CRIME—SOME SOCIAL ASPECTS

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In this the first of a series of two articles, Mr. Matthew examines how certain social conditions lead to crime more than certain other conditions. At the same time he shows how it is not the social factors by themselves, but the collusion of something within the individual with unfavourable environmental factors from outside that results in crime.

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Crime is a great source of waste. Millions worth of property is destroyed by criminal activity every year, in every country of any importance. Lakhs of rupees are spent on detection of crime and on bringing to book the offenders. Thousands of men are sent to prisons when their crimes are detected, and they have to be fed and housed at State cost. It is true that the prisoners are made to do some work, but the output of their work is far from adequate when we take into account the number of people who are supposed to be working. Men and women who should have been creatively employed producing national wealth in different forms, spend their life under restraint, turning only a small portion of their efforts into actual production. Still worse is possibly the influence which crime and its consequences in penal servitude have on the life of the criminals themselves. It is a huge waste of creative human personality that we witness in prisons. Besides, the influence that the criminals and their treatment exercise indirectly over their custodians and the body politic in general should also be taken into account. Those who believe in the worth of human personality and its creative possibilities—individual and collective—cannot be indifferent to this colossal waste that goes on day after day, year after year, and generation after generation.

No Single Causative Factor.—In dealing with crime, we should, both from the standpoint of theoretical interest and of practical importance, try to discover the causes of crime. It should, however, be noticed that those who place emphasis on the ability of people to use their free will on all occasions will not find any problem in the matter of the etiology of crime. The fundamental assumption of those who stress the importance of free will is that every man, woman or child is what he or she is on account of the free choice he or she has made in regard to the various phases or vicissitudes of life. A man commits a crime because he chooses to do so; he could have desisted from the crime if he had wanted to; and therefore his is the responsibility for the commission of the deed. This, for centuries, was the standpoint of penology in almost all countries. It held each offender, young or old, responsible for his crime, and thought that the best way of putting an end to the prevalence of crime was to punish the offender for his misdeed. The trend of thought has begun to change and to take a new direction in the matter of responsibility for crime, and naturally, leaders of thought and administrators of justice have begun to take an interest in the various factors that might have induced a person to take to criminal activities.

It should, however, be noticed, at the very outset, that crime is not caused by any single factor but by a group or constellation of them. It is like a river fed by several tributaries. The effort to find any single cause of a crime is fruitless, for though we popularly may refer to any one thing as
the cause of a criminal deed, it is the resultant of a multiplicity of causes. For instance, physical and geographical factors such as climate, nature of the soil and means of communications in a country may have something to do with the number and the nature of crimes committed in it. Some people think that in the higher latitudes of the north zone there is less crime against persons than in the lower latitudes, but that in the northern latitudes there are more crimes against property than in the south. It is very difficult, however, to arrive at an accurate statement of this kind through scientifically collected facts and figures. Even countries in the north do not all have the same geographical and social factors equally present in each one of them. There is, however, more statistical support for the view that in European countries there is a variation in the kind of crimes that occur predominantly in the summer and winter months. In the former season crimes against persons are more frequent than in other parts of the year, while in the latter there is a greater frequency of crimes involving property. This variation in the nature and number of crimes has something to do with the social habits and economic conditions of people in European countries. Statistics of the kind worked out for different parts of India would be most helpful, if available. Unfortunately, however, I have not come across attempts in India to find out whether any such relationship exists between crimes of various kinds and the different seasons of the year such as the hot months, the rainy months and the cold months (where a cold season exists).

The Italian school of criminologists thought that there was a close correlation between crime and the anatomical features of a person. The one who advocated this theory most strongly was Lombroso. He thought that the biggest criminals were born criminals and that there were certain anatomical and physiological characteristics which marked them out from ordinary human beings. He arrived at his conclusion after measurements which he made on numerous prisoners whom he examined. He was struck by the frequent recurrence of certain characteristics such as "a small cranial capacity, a small weight of brain, a great length of arm, a retreating forehead, a protruding underjaw; a scanty beard and a thick head of hair; projecting ears and squinting eyes; a tendency to lefthandedness; a lessened sensibility to pain but a more than doubled susceptibility to climatic, magnetic and meteorological changes."* In this way, by putting together the anatomical and physiological abnormalities which he had noticed in thousands of persons, he constructed a specific type of man whom he called a criminal type. This made a great stir in learned circles. Many people accepted Lombroso's contention, once he could boast of having made personal notes on no fewer than 25 thousand criminals, as it was based on personal observations and anthropometric measurements. Other investigators were surprised at the strange statements of Lombroso and made measurements of this kind. Among those who made measurements of this kind may be particularly mentioned a prison-doctor in England called Charles Goring. These investigators could not get the same results as Lombroso. They found that the characteristics which he pronounced to be criminal could be found in many honest men and that in many of the delinquents in whom they were traceable, they were not innate but merely the result of penury and hardship. They believed

that the general run of prisoners in any prison had on the whole the same features as people outside. Several other attempts have been made by observers to arrive at a kind of correlation between physical or anatomical features and mental characteristics, but hitherto no satisfactory proof has been given to show that crime has anything to do with special anatomical characteristics. Even if there is a correlation between physical features and character, it does not follow that those who have a certain type of mental and physical traits should necessarily turn out to be criminals.

