

Introducing the New School of Convict Criminology

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That's the reality, and to hell with what the class-room bred, degree toting, grant-hustling "experts" say from their well-funded, air-conditioned offices far removed from the grubby realities of the prisoner's lives (Rideau and Wikberg, 1992: 59).

Introduction

THE UNITED STATES IMPRISONS MORE PEOPLE THAN ANY OTHER COUNTRY IN THE Western world. Meanwhile, prison research is dominated by government funding and conducted by academics or consultants, many of them former employees of the law enforcement establishment (ex-police, correctional, probation, or parole officers), who subscribe to conservative ideologies and have little empathy for prisoners. Much of this "managerial research" routinely disregards the harm perpetrated by criminal justice processing of individuals arrested, charged, and convicted of crimes (Clear, 1994; Cullen, 1995).

If legislators, practitioners, researchers, and scholars are serious about addressing the corrections crisis (e.g., Clear, 1994; Welch, 1996, 1999; Austin and Irwin, 2001), we need to be more honest and creative with respect to the research we conduct and the policies we advocate, implement, and evaluate. To promote this objective, this essay introduces what we are calling "Convict Criminology," and reviews the theoretical and historical grounding, current initiatives, and dominant themes of this emerging school and social movement.

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Theoretical and Historical Grounding

To appreciate the context of *Convict Criminology*, we need to understand the steps taken to arrive at this juncture. Four interrelated movements, factors, and methodologies led to the birth of *Convict Criminology*: theoretical developments in criminology, the failure of prisons, the authenticity of insider perspectives, and the centrality of ethnography.

Theoretical Developments in Criminology: The history of criminological theory consists of a series of reform movements (Vold and Bernard, 1996). As early as the 1920s, biologically based arguments of criminal causation were being replaced by environmental, socioeconomic, and behavioral explanations. Even in the field of radical and critical criminology, there have been a series of divisions (Lynch, 1996; Ross, 1998). Since the 1970s, critical criminology has splintered into complementary perspectives including feminism (e.g., Chesney-Lind, 1991; Daly, 1994; Owen, 1998), postmodernism (e.g., Arrigo, 1998a, 1998b: 109–127; Ferrell, 1998), left realism (e.g., Young and Matthews, 1992), peacemaking (e.g., Pepinsky and Quinney, 1991; Quinney, 1998), and cultural criminology (e.g., Ferrell and Sanders, 1995; Ferrell, 1996). This multiplicity of perspectives suggests that radical/critical criminology has broadened its intellectual endeavor. Although these diverse discourses and “metanarratives...open up some new conceptual and political space” (Ferrell, 1998: 64), they, too, often remain the intellectual products of the well meaning yet privileged, with only minimal reference and relevance to the victims of the criminal justice machine. Perhaps in the new millennium criminologists and other social scientists may realize that convict voices, in many instances, have been forgotten, marginalized, or simply ignored (see Gaucher, 1998: 2–16).

The Failure of Prisons: Many prominent criminologists have discussed the failure of prisons to correct criminal behavior. The differential effects of incarceration are well known. According to Sutherland et al. (1992: 524), “some prisoners apparently become ‘reformed’ or ‘rehabilitated,’ while others become ‘confirmed’ or ‘hardened’ criminals. For still others, prison life has no discernible effect on subsequent criminality or noncriminality.” Johnson (1996: xi) suggested that, “prisoners serve hard time, as they are meant to, but typically learn little of value during their stint behind bars. They adapt to prison in immature and often destructive ways. As a result, they leave prison no better, and sometimes considerably worse, than when they went in.” Similarly, Reiman (1995: 2) argued that the correctional system was designed to “maintain and encourage the existence of a stable and visible ‘class’ of criminals.”

Needless to say, we should not assume that all prisoners are criminals, or that committing crime has anything to do with going to prison the first time, and even less the second or third times. Considering the dramatic growth in prison populations (Austin and Irwin, 2001: 1–16; Richards, 1998: 125–126), the

numbers of "innocent" victims will also continue to grow. The first failure of correctional institutions is that they incarcerate hundreds of thousands of prisoners who, although they were convicted of a crime, are not violent and pose little if any threat to the community. The second is that they hold people too long. As Austin and Irwin (2001: 143–146) demonstrate, it is about time: not just "hard time" (Johnson, 1996), but "long time" and "repeated time" in prison. The third tragedy of prisons is that "they don't do more to rehabilitate those confined in them" (Rideau, 1994: 80). Instead, prison systems are transformed into vast depositories for drug offenders, minorities, and petty offenders (Miller, 1996: 10–47; Austin and Irwin, 2001: 17–62). One cursory look at the gun towers, walls, and razor wire is sufficient evidence that prisons were built to warehouse and punish and not to rehabilitate.

