MEET THE NEW BOSS:
INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE AND LOOSE COUPLING IN PAROLE AND PROBATION

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ABSTRACT: The authors use the institutional theory of organizations to argue that historical changes in parole and probation are ceremonial in the sense that they are aimed at an institutional audience and have had little effect on the day-to-day work of line-level officers. A review of the history of community corrections in the US suggests that parole and probation can be described in four eras, each era marked by a particular pattern of institutional authority and by corresponding changes in the structure, goals, and policies of parole and probation. By loosely coupling the work of street-level parole and probation agents to organizational goals and policies and minimizing caseload problems via surveillance and information-gathering techniques, the day-to-day activity of parole and probation officers has been largely unaffected.

According to the recent literature, probation and parole have passed a crossroad and have been transformed in purpose, structure, and role. The purpose of parole and probation has shifted from the rehabilitation of individual offenders to the classification, surveillance, and control of dangerous populations. Scholars now argue that, rather than attempting to correct offenders in the community, parole and probation increasingly are adopting a crime control mandate, using what were formerly rehabilitative programs to regulate and punish offenders (Cohen, 1985; Duffee, 1990). Significant structural changes in the organization of parole and probation are also argued to have occurred, marked by the development and spread of specialized subunits, sophisticated surveillance technology, and databases of offenders (Gordon, 1991). Intensive supervision probation, house arrest, and electronic monitoring are now said to be the core of a new surveillance-oriented community corrections (Byrne, 1990). Changes in the perceived role of

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parole and probation agents have been cited as well. There are even reports that the perennial conflict between counselor and law-enforcement roles has abated, now that increased organizational demands for surveillance, coupled with contemporary hiring practices, have cultivated a crime-control mentality among officers (Harris, Clear, & Baird, 1989).

This transformation of parole and probation has been of considerable interest to scholars (Duffee, 1990; Fogel, 1984; Gordon, 1991; Hagan, 1989). Feely and Simon (1992) argue that the changes are manifestations of a radical reorientation under way in the penal field in general, one so significant as to constitute a "new penology." Whereas the "old penology," they affirm, was concerned with issues such as responsibility, fault, and treatment, the focus of the new penology is no longer transformative but managerial: the objectives are "to sort and classify, to separate the less from the more dangerous, and to deploy control strategies rationally" (p. 452). These new objectives have been facilitated by the development of statistically based classification schemes and intermediate sanctions, making it possible to place offenders rationally at points along a "custodial continuum" — with the prison at one extreme — based on the likelihood of future criminal behavior. New techniques of social control, such as drug testing and electronic monitoring, provide close surveillance, swift response to violations, and enhanced public safety. Feely and Simon suggest that we cease viewing community corrections as a means for reintegrating offenders into communities and to accept its transformation into an instrument for "managing and recycling selected risk populations" (p. 465).

Observers have linked the emergence of this new penology to the growth of the urban underclass (Simon, 1993). Structural changes in the economy purportedly have pushed large numbers of inner city males outside the mainstream of the American occupational system (Wilson, 1987). Lacking the work-related experience or skills that would allow employment in service industries, they have drifted increasingly into illegal labor markets. The persistence of the underclass, despite the Great Society policy interventions of the 1960s, have led to less ambitious policies and programs designed not to reintegrate but simply to manage or control high-risk members of that population. In an era of burgeoning prisons, community corrections increasingly has assumed this task, employing a revamped and toughened crime control mission; broad, diverse, and punitive community-based sanctions; and technologically sophisticated surveillance and data-gathering capabilities (Byrne, 1990).