Personally, I am inclined to think that the psychological make-up of the people concerned is the most important factor in the etiology of crime, for crime is something that is concerned with the reaction of individuals (or groups of individuals) to society. As a whole, crime, in more direct words, is something that is caused by psychological factors more than by anything else. By psychological factors we understand quite a number of things such as the temperament of a person and the relative strength of the various natural propensities or instincts that work in him, the attitudes and fears and prejudices that he acquired in his early days, and the kind of ideals of character and principles of conduct that he has accepted for himself. We should also bring into this category of psychological factors the intellectual equipment of a person. To understand what led to a criminal deed or a criminal career, we should give heed to all these factors that pertain to his psyche. But in this paper I do not intend to deal with them—not because they are unimportant, but because they are so important that they should be dealt with independently and at greater length than is possible in this paper.

The Environment.—Important as the psychological factors are, we cannot account for criminality by them alone. They result in crime when they come into combination with social factors. "A man of a certain constitution put in a certain environment will be a criminal," said J. B. S. Haldane.* The same view has been put forward by Hentig, who says: "Punishable actions can be forced out of a relatively social disposition by the pressure of outside circumstances just as the healthy body can be made sick by a very evil climate or the attack of virulent bacteria. To use a metaphor, many metals have a high melting point, many a low one. We call those metals with a high melting point hard. If by means of a very high temperature we melt a hard metal, we cannot suddenly classify it as soft because it has succumbed to an exceptional temperature. It is similarly so with man's natural disposition,"#

Hentig does not contend that the social environment of a person necessarily determines whether he lapses into criminal ways or not, any more than he would say that "Crime=Symptom of a defect in personal disposition." But, he rightly recognises that under certain social and economic circumstances, any man or woman or child may be tempted to ignore or set aside rules of conventional and social propriety. I am sure that there are individuals who, however sorely they may be tempted, do not take recourse to anti-social lines of conduct. While such people are ready to face and, if necessary, suffer the gravest and hardest situations, even at the risk of their lives, there are a few who go under even with slight provocations.

* Quoted by Claude Mullins: Crime and Psychology, Ch. V., p. 123. Methuen, 1944, 2nd ed.
In between, there is a vast proportion of people who put up a fight against hardships and privations but give up their resistance when they feel that the course of circumstances is too hard on them. This is what criminal statistics have revealed (the first man who demonstrated that there is a natural frequency curve in regard to crime in every state or big natural group of people being a Belgian statistician Adolph Quetelet in the eighties of the last century). The level of resistance is not the same in the case of all people. The psychological build or make-up of a person and the social conditions in which he lives, together account for the failure of such people to keep to the rules and regulations of organized social life. "What I propose to do in this paper is to examine how certain social conditions lead to criminality more than certain other conditions. But before proceeding I wish to say once again what I have said already, and I shall have occasion to say it again in the course of this paper, that it is not the social factors as such that lead a person to a criminal career; it is the collusion of something within himself with unfavourable environmental factors from outside that results in crime.

The Home Atmosphere.—In considering the social environment we should first take the home into account. The home is a place that should give love and a sense of security as well as natural comforts to the child. In many homes, however, children do not get these most essential requisites of healthy growth. For a sense of security the child must feel himself loved; but in some homes there is so much strict discipline and repression enforced on the child that he does not enjoy any happiness there. He has to control himself lest he should incur the displeasure and punishment of the grown-up people around him. In some homes the situation may be the opposite, where the child tyrannises over the mother and other members of the family. The child needs to feel that he belongs to a world of order and regularity; and where the child is able to mould his environment according to his impulses and changing whims, he fails to be sure of the world around him as a stable and well-ordered world. This leaves him with a lot of uncertainty in his own life. His perplexity is still greater in those homes where there is love and indulgence on certain occasions and strictness and repression on certain other occasions and at times when he is not in a position to understand what reactions would be created in others on account of his own actions. There are many homes in which the children are entirely neglected, especially in what are known as broken homes, from which either the father or mother, and in some cases both of them, have run away. All these social factors create uncertainty, perplexity and tension in the members of the family, especially in children; and, as psychology tells us, these tensions and unhappy conflicts are likely to express themselves in various forms of anti-social conduct.