Inside Perspective: The existing literature that provides an "inside perspective" on crime and convicts can be divided into six groups. In the first group are edited anthologies by prison reform activists (e.g., Rosenblatt, 1996; Burton-Rose, with Pens and Wright, 1998). Embedded in these works are chapters or short pieces written by political activists, lawyers, journalists, and prisoners. The second set of writings includes journalists' accounts of life inside prison (e.g., Mitford, 1973; Wicker, 1975; Earley, 1993; Bergner, 1998; Conover, 2000). A third set consists of prison journalism written by convicts in prison newspapers, for example, the *The Angolite*, or appearing in free-world publications such as *The Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*. The fourth group includes edited collections of authentic convict writing (e.g., Martin, 1995; Franklin, 1998; Morris, 1998; Johnson and Toch, 1999; Leder, 1999; Chevigny, 2000). In the fifth collection are books authored or edited by academics that may employ observation and/or interviews of criminal offenders or convicts (e.g., Schultz, 1991; Churchill and Vanderwall, 1992; Johnson, 1996; Cromwell, 1996; Walens, 1997; May, 2000). The last, and most prominent category, is composed of monographs written by convicts about life in prison (e.g., Jenet, 1949a, 1949b; Chessman, 1954, 1955, 1957; Cleaver, 1968; Jackson, 1970, 1972; Abbott, 1981; Rideau and Wikberg, 1992; Abu-Jamal, 1995; Hassine, 1996; Peltier, 1999).

The first four groups, be they convicts, activists, journalists, or academic editors, write "stories" or investigative reports that rarely connect their discussion to the debates found in the scholarly literature. Academics in the fifth group may support their research with excerpts from prisoner interviews, and may have been employed inside prisons at one time, and yet still write from a privileged perspective as compared to the lived experience of convicts. The last group writes authentic and compelling accounts of prison life, but are generally unable to ground their discussion in academic research (e.g., Gaucher, 1999). Missing or underutilized are the research accounts by academics who have served prison time.

Centrality of Ethnography: Convict Criminology is the logical result of criminologists' (e.g., Newbold, 1982/1985, 1987; Richards, 1995; Ferrell, 1993; Ferrell and Hamm, 1998) use of ethnographic methods to better understand their

subject matter. Clearly, the use of ethnographic methods is not new in the field of penology or corrections (e.g., Sutherland, 1937; Sykes, 1956, 1958; Sykes and Messinger, 1960; Jacobs, 1977; Peak, 1985; Lombardo, 1989; Farkas, 1992). For example, during the 1930s, Clemmer (1940/1958), while employed as a sociologist on the prison mental health staff of Menard Penitentiary (Illinois), collected extensive information on the convict social system.

Ex-convict academics have also carried out a number of significant ethnographic studies. In a series of articles and monographs (Irwin and Cressey, 1962; Irwin, 1970, 1980, 1985; Austin and Irwin, 2001), Irwin, who served prison time in California, drew upon his experience as a convict to interview prisoners and analyze jail and prison conditions. McCleary (1978/1992), who served both state and federal time, wrote his classic "sociology of parole" through participant observation of parole officers at work and on the street. Terry (1997), a former California and Oregon state convict, wrote about how prisoners used humor to mitigate the managerial domination of penitentiary authorities. Newbold (1982/1985, 1987, 2000), having served prison time in New Zealand, used both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze crime and corrections in his country. Finally, Richards and Jones (1997), both former prisoners, used "inside experience" to inform their observation and interviews of Iowa convicts upon their transfer to community work release centers. Each of these studies benefited from the inside experience of the investigators.¹

The previously reviewed movements, factors, and methodologies suggest that while academic criminology has flourished intellectually, and has made serious efforts to extend theoretical ideas, there remains a disjuncture, and serious distance, between the critical empirical literature and the real world of convicts. Our remoteness from our subject might be considered as a crisis best remedied by using the emerging research we are introducing as Convict Criminology.

Current Initiatives

Having outlined the factors contributing to the formation of the New School of Convict Criminology, we are in a better position to consider the initiatives resulting from our collective effort to date. The subjects covered include defining the New School of Convict Criminology, inclusion criteria, understanding the authors, the preeminence of John Irwin, Convict Criminology's objectives and issues, and the questions asked and answered.

