whether those who do get well might not have got well anyway. We might therefore look at the mental hospit-

<sup>7</sup> Becker [1951]; Becker [1957].

al and ask what indeed is its function. It would certainly turn out to be only in a very minor way that of therapy. I notice I am beginning to wander off into rather obvious points which are certainly more familiar to you than to me. Let this be the end.

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