The sense of insecurity is experienced by the child when his material needs are not satisfied, and the homes of many children are homes of destitution and utter poverty. Cyril Burt found in a study of 200 children that over one-half of the total amount of juvenile delinquency is found in homes that are poor or very poor—belonging to an economic group that numbers only about 30% of the total population.* Clifford Manshardt points out that 618 out of 1,195 cases or 51.7 percent of the cases that appeared before the Bombay juvenile court in 1937 were destitutes. Referring to this condition of the

* Cyril Burt: The Young Delinquent, Ch. III, p. 68-69.
children and the overcrowded homes they come from, a topic we shall refer to later, he says: "The continual wonder to me is not the number of children who become delinquent, but rather the number of children who, in spite of such odds, manage to keep out of trouble."* This is a tribute which the poor deserve; and another writer in India who has written a small book on the subject has anticipated Manshardt in paying this well-deserved tribute to the poor: "It would be a great injustice to the poor to say that poverty necessarily leads to crime. The great majority of the poor struggle bravely with adversity, and retain their honesty. This is equally true in India. The greatest poverty will be found in the villages, and yet crime is less in villages than in towns."

The condition of poverty and destitution is something that provides a temptation for people to fall into delinquent ways though, as we have seen, the majority of the poor are able to resist it. The temptation is there for all poor people, but it is particularly strong for those who knew better times but have now fallen upon hard days. It is this deterioration in economic position, providing situations of contrast, making the people feel what conveniences and amenities of life they had and how needy and destitute they are today, which often serves as an additional temptation to adopt evil means to satisfy their present needs.

In poor homes where the parent is unable to provide for the needs of the children, the latter are expected to help in the maintenance of the family. Children go out to work and bring home their earnings. In some homes the parents take from the child all his earnings and he does not have any pocket money for himself. He may hand over his earnings to his parents with apparent readiness and joy, but as a little boy he feels his privation; and in course of time he may develop a sense of animosity. "The attitude of the wage-earning child who takes the turning-over of all his earnings to his parents as a matter of course........may lead to insubordination later on. A natural reaction from complete subjection is pushed too far by the spirit of his new associates and by the invitations of his enlarged world."**

Children going out to work create a number of other problems. For one thing, many of them can get only what may be called blind alley occupations—such as running errands, hawking, newspaper selling, serving as part-time shop assistants or domestic servants, etc. First of all, a job of this kind cannot be a training for work that should satisfy a person as an expression of his creative manhood. It may be supposed that, after doing little odds and ends of work of this kind, boys may change their occupation and enter into skilled trades, but very few boys are able to pick up skill for any respectable kind of work after doing mere errand work for two or three years. The great mass of them fall, as was reported by an observer in 1909, "into low skilled trades or casual labour." § Very often they finish their work in a few hours and have therefore too much leisure and freedom for themselves with almost complete lack of control from any responsible senior person. They are subject to dangers and

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** Mary E. Richmond: Social Diagnosis, Ch. VII, p. 155.—Russell Sage Foundation, 1923.
temptations that are particularly strong for children of the "teen" years. They often gather in small groups and commit little deeds of mischief and nuisance, with the result that they fall into the hands of the police, who take them to the law court. There, for minor offences they are often fined; and, when the fines are not paid, they are committed to prison. The fault is not primarily of the kind of occupations in which they find themselves but of the economic circumstances that drove them to these occupations. Many of them have had no chance of acquiring a skilled profession—their parents were too poor, and state authorities did not care for them sufficiently well to do for them what the parents could not afford to do.

Those who have to work hard and for long hours come out tired, and such fatigued people do not have as much control over their feelings and emotions as those who are physically fresh and fit. Verrier Elwin, in mentioning the causes of crime, considers fatigue as having an important place among secondary causative factors. He quotes from Kinberg that "great exhaustion will occasionally produce actual psychosis of a confusive type. A disturbed consciousness of externals, the presence of hallucinations and delusional ideas, may then naturally enough produce criminal actions. But even in cases where fatigue does not give rise to such pronounced mental disorders it may produce a change of personality which, under circumstances, may result in criminal actions. The psychological fatigue phenomena that are especially important as crime factors are a strong feeling of dysphoria, dejection and irritability, worry, desperation and an unreflecting vague wish to escape from a situation which seems intolerable. Any intensification of the complicated emotional condition may weaken further the automatic action control."* Dr. Norwood East in his Medical Aspects of Crime says that from the study of several cases he is convinced "that physical fatigue is not uncommonly the last straw which precipitates a suicidal attempt;"# and we may add that what applies to suicide, which is aggression against the self, applies also to crime, which is aggression against others. Fatigue may arise out of hard and prolonged work, but it is not only hard work that creates the bad effect that we have mentioned. Continuous occupation with uninteresting or uncongenial work may also produce the same consequences.