Defining the New School of Convict Criminology:² Convict Criminology primarily takes the shape of essays and empirical research by convicts or ex-convicts, in possession of a Ph.D. or on their way to completing one, or enlightened academics who make critiques of existing literature, policies, and practices, and contribute a new perspective on criminology, criminal justice, corrections, and community corrections. This is a "new criminology" (Taylor, Walton, and Young, 1973), led by ex-convicts who are now academic faculty. These men and women,

who have worn prison uniforms and academic gowns, served years behind prisons walls and now as academics are the primary architects of the movement. The convict scholars are able to do what most previous writers could not: merge their past with their present and provide a provocative approach to the academic study of criminology, criminal justice, and corrections. These authors, as a collective, are the future of a realistic paradigm that promises to challenge the conventional research findings of the past.

Ex-convict professors have endured years of lockup in penitentiaries and correctional institutions, lived in crowded, noisy, violent cellblocks, and emerged to complete graduate degrees and become professors of sociology, criminology, criminal justice, and related disciplines. They have an intimate knowledge of "penal harm" (Clear, 1994), which they carry in their heads and hearts, and in some cases wear as scars and tattoos upon their skin. They are like John Steinbeck's Tom Joad, portrayed by Henry Fonda in the movie version of *The Grapes of Wrath* — people with something to say, an anger that will not betray them. They do not write for vitae lines, promotions, or tenure. They write so that one day the ghosts will sleep.

Together, ex-convict graduate students and professors are now working to build their expertise in subject and methodology. We now number over a dozen professors of sociology, criminology, and criminal justice, from Anglo-American countries. A growing number of ex-convict graduate students are joining us as they complete their dissertations, as are established criminologists without criminal records, who are well known for their critical orientation toward managerial criminology, criminal justice, and corrections. The dramatic expansion in arrests, convictions, and the rate of incarceration guarantees that the number of professors with profound and traumatic firsthand experience with the criminal justice system will continue to increase. Some of the most important members of our growing group are prominent critical criminologists; although not ex-cons, they have contributed to the content and context of our new school. This expanding pool of talent, with its remarkable insights and resources, is the foundation of our effort.

Who Are These People? In terms of academic experience, the convict authors fall into three distinct cohorts. The first are the more senior members, full and associate professors, some with distinguished research records. A second consists of assistant professors just beginning to contribute to the field. The third group is graduate student ex-convicts, only some of whom have been identified.

Regardless of academic status, the ex-convicts form two distinct, yet overlapping groups with different personal dispositions toward our collective project. The first group embraced the "new school" with little, if any, hesitation. Some of them are known ex-con academics. The second group, ex-con professors and graduate students, share our correspondence and confidence. They provide those of us who are "out" with support and encouragement, but for personal and professional reasons have elected to remain anonymous, "in" the closet, where only their trusted friends know of their past. Some of their personal reasons include a

reluctance to revisit a painful time in life and a wish to put the past behind. Professionally, a number of the convict professors have expressed concerns that by appearing in this journal, they might be denied fair access to government research grants. A few students are concerned about "coming out" while still in graduate school, and before they test the job market.

Although ex-convicts provide Convict Criminology with unique and original experiential resources, some of the most important contributors may prove to be scholars who have never served prison time, but may have been or could be arrested, charged, or convicted of crimes. This situation may lead them to be reasonably empathetic. The inclusion of such people in the new school's original cohort provides the means to extend its influence, while also supporting existing critical perspectives in criminology.

The outlines of the school's mission and purpose emerged as writers shared their experiences with prison and academia. These academic authors have critiqued existing theory and presented new research from a convict or insider perspective. In doing so, they hope to illuminate the message that "it's about time" (Austin and Irwin, 2001), time served, time lost, and time that taught us the lessons we share. In demarcating the field of study for this new school, the contributors recognize that they are not the first to criticize the prison and correctional practices. They pay their respects to those who have raised critical questions about prisons and suggested realistic humane reforms. The problem, as Clear wrote in the foreword to McCleary's (1992: ix) *Dangerous Men*, is that all good efforts to build reform systems seem inevitably to disadvantage the offender. This is because, despite the best intentions, reform systems were never intended to help convicts. Reformers rarely even bothered to ask the convicts what reforms they desired. The new school corrects this oversight, since its faculty members are educated "consultants" (Mitford, 1973: 15).

