

THE NORMATIVE-AXIOLOGICAL DIMENSION AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT OF PENAL SANCTIONS

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ABSTRACT: The Normative-Axiological Dimension and the Environmental Context of Penal Sanctions.

This paper examines the normative-axiological dimension and the environmental context of penal sanctions, focusing on the original theoretical framework developed by Romanian criminologist **George C. Basiliade** in his seminal work *Comprehensive Criminology*. The study situates Basiliade's "critical difference" concept—defined as the contrast between the convict's penal and pre-penal environments—within the broader tradition of criminological and penological thought, from Beccaria, Bentham, and Kant to Durkheim, Foucault, and Goffman. The article explores the material, social, and natural environments of punishment and their impact on the convict's perception of coercion, repression, and expiation. By integrating classical theories with contemporary perspectives from sociology, psychology, and social work, Basiliade proposes a comprehensive, interdisciplinary model of punishment that links the normative legitimacy of sanctions with their ecological and phenomenological experience. This synthesis underscores the enduring importance of environmental factors in shaping the effectiveness and ethical justification of penal practices.

Keywords: *Penal sanctions; normative dimension; axiological perspective; criminology; Comprehensive Criminology; environmental context; prison environment; total institutions; panopticism; critical difference; punishment theory; penology; sociology of punishment; restorative justice.*

Introduction

The study of penal sanctions has traditionally oscillated between normative theories of justice and empirical analyses of punishment's effects. From

Beccaria's utilitarian rationalism to Kant's categorical imperative and Durkheim's sociological moralism, the legitimacy of punishment has been interpreted in terms of legality, proportionality, deterrence, retribution, and the restoration of social order. Yet, beyond these abstract principles, punishment is also experienced by convicts within concrete environments—material, social, and natural—that shape its meaning and effects.

The Romanian criminologist George C. Basiliade, in his seminal work *Comprehensive Criminology*, advances an original synthesis of these perspectives. He argues that the environmental context of punishment—encompassing material, social, and natural dimensions—determines how sanctions are perceived and internalized by convicts. Central to his theory is the concept of the “critical difference,” denoting the contrast between the convict's penal environment and their pre-penal life conditions. This difference, Basiliade maintains, gives punishment its repressive, coercive, expiatory, and preventive character.¹

This article situates Basiliade's theory within classical and contemporary criminological thought, highlighting its originality and interdisciplinary significance.

I. Classical Foundations of the Normative-Axiological Dimension of Punishment

The Enlightenment marked the beginning of penal rationalization. Cesare Beccaria in *On Crimes and Punishments* argued that punishment must be proportionate, legally defined, and preventive rather than vengeful.²

Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon model epitomized the rationalization of surveillance, linking punishment with utilitarian principles of maximizing deterrence while minimizing suffering.³

Immanuel Kant, by contrast, defended a retributive vision of punishment as a categorical imperative: an offender must be punished simply because he has committed a crime, regardless of consequences.⁴

1 Basiliade, G.C. (2002) “Comprehensive Criminology”, Bucharest, Bucharest University Press, pp. 395–396

2 Cesare Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments*, translated by David Young, Hackett Publishing, 1986 [1764], pp. 9–34.

3 Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings*, ed. Miran Božovič, Verso, 1995, pp. 29–95.

4 Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge University Press

G.W.F. Hegel conceptualized punishment as the dialectical restoration of ethical order, a “negation of the negation.”⁵ Émile Durkheim understood punishment not only as deterrence or retribution, but as a ritual reaffirmation of collective conscience, reinforcing social solidarity.⁶

In the 20th century, Michel Foucault reinterpreted Bentham’s Panopticon as a paradigm of disciplinary power. In *Discipline and Punish*, he described panopticism as a generalizable technology of surveillance and normalization, extending beyond prisons to schools, hospitals, and political regimes.⁷

Against this background, Basiliade introduces a distinct contribution: punishment is not merely a legal act or symbolic reaffirmation, but also an environmentally mediated experience.⁸

II. The Environmental Context of Penal Sanctions

1. The Material Environment: Architecture and Overcrowding

The material environment of punishment has historically shaped its meaning. From monastic cells to penitentiary architecture, punishment has long been associated with isolation, austerity, and surveillance.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, penitentiary systems such as the Pennsylvania and Auburn models institutionalized solitary confinement or silent labor, reflecting the belief that repentance and discipline could reform offenders. The very term “penitentiary” derived from religious notions of penance.⁹

The codification of modern criminal law in the 19th century produced a classification of crimes and sentences that led to overcrowding, undermining the individualized treatment of offenders. As Basiliade notes, the contradiction between the material environment and the goals of correction forced a rethinking of punishment, leading toward paradigms of re-education and reintegration rather than mere isolation.¹⁰

5 1996 [1797], pp. 140–150. ^4 G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox, Oxford University Press, 1967 [1821], pp. 70–85.

6 Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. W.D. Halls, Free Press, 1997 [1893], pp. 108–130.

7 Foucault, M. (1977 [1975]) “Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison” Translated by A. Sheridan. New York: Pantheon Books, pp. 195–230.

8 George C. Basiliade, *op.cit.*, pp. 395.

9 George C. Basiliade, *op.cit.*, pp. 396.

10 George C. Basiliade, *op.cit.*, pp. 400–401.

The subjective experience of the material environment is crucial: solitary confinement may become psychologically torturous, while minimal deprivation risks reducing punishment to mere neutralization. Here, Basiliade's concept of critical difference is central—the convict perceives punishment only in relation to contrasts with prior life conditions.¹¹

2. The Social Environment:

Inmate Subcultures and Power Hierarchies

The social environment of punishment is equally decisive. Relationships among inmates, between inmates and staff, and between prisoners and their families shape how sanctions are internalized.