Unemployment.—Unemployment is an important factor in the etiology of crime. An unemployed person is worried as to how he may provide his dependents and himself with the bare necessities of life. He cannot stand the sight of his wife and children going without food for days together and he takes recourse to desperate means to satisfy the most primary needs of life. We find in this country a not infrequent connection between unemployment and desertion. An unemployed man in a village often turns to industrial cities like Bombay or Ahmedabad for work. He leaves his family behind, as Clifford Manshardt, the former Director of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Bombay, says with true understanding, hoping to send for them when he has become established in his new work. But the expected work is not found immediately and he begins a bondage to the money-lender which compels him to postpone indefinitely the transfer of his family to the city. "As months pass, his contacts with the village become fewer and fewer.

* Elwin: Maria Murder and Suicide, Ch. XI, p. 143, Oxford University Press, 1943.
Finally, even the small money-orders which have been remitted cease, and the family tie is broken. The man leaves his last-known address and takes up his residence in another quarter of the city, often forming a loose attachment with another woman worker and even starting to rear another family. The deserted wife may stay in the village, or she may bring her children to the city in search of her husband. If she comes to the city, the chances are that the man cannot be found, and she herself is compelled to seek work to keep the family together. The children are left to fend for themselves, without parental guidance or supervision. It is only to be expected that in an appreciable number of cases the children will get into trouble, which may be of a serious enough character to bring them into conflict with the authorities."

When a large number of people are out of employment and cannot find for themselves and their dependents such elementary things as food, clothing and shelter, there arises the possibility of frequent acts of violence and riots. Of course the incidence of violence and mass acts of lawlessness such as riots and loot are not the same everywhere. We recall that in 1944 when several lakhs of people died of destitution in Calcutta and other parts of Bengal, there were to be seen all around them shops of sweetmeats and provisions and other marks of plenty enjoyed by their more fortunate neighbours. It was, nevertheless, a remarkable fact that the dying people hardly made any organized or violent attempts to help themselves to the things they considered as belonging to others. Hermann Mannheim studied statistical figures of unemployment and strikes in England for a few years and compared them with those of crimes; and he says that though in some places unemployment and strikes brought about an increase in the number of crimes there were instances where in spite of unemployment and protracted strikes there was no proportionate rise in the number of crimes. "The only conclusion," he says, "which can safely be brought from our statistical material is that unemployment as a causative factor of crimes seems to play a widely varying role in different districts. Whilst in some cases there is to be found an almost complete harmony between the fluctuations of unemployment and crime, in some others not even the slightest analogy exists." 

The peaceful behaviour of the starving and dying millions in Calcutta and other parts of Bengal, referred to above, shows that economic factors by themselves, do not account for the causation of crime. Economic motives are found in association with, and are complicated by, other motives. This is how sometimes grievous hurt and even homicide occur in disputes concerning property of no high intrinsic value. Sometimes disputes take place over a boundary line which possibly means a few square feet of land going to someone who is greedy of other peoples' land. Arguments take place and they are followed by angry and violent deeds. Sometimes people in two neighbouring villages dispute the ownership of a certain plot of ground covering a few acres. In such cases ownership of the disputed land becomes a matter of prestige for the two groups. I remember, when I was a boy, people of two villages, E and K, had a fierce struggle with each other. It so happened that the leaders of the two combating groups were related to each other by marriage—the leader of K having married the daughter of one of the leaders of E. The leader of K was violently assaulted by the E people, and many of his

* Clifford Manshardt: The Delinquent Child, Ch. III, p. 40 f.
supporters also suffered bodily hurt. The K people had to go for judicial and other business transactions to a town called T, and as the road that led to T passed through E the former had often to walk that distance with great vigilance and circumspection. Such disputes and law-suits often cost immensely more than the value of the original property the ownership of which is disputed. In Travancore a series of law-suits and occasionally even of criminal assaults have been going on for nearly 30 years regarding a small endowment fund given to the Syrian Church by the Travancore Government about a hundred years ago. The endowment amount is only a few thousand rupees, but the contending parties have spent several lakhs to prove their respective claims to the right of using the interest accruing from it. If you consider in terms of money the value of the time and energy spent by some of the most respected leaders of the two parties of the church, I am sure it means very many more lakhs of rupees still. Examples of this kind show that it is not always the intrinsic material value of some property that counts: economic considerations are often aggravated by considerations of prestige, moral rights and revenge.