The Preeminence of John Irwin: The most prominent ex-convict criminologist is John Irwin. His work and professional conduct over the years has inspired the group. In 1997, in San Diego, we had our first panel (organized by Chuck Terry) at an American Society of Criminology (ASC) annual meeting. Over dinner that evening, Irwin, Jim Austin, Stephen Richards, and Chuck Terry discussed the potential of Convict Criminology. Irwin (Irwin and Cressey, 1962; Irwin, 1970, 1980, 1985; Austin and Irwin, 2001) recalled how he had always wished to assemble a group of ex-con scholars to write criminology from a convict perspective. Over the last 40 years, however, only a few ex-convicts had held academic positions. Ironically, the drug war and the dramatic increase in prison populations during the last two decades have added to our numbers and provided the opportunity to assemble this group.

Irwin has mentored and supported the group from the beginning. We have held long, informal meetings at ASC and American Criminal Justice Society (ACJS) conferences, with Irwin generously spending time getting to know each member

of the group. Irwin has counseled us to honestly declare who we are and what we have experienced and observed, and to engage in ethnography that tells the truth (Ferrell and Hamm, 1998; Miller and Tewksbury, 2000).

The School's Objective: Convict Criminology challenges managerial criminology, criminal justice, and corrections. Research and publications by this group (e.g., Richards, 1990, 1995, 1998; Richards and Jones, 1997; Terry, 1997; Newbold, 2000; Austin and Irwin, 2001) should be viewed as a dramatic attempt to critique, update, and improve the critical literature in the field. Among our goals are to transform the way in which research on prisons is conducted and to insist that our professional associations (e.g., the ASC, ACJS) begin to articulate policy reforms that make the criminal justice system humane.

Issue-Based Approach: Convict Criminology is issue based and not necessarily structured by the traditional disciplinary divisions assumed by criminology, criminal justice, or corrections. These subjects generally describe the etiology of crime, the stages of the criminal justice system, or correctional control as separate entities. Unfortunately, too often this approach has resulted in piecemeal research and analysis conducted by armchair technicians and theorists with little practical understanding of crime, criminals, and corrections. Most academic criminologists either fail to comprehend the lived experience of defendants and prisoners, or are simply misinformed. In contrast, research in Convict Criminology is carried out by our "felonious friends" who have personal and abstract knowledge of the criminal justice machinery.

Questions Asked and Answered: Researchers in this area address a series of questions: What is wrong with the criminology, criminal justice, and corrections literature? What is missing from the literature and discipline? How do the views of ex-con academics differ from those without insider status? What is it like for ex-prisoners to read academic material about crime, criminals, and corrections? What did the writers learn about the criminal justice system from being processed through arrest, court, jail, prison, and release? What unique research methods did convict authors employ in their research? Why do authors need to be honest and truthful about themselves as they approach their research and writing? Did the prisoners' views on crime and corrections change when they became scholars? What obstacles did these ex-cons experience as university employees? As ex-convict professors, how are they perceived by colleagues? What suggestions do former prisoners have for the reform of criminology, criminal justice, and prisons?

Development and Support of Critical Criminological Perspectives

As the field of criminology matures, it incorporates new voices, ostensibly refutes established theories, and develops new ones. Critical criminology contributes many of the most innovative theoretical developments. Our hope is that the New School of Convict Criminology will support critical criminologists to "ground" their theory in ethnographic accounts. This, in turn, will inform specific

policy recommendations that will encourage academics, policymakers, and correctional administrators.

With the continued growth of the prison population, so too does the number of individuals released into the community. As they reenter conventional society, many will attend universities and study criminology, criminal justice, and corrections. Some former prisoners will complete their graduate educations and become the future cohorts of the new school. Over time, this New School of Convict Criminology will provide the public with a more realistic understanding of crime, criminal justice, and corrections, one based on experience and cutting-edge research.

Paying Our Respects to the Convict Authors Still in Prison

A number of the Convict Criminologists continue friendships and working relationships with writers in penitentiaries, some of whom are published in criminology (e.g., Victor Hassine, Wilbert Rideau, and Jon Marc Taylor). We owe a debt of gratitude to the many men and women who live inside prison and continue to write and publish their ideas, thoughts, and observations. Ex-convict academics use correspondence, phone calls, and prison visits with these individuals to stay current with the conditions inside correctional facilities.

