

DAILY PEOPLE

VOL. 4, NO. 297.

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, APRIL 22, 1904.

ONE CENT.

EDITORIAL

REFORMING PRISONERS.

By DANIEL DE LEON

TO look at the language held by some people on some subjects one would think they are talking ghosts of the stone-age. This is the impression one gets from the “learned” discussion now going on upon the subject of whether prisoners can be reformed, and, if so, how? One set emphatically pronounces itself in the negative—prisoners are hopelessly perverse; another set says they are not hopelessly perverse, and can be reformed, and the method is “kind treatment.” Which of the two sets belongs to the further back period of the stone-age it would be hard to determine.

If there is a country on whose soil such a discussion and remedy is ruled out by its history it is this country. On American soil, as upon a broad and conspicuous stage, the practical test has been made, and made under the only conditions that would constitute a test. Hither, in the country’s early days, we have seen men and women deported from England for all manner of crimes and misconduct. America was to be their prison, were they found to be incorrigible? or, if corrected, was it “kind treatment” merely that corrected them? They improved, they became honorable men and women—judges, respected matrons, paragons of honor and probity. Their history is a flat denial of the theory of the incorrigibility of the prisoner. But how or why did they reform? The answer to the question goes to the root of the bulk of criminality.

The criminal, as a rule, is a product of social conditions. Where livelihood is hard to get the effect upon man and woman is crime, as a rule. Some commit suicide, others go crazy, but in most instances the effect is a resort to crime. Obviously, the disease can be considered uneradicable only by people who imagine impossible a state of society where privation, despite readiness to work, is an impossibility. Obviously also the “kind treatment” nostrum will have as much effect

as a plaster on a wooden leg. No patting on the cheeks, no gentleness will stead. These are all very good in their way, but they are in this connection pre-eminently an illustration of the saying that sweet words will butter no parsnips. The criminals, sent to America, became criminals in England because there was no other avenue for earning a living. They ceased to be criminals in America because the path here lay open for honest endeavor. It was not “kind treatment” that was bestowed upon them but freedom of natural and social opportunities—that reformed them.

As man worked out his emancipation from savagery and barbarism up to what is broadly called civilization by developing the tool of production and subjugating nature so can the criminal of to-day be made to work out his salvation from criminal practices by being afforded full natural and social opportunities to labor and to keep the fruits of his toil.

The criminals, accordingly, “ye shall always have with you” so long as society is what it is to-day—a breeder of criminals, wholesale, some few landing in jail and the larger number running the jails as one of the social institutions of their glorious society.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

Uploaded May 2007

slpns@igc.org