*Size of Families.*—It is generally held that there is some correlation between the size of families and the presence of crime. Even if there is, it need not in my opinion be an indication of the fact that large families are breeding grounds of criminally inclined persons. It is no doubt a fact that in all countries the larger families are found among the poor and the lower middle classes of people; but it must also be remembered that the majority of people in any country belong to this socio-economic group. Taking these two facts together, we may be able to account well enough for the prevalence of crime in greater numbers actually, though not proportionately, in that section of the population—made up of the lower middle and poor classes—which is characterized by prolific families. It may as well be pointed out that well-behaved and law-abiding people also are found among lower, middle and poor class people in larger numbers than among the rich. The fact is that the size of families does not give any reliable indication of the strength of criminal tendencies in people. If there is more crime in prolific families, it is due to the economic hardship to which young and old members in such families are subjected. For instance, there is a lot of overcrowding in tenements belonging to the lower strata of society. Poverty leads to overcrowding. Poor people huddle together in certain localities and make them a congested area, and in each home all available space is occupied in the day time and in the night. Children do not have moving space to play about, and if they play around and make noise their parents are disturbed, who cannot do their work without encumbrance. If there is any sick person in the home, he or she does not get any quiet. At night quite a number of people sleep together in the same room—father, mother, sometimes a few relatives, grown-up children and little children—and here they often witness scenes which are not conducive to their mental poise and calm. Possibly in India with our warm climate which allows many people to sleep out in the open, the danger of over-crowded tenements is not so great as in colder countries. Cyril Burt in his investigation of delinquency in London found that there was a correlation of .77 between overcrowding in the home and juvenile delinquency. The incidence of crime in overcrowded families in some selected areas in India—whether in big cities like Bombay or Calcutta or even some of our smaller cities which too have
their slums and over-crowded quarters—is worthy of special study by workers interested in sociological research.

*Tribal Traditions.*—The influence of what may be called social heredity is seen in certain tribes in India which for generations have been addicted to the commission of special offences. Mr. O. H. B. Starte, an I. C. S. Officer who was placed in charge of the education and reformation of such tribes in the Bombay Province, mentions the traditional habits of some of them.

The Chhaparbant confined himself to the making of false coins, the Ghantichor was an adept in the stealing of bundles in the bazar and hence his name. The Phase-Pardhi or Haranshikari snared deer, it is true, but was equally prepared to snatch a goat from a herd, or to demand by blackmail grain from the threshing floor." * Some of these people never did any honest work for any length of time, and very few employers were ready to employ them even if they offered to work." For centuries they have wandered from village to village living on begging, blackmail and loot. These need to have special care taken for them, and to be trained to honest labour. They are gathered together in colonies called Criminal Tribes Settlements and work is provided for them." There are other tribes whose criminal record is not so bad as that of the people just mentioned but who still have criminal careers as tribal ideals. The framing of the Criminal Tribes Act, the establishment of Settlements under special officers, and the effort to provide work for them and education for their children have already produced results which indicate that if attention is given to their social and economic conditions, even people with a tradition of criminal tribes for generations can be started on the path of group self-respect and honest occupations.

This fairly detailed reference to economic factors does not imply that if all people have enough to eat and good houses to live in, and adequately remunerative work to do and leisure to enjoy, all crimes would come to an end; no, crimes will still occur even when economic conditions are satisfactory. At the same time it cannot be doubted that the number of crimes will be appreciably reduced if attention is given to a more equitable distribution of wealth. Karl Marx's view that disparity of economic conditions is the cause of all social and political and international ills is rather a narrow view. Man does not live by bread alone, nor are all his activities motivated by an effort to be well-off in material things. We cannot expect that all conflicts in the social life of people will come to an end when there is plenty for all to eat and comfortable places for all to live in and ample leisure for all to enjoy. Conflicts have their origin not only in matters relating to economics but also—and in my opinion more primarily—in psychological factors. All the same we should admit that behind many of the conflicts that take place all around us, especially in conflicts of an anti-social nature, reference to economic conditions is conspicuously present. Long hours of work, uncertainty as to how to satisfy such legitimate needs of a growing family as food, medical care and education, fatigue through protracted or monotonous occupations, lack of common amenities of life, inability to secure care-free leisure, and the impossibility of enjoying leisure to the best advantage even when it is available—these are factors that contribute to crime, and they are all related to the economic condition of people.