Donald Clemmer's *The Prison Community* (1940) introduced the concept of prisonization—the process by which inmates assimilate prison culture, often at odds with resocialization.¹²

Gresham Sykes, in *The Society of Captives* (1958), analyzed the “pains of imprisonment,” including deprivation of liberty, autonomy, and security.¹³

Erving Goffman highlighted the “mortification of the self” within total institutions.¹⁴

Helmut Schuller-Springorum, Siegfried Lamnek, and Joachim Kersten deepened the analysis of inmate subcultures, examining formal vs. informal rules, peer hierarchies, and social psychology of adaptation.^{15, 16, 17}

Basiliade integrates these findings but emphasizes that the critical difference between the convict's former life and the prison environment conditions how punishment is perceived. For socially integrated individuals, imprisonment constitutes a sharp rupture, intensifying punitive effects.

11 George C. Basiliade, *op.cit.*, pp. 399.

12 Donald Clemmer, *The Prison Community*, Rinehart, 1940, pp. 299–340.

13 Sykes, G.M. (1958) “The Society of Captives”, Princeton, Princeton University Press, pp. 63–94.

14 Goffman, E. (1961) “Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates”, New York, Anchor Books, pp. 3–35.

15 Schuller-Springorum, H. (1982) „Kriminologie“, Heidelberg: C.F. Müller Verlag, pp. 210–235.

16 Lamnek, S. (1981) „Theorien abweichenden Verhaltens“, Munich, Juventa Verlag, pp. 155–175.

17 Kersten, J. (1980). *Sozialpsychologie der Anstalt*, Weinheim, Beltz Verlag, pp. 112–146.

For socially marginalized individuals, imprisonment may appear less alien, reducing its corrective function.¹⁸

3. The Natural Environment: Climate and Spatial Isolation

Often neglected, the natural environment has historically shaped punishment. Penal colonies in Australia, French Guiana, or Siberia reinforced punishment through geographical remoteness and harsh climatic conditions.

Basiliade innovates by explicitly integrating the natural environment into the analysis of penal sanctions. Climate, location, and physical geography accentuate the critical difference, intensifying or mitigating the punitive impact.¹⁹

III. Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Modern scholarship has shown that punishment is a multidimensional experience:

- Psychology of imprisonment (Hans Toch and others) emphasizes coping strategies and mental health in confinement.^{20, 21, 22}
- Sociology of punishment (Stanley Cohen, David Garland) links penal policy to cultural anxieties and political control.^{23, 24}
- Social work and labeling theory (Howard Becker, Edwin Lemert) reveal how sanctions can stigmatize and reinforce deviance rather than rehabilitate.^{25, 26}

18 George C. Basiliade, *op. cit.*, pp. 397–401.

19 George C. Basiliade, *op. cit.*, pp. 391–393.

20 Hans Toch, *Living in Prison: The Ecology of Survival*, Free Press, 1977, pp. 89–120,

21 Colectivul Institutului de Criminologie, *Psihologia judiciară*, Editura Academiei, București, 1977, pp. 289–310.

22 Angelo Hesnard, *L'Univers morbide de la faute*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1949, pp. 200–220.

23 Stanley Cohen, *Visions of Social Control*, Polity Press, 1985, pp. 12–49

24 Garland, D. (2001). *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Capitolul „A History of the Present”, pp. 1–26).

25 Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, Free Press, 1963, pp. 31–68.

26 Lemert, Edwin M. *Social Pathology: A Systematic Approach to the Theory of Sociopathic Behavior*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951, pp. 75–77.

- ✦ Restorative justice (John Braithwaite) argues for reintegration and repairing harm rather than mere retribution.²⁷

Basiliade's originality lies in integrating all these perspectives into a comprehensive model that emphasizes both normative legitimacy and environmental experience.

IV. The Originality of George C. Basiliade's Contribution

1. The Concept of the "Critical Difference"

Basiliade's key innovation is the "critical difference," defined as the contrast between the convict's penal and pre-penal environments. This contrast determines the subjective perception of punishment. Where differences are profound, punishment acquires a stronger repressive, coercive, and expiatory character.²⁸

2. Punishment as Multidimensional

Basiliade identifies punishment as simultaneously repressive, coercive, expiatory, and preventive, rejecting one-sided theories of deterrence, retribution, or rehabilitation.

3. Comparative Relevance

Placed alongside Beccaria, Bentham, Kant, Hegel, Durkheim, Foucault, Goffman, and Garland, Basiliade stands out for his integration of normative theory with environmental analysis. His synthesis advances Romanian and European criminology alike.

V. Conclusion

Punishment cannot be reduced to legal definitions or symbolic gestures. It is lived and experienced by convicts in specific material, social, and natural environments. These environments generate a critical difference that mediates the repressive, coercive, expiatory, and preventive functions of penal sanctions.

By developing this concept, George C. Basiliade provides an innovative and comprehensive framework, bridging philosophy, sociology, psychology,

27 Braithwaite, J., 1989. *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 54–75.

28 George C. Basiliade, *op. cit.*, pp. 400-401.

and penology. His *Comprehensive Criminology* remains a landmark contribution, offering a multidimensional model of punishment that is at once theoretical, empirical, and normative.

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