Contributors to this project pay their respects to prisoners who have attempted to write serious commentaries on prison life (e.g., Abbott, 1981; Rideau and Wikberg, 1992; Abu-Jamal, 1995, 2000; Taylor, 1995; Hassine, 1996; Peltier, 1999). We recognize that much of their research and writing, while critically informed and based on their experiences inside prisons, may be only partially grounded in the academic literature. After all, many of these authors lack, or have difficulty obtaining, the typical amenities that most scholars take for granted (e.g., a computer for writing, university library, and colleagues educated in criminology who might provide feedback on their work). They struggle to write by hand, or with broken or worn-out machines, and a lack of supplies (e.g., typewriter ribbons, paper, envelopes, stamps, etc.). In addition, their phone calls are monitored and recorded, and all of their mail (sent and received) is opened, searched, and read by prison authorities. They often suffer the retribution of prison authorities, including denial of parole, loss of good-time credit, physical threats from staff or inmates, frequent cell searches, confiscation of manuscripts, trips to the hole, and disciplinary transfers to other prisons.

The convict criminologists, both the ex-cons and non-cons, have it easier. They benefit from superior resources to open the window on a subterranean world of confinement that few people know.

Reforming the Study of Criminology and Criminal Justice

The notion of reform is not new in the academic disciplines of criminology and criminal justice. One might even argue that the entire field was originally

conceived in an effort to provide civilized legal solutions to socioeconomic conflicts. However, the number of criminological “experts” with little or no firsthand experience with prisoners is shocking. The result is that academic technicians who manipulate data sets and publish statistical trivia from the safety of their offices dominate writing in criminology and criminal justice. Unfortunately, much of this number crunching, which masquerades as objective science, obscures the truth and supports the functions of managerial elites. The analytical interpretation of aggregate data does not replace the need to go to the streets, visit penal institutions, and observe and interview the victims of the criminal justice juggernaut (Gordon, 1990).

We have argued for the primacy of ethnographic methods — those involving speaking, observing, or interacting with prisoners. This methodology requires researchers to take chances, get a little “dirty” as they sample reality, and (at the risk of committing an “academic felony”) become emotionally involved with their subject. Objectivity is an illusion that illustrates the social distance of the armchair technician from the sordid lives of criminals and convicts. In contrast, by entering prisons, spending time with convicts, and learning to understand their concerns as legitimate, the prison ethnographer surrenders any pretense to being value free. He or she becomes partisan (Gouldner, 1968), as it should be. After spending enough time behind the walls, seeing the way human beings live in animal cages, and listening carefully to what they say, you know why you have to take sides.

An Invitation to Join Us: Changing Corrections

Unfortunately, the primary focus of correctional work has been on controlling prisoners, rather than providing them with services, programs, and opportunities for personal growth. The real problem is finding ways to control the abuse of legal authority that allows the state to imprison millions of poor, minority, and young Americans by criminalizing common nonviolent activity and behavior (Ross, 1995/2000, 2000; Richards and Avey, 2000).

The convict perspective suggests several policy recommendations for civilizing corrections, lowering the rate of recidivism, and reducing the number of men and women in prison. We advocate the following: dramatically decrease the national prison population by reducing prison sentences for prisoners; reduce prison time for good behavior; require that all prisoners have single cells or rooms; better food and clothing; vocational and family skills programs; higher education opportunities; voting rights for all prisoners and felons; voluntary drug education therapy; an end to the use of prison snitches; and the termination of the drug war. These recommendations will be further developed and debated by colleagues concerned with the humanitarian reform of criminal justice.

Indeed, more research will be conducted and essays written from the perspective of a Convict Criminology. We already have plans for a number of prison studies. Additionally, perhaps this discussion will empower those who are still in

the closet, ex-cons with Ph.D.s who do not want to reveal their status, ex-convict graduate students, or members of the criminology/criminal justice community. We invite you to join us.

NOTES

1. For a detailed discussion of the use of ethnographic methods to do prison research, see, for example, Peak (1985) and Farkas (1992).

2. Our use of "New" mirrors Talyor, Walton, and Young's (1973) seminal work, *The New Criminology*. This monograph generated considerable controversy and intellectual debate in our discipline. These authors were critical of positivist, functionalist, and labeling approaches that failed to consider how the criminal law, policing, and corrections were sociopolitical constructions of class domination and the logical priorities of capitalism. Our use of the word "school" is similar to the Frankfurt School and the New School of Social Research, which suggests a collective effort grounded in a creative and critical research tradition.

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