# HOW TO SURVIVE COHEN AND TAYLOR:

*Research in Prisons*

by

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The reissue, in 1980, of Cohen and Taylor's book **Psychological Survival** (Pelican) can be seen in a number of ways. James Crippledini's recent review in **Self and Society** (Vol. XIII, No.5, Sept/Oct. 1985) points out that it casts doubts on the prison system. I would go along with that. But on rereading this book (it first came out in 1972: the material was collected in the 60's), I found it gave me more of an insight into the inhumane way in which 'old paradigm' research was done in the 1960's by Stan Cohen, Laurie Taylor, Jock Young and one or two others whose names I forget.

There is one type of old paradigm research which Cohen and Taylor do not go in for. Indeed they scorn it and devote an appendix to saying why. That type of research is the sort which measures 'variables' such as attitudes and personality by paper and pencil test and compares the peasurements between different groups at different points in time. Taylor and Cohen point out that this type of research usually generates masses of material on methodology and very little material of any importance to the issue being studied, in this case the long-term effects on personality of being imprisoned. I cannot see what is wrong with the method in principle, as a way of measuring change in a population of people, so long as it is clear whose interests are being served and the population of people are fully participant in the enquiry. It may be true that most studies carried out using this type of plan lead to sterile results, in which case they have something in common (so my physicist friends tell me) with research in the pure sciences. Perhaps the small percentage of fertile research requires a mass of dross. To me, the important issues lie in the moral base of the research and the influence the research has on people's lives. It is this aspect of old paradigm research which Cohen and Taylor fall foul of.

In the 1960's it was widely held by some academics that research which 'took sides' was not only acceptable but desirable. A paper of Howard Becker's, 'Whose side are we on?', **Social Problems**, 14, (Winter, 1967), pps. 239-247, came to represent this view, depicting social research as well motivated if it stood up for the

oppressed and showed the vile mechanisms whereby normal society crushed anyone who differed from the prevailing norms of 'decent behaviour'. Demythologizing normal society was in the air. Decolonization of Africa, Asia and South America by European countries had been recently completed. Gay, female, physically handicapped and other minority groups began to push for recognition. Laws changed. Greater choice of lifestyle became easier to exercise. Hanging was abolished in Britain. R.D. Laing and David Cooper 'took sides' with offspring against their parents, students against their teachers, patients against psychiatrists. Ivan Illich and Ian Kennedy followed up with attacks on the practice of modern medicine (in **Medical Nemesis** and the Reith Lectures, **The Unmasking of Medicine**). Stirring stuff which helped loosen up ideas about individual power, choice, responsibility and joy.

By 1980, when **Psychological Survival** was reissued, it was quite clear that this line of research had raised awareness but that it had one serious flaw. It always had a bogey to put down. 'The family' caused misery to the next generation, psychiatrists suffering from 'psychiatrosis' gave hell to schizophrenics, doctors ruined our bodies, prison officers ('screws' according to the side that Cohen and Taylor were on) rob prisoners of dignity. I would have thought that a morally sound piece of research must not only establish whose interest is being served, and have those being studied as a party to the research, but must not hold in contempt two-thirds of the people in the organization being studied. (Prison officers outnumber prisoners, on the average by 2 to 1, partly because a prisoner does 168 hours per week. A prison officer averaged 60 hours at the time of Cohen's study).

Lest I appear to exempt myself from the rules of new paradigm research, I had better state where I am coming from. In 1965 I became an assistant lecturer at L.S.E., the next year a lecturer, about four years after that I got 'tenure' i.e. I could stay in the job until 65 years old or I could give notice and leave or I could get the sack for moral turpitude. I stayed. The young radical criminologists (as they were called in those days) published a lot of books and appeared in the media. I felt rather envious of them. I greatly admired their panache at exposing iniquities in 'the system'. I repressed the slight sense I had that something was fishy with their books: it smelled to me then of my own envy.

My view of criminology (radical type) took a knock when, in the mid-1970's, I was invited to show a set of 80 colour slides with 55 minutes of cassette reporting the well-known Zimbardo prison experiment to a three-day conference of 150 prison governors. The presentation of the prison experiment is dramatic and disturbing. It shows how some young male college kids became bullies when they played the role of guards, and apathetic when prisoners, even though they were in an experiment - a powerfully contrived experiment - but nevertheless an experiment. The conference, arranged by the prison officers themselves, also saw the film of Milgram's electric shock

experiments which shows how easy it is for one ordinary citizen in charge of a situation to get another ordinary citizen (a prison officer perhaps?) to obey orders to hurt a third, blameless or protesting person. The programme was rounded out to include a talk by Gitta Sereny of her interviews with Franz Stangl. An account of her book **Into that Darkness** was circulated so that each prison governor could read about and identify with Stangl: working-class background, played the guitar (zither), a master weaver, joined the police, an Austrian Nationalist, decorated for arresting Nazis, bullied by the conquering Germans into policing a euthanasia centre (colleagues were shot), conned into commanding Sobibor extermination camp, protested, carried out his job very correctly, avoided contact with the 'clients', did not have sex with inmates, nor did he beat them; he killed nobody. Appointed, against his wishes as commandant of Treblinka for 10 months (1,000,000 gassed). A coarse man, he lived an unexceptional life as a family man and junior employee of Volkswagen in Sao Paulo, Brazil, for 20 years after the war until his arrest and trial. He died in jail and left a widow and three daughters.

The prison governors reacted in various ways to their conference. Many sloughed it off as interesting, a diversion from daily work, and headed for the bar. A few felt insulted and threatened and criticized the film makers, academics, platform speakers, TV, the press and L.S.E. for . . . well, I forget what for but I remember a few dozen angry prison governors. An equal number were greatly in favour and said so. To some extent they took on the angry ones. These governors mainly worked with young offenders and wanted prisons to be less oppressive. So, Taylor and Cohen were a bit off the mark to depict all prison staff as being the same.

There was a surprise in store for me. Some time after the conference was over I was asked by an assistant governor to show the Zimbardo experiment to the staff of his prison during one of their lunch breaks. The reaction was the same as before - a bit of anger and rejection, some support and a lot of 'so what?'. About a dozen of the staff, educational and custodial, asked me to hold a group discussion with them without senior staff being present. I visited this group three times. Discussion lasted more than two hours on each occasion. Heat was generated between the custodial staff who had the task of checking that the rules were being kept and the daily programme followed and the educational staff who taught various skills. The custodial staff viewed the prisoners as a potential threat as rule breakers. The education staff viewed them as unfortunates, not very talented or gifted and from appalling backgrounds; a sorry lot of people some of whom might be helped.

I did not meet any prisoners. I saw a few doing various tasks as I walked through the prison and sensed that I would not easily mix with them and had a feeling of distaste. Accounts of rare but vicious physical attacks by prisoners on the staff reinforced my reaction. One of the educational

staff had his skull fractured by a prisoner to whom he was teaching basic building skills and who he had checked quite forcefully for fooling about with a truck in a way which would maim others. I felt for the staff - and decided not to get involved with research in prisons precisely because I lacked a feel for the life of inmates, their space, views of the world, likes, hopes and hates; in short, their sub-culture; just as Cohen and Taylor have no feel for prison staff. I know of two informative books on prison staff, Thomas's **The Prison Officer since 1850** and Emery's **Freedom and Justice within Walls.** More helpful, in my view, than Cohen and Taylor.

I hope that future, humanistic studies of prisons won't take sides, will involve all parties in the research and will be clear about whose interests are being served, in other words be 'new paradigm' a la Peter Reason and John Rowan.

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