Editorial

The Challenge of Criminality

by Thorsten SELLIN

We are living in an age that is witnessing fabulous discoveries in the physical sciences. We seem to be learning more of the innermost secrets of the structure and of the laws governing our physical universe. We stand on the threshold of an era of space exploration which only the wildest speculation could have imagined a mere generation ago. It is tragic that so many of the great advances in recent years have been incidental to or hastened by intensive search for more and more deadly offensive weapons of war or for increasingly effective means of defense against a possible enemy attack, but in any case these scientific discoveries could not have been made but for the expenditure of fantastically large sums of money, placed at the disposal of vast research organizations, staffed by persons educated to use appropriate techniques of investigation and to design and manipulate the intricate laboratory equipment needed in their research.

Now, whether the knowledge which these scientific researches have amassed will be employed for the benefit or for the harm of mankind depends ultimately on our motivations and aspirations which in turn are shaped by our system of social organization, our philosophy, our traditions. It would seem, therefore, that the need for achieving greater knowledge of the forces of nature should be secondary to our need to find out more about ourselves and the society in which we live, to learn why we behave the way we do as individuals or in groups, under given circumstances and conditions. This search is chiefly the task of what we in Anglo-Saxon countries have come to call the behavior sciences, and it is largely within the framework of these disciplines, that the criminologist is working.

There is no time to enter into a discussion of what criminology is or what criminologists do. Briefly, in many different disciplines that study human behavior there are researchers who have become interested in and wish to find scientific explanation for conduct that deviates from accepted moral standards and especially conduct considered criminal by law. Some of them seek this knowledge by a study of offenders ; others by the study of the cultural and social setting in which offenders live. Some focus their attention on the standards or rules of conduct embodied in the criminal law ; others on the administration of criminal justice or the nature and functioning of our correctional institutions. All of them try, by whatever research methods and techniques

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they have learned to use, to delve below appearances in the hope of finding a more secure basis for generalizations applicable to the phenomena they are studying and when they devote themselves more or less continuously to their tasks we call them criminologists.

In most countries to-day a grave concern is felt about criminality and especially about juvenile delinquency. This is evidenced by the reports made to the recent international congress on the prevention of crime and the treatment of offenders held in London by the United Nations. Nevertheless, international surveys of research on delinquency show that, by and large, there is little concerted effort to study the problem, and that in most countries even elementary data about its nature and dimensions are lacking. It is, of course, obvious that there are many social problems that need to be intensely studied, but there would probably be no disagreement with the claim that criminality, which touches the moral foundation of social life, does present a challenge of vital importance. Hitherto, basic criminological research has received little support from governmental authorities. There are signs here and there that there is a brighter day coming. The puzzling phenomenon of an increase in criminality in countries where every effort has been made to raise living standards to the highest possible level for everybody has made even public authorities conscious of the lack of basic knowledge about criminality. Questions are being raised not only about the possible causes of crime but about the whole process of defining crimes, fixing penalties in the law, and the application of such measures by the courts, and questions are increasingly being asked about the effectiveness of our methods of dealing with offenders by institutionalization or other means.

To answer these questions, basic research is necessary and this should primarily be entrusted to universities that possess competent staff to provide the needed professional training of research workers and the atmosphere and tradition of free inquiry. It is gratifying to note that more and more universities are setting up institutes of criminology, of which the University of Leyden possesses a notable example. This is encouraging, but the effectiveness of such institutes will not be felt unless they are given the financial means to carry out large-scale research and training programs, which enlist good minds from *all* the behavior sciences in a cooperative effort. In the field of physical and mental health research has gone a long way to meet the challenge posed by the existence of illness and disease. The time has come when we must meet *the challenge of criminality* with equal vigor and resources.

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