

The International Society of Social Defence

and for a humanist criminal policy

The International Society of Social Defence (ISSD) was created, in 1947, amidst the rubble of the II World War, in a Europe in ruins after millions of military and civilian deaths, millions of murdered people, millions of people suffering hunger. Youths in their thousands without families went on the rampage. A hundred thousand between Rome and Milan, as many others in Berlin alone and its surrounding area. The social upheaval provoked by the War across the world sowed similar effects. Criminality increased in all parts, especially in those countries where the principle of “Thou shalt not kill” had been violated. More than a problem of justice, criminality represented a social question, and the punishment, if it were to make any sense, would have to be oriented towards what today we call resocialization.

This was the inspiration that filled the minds of Professor Filippo Gramatica in Geneva and Marc Ancel in Paris. The formal launch of the Society took place in Belgium, in 1949. The General Secretary represented by the great founder of scientific societies, Adolfo Beria di Argentine, soon established a headquarters at the Centro Nazionale de Prevenzione e Difesa Sociale in Milan.

Organized as a movement more than as a closed institution, it was based around a minimal programme approved in 1954, wider dissemination of which would take place that same year with the publication of “La défense sociale nouvelle” by Marc Ancel. However, the idea of a penal policy oriented around resocialization clashed with international social reality when the five-yearly Congress was for the first time held outside Europe, in Caracas, in 1976. So, the specific proposal for stable societies, without major inequalities, in the Europe of the 1970s, had to respond to serious needs, social inequality and discrimination, and the intense social marginalisation of Latin America and in other regions of the world. All of this prompted ample reflection and an updated minimal programme, which led to its inclusion in the scientific programme of constructive social criticism and criticism of the penal and prison system. It also led to the specific proclamation of Human Rights as the principle and the limit of all penal actions, with guarantees and full respect for the rights and dignity of the individual. So, the decriminalization programme likewise covers numerous infringements and the substitution of a prison sentence by other less serious sanctions. Without rejecting the idea that intervention has to take place for resocialization to happen, the programme denounces resocialization as a myth.

In 1987, Marc Ancel added a second part to the original name: For a Humanist Criminal Policy. A very significant title for everybody who thought that the modern World should

not be only democratic and social, but that it should also carry out its policies under the presidency of the principle of humanity, what is today also called civil humanism.

ISSD performs its activities organizing the criminal-policy movement, fundamentally, through international congresses and their resolutions, of which it has organized sixteen, as well as through publications, especially the “Cahiers de Défense Sociale”, available on-line at www.defensesociale.org.

At its first eight congresses, participants focused special attention on the problems of criminal behaviour, the perpetrators and their relation with society, formulating systems to reduce the punitive nature of punishments and to endow their content with mechanisms for resocialization. Moreover, it was proposed to divide the penal process into two phases, to determine responsibility in the first, and to agree on the penal consequences afterwards, in accordance with personality studies.

However, since the Congress in Caracas, in 1976, the preferential objectives of the study have been the determining social conditions of criminality. Since the Congress in Buenos Aires in 1986, stress has been laid on the internationalization process of contemporary societies and their effects in the field of criminality. These boundaries were substantially broadened at the last Congress, in Mexico, in 2012, the objective of which was “Criminal Policy in the age of the Millennium Declaration”.

In turn, the ISSD has grappled with three groups of complex and new problems, at all times out of special concern for human rights: “The protection of the environment and fundamental rights”, in Paris in 1991; “Corruption, protection of public administration and the independence of the Justice system” in 1996, in Lecce, Italy; and, in Toledo, in 2007, the problem of Criminal Law between peace and war and criminal justice in international conflicts and peacekeeping operations.

Since 2009, the ISSD in its own right, and another three organizations AIDP [Asociación Internacional de Derecho Penal], SIC [Société Internationale de Criminologie] and FIPP [Fondación International Pénal et Penitentiaire] have coordinated and driven the International Academic Network against the death penalty. We have been working alongside it, to comply with the 2007 Resolution of the United Nations, which calls for the abolition or at least a universal moratorium on the death penalty.