

Book Review

Criminal Justice Review

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Ross, J. I. (2024). *Introduction to convict criminology*. Bristol University Press. 200 pp. \$46.95, ISBN 978-1-5292-2120-6.

Reviewed by: Jim Thomas, *Northern Illinois University DeKalb IL USA*
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Jeffrey Ian Ross packs far too many issues in *Introduction to Convict Criminology* (ICC) to adequately address in a short review. The obvious theme is an overview of ICC, in which he describes the general substance of the perspective; its history, strengths, and weaknesses; justification for it as an academic paradigm; and its impact on criminological and related fields. He acknowledges that ICC is an ambiguous and confusing label, but there nonetheless are definable boundary markers that clarify its identity and separate it from similar perspectives that might overlap. Beyond this overview, Ross offers several subtler insights presented in a clear and parsimonious style that will interest not only criminologists but also readers outside the social sciences.

Ross's discussion of what Convict Criminology (CC) is and who can self-identify with the label is reminiscent of the debates over who can claim to be identified with or write within the fields of feminism, race, gender, and other areas often associated with identity politics.

His apparent insistence that those who identify with CC and claim “membership” should have either scholarly credentials or carceral-related experience in some aspect of the criminal justice system might suggest that he limits CC to an impermeable set of criteria restricting membership to an exclusive organization. But his point is more nuanced and is intended to focus on the goals of CC and establish the credibility of those who identify with the perspective. More simply, one cannot claim a label without some compelling experience aligning with the goals of that group. Ross is explicit in arguing that CC must be inclusive of all who share those goals, which he lists as “scholarship, mentoring, and activism.”

The fundamental premise of CC is that, as a stigmatized group, those who have been incarcerated have had researchers and others speak about them, for them, or to them, but who generally have not had voices of their own. CC attempts to correct that by integrating formerly incarcerated persons and others with relevant experience in corrections or related fields or professions, into academic settings. Ross traces CC's history by first acknowledging the contributions of earlier scholars dating back to the 1970s who provided a foundation and then describing how CC built upon them. Beginning as an ad hoc collection of former prisoners in academia joined by other like-minded criminologists in panel sessions at the American Society of Criminology (ASC), the group gradually grew and became a formal substantive Division in the ASC.

It might seem that a focus on “convicts” is an esoteric and somewhat limited population for attention. However, although no precise figures exist, drawing from annual Federal incarceration data, between 80 and 100 million unique individuals have experienced imprisonment in prisons or jails in the United States between 1966 and 2026. This excludes juveniles and those who have

encountered the criminal justice system but avoided incarceration. Because of the plethora of issues impacting them, and because of the complex problems they face on reentry, this is a mind-numbing number of impacted people whose experiences are barely visible to the public. Although there has been a plethora of realist prison ethnographies in recent decades that provide incisive depictions of prison life from inmates' perspectives, Ross reminds readers that these accounts are generally filtered through the researchers' interpretive lens. CC instead seeks to amplify the voices of formerly incarcerated individuals themselves. One antidote is creating a structure for inmates themselves to become involved in formal research, social praxis, and public outreach.

In three sections and nine chapters, Ross lays out a primer for understanding and advancing CC. Chapter one defines what it is and isn't, addresses an especially interesting explanation of why the term "convict" was chosen, and justifies why it was kept despite contentious disputes about the symbolism of the label. The discussion seamlessly leads into chapters two and three, tracing its history and the contributions CC has made to criminological literature. Chapter three provides a compelling defense of CC partly as an information medium, but also as a legitimate and growing body of conventional scientific peer-reviewed scholarship.

Part two is divided into three chapters developing the teaching and mentoring pillars of CC. This detailed section expands the relevance of ICC far beyond its ostensible topic and makes it appropriate for all those who teach or are otherwise involved in working with students. Most of us have had to develop and revise the substance of our courses, advise or mentor students, develop internships, or find creative ways to nurture and guide our students. Part two provides a model for how we can sharpen those skills regardless of our discipline. These three chapters alone make the volume worth reading if we teach, advise, or work with students.

The final three chapters in Part Three conclude by developing how a paradigmatic framework in the social sciences can be converted to a form of social praxis in which we apply our theories and research to address practical issues. After defining prison activism in chapter seven, the eighth chapter traces CC's relevance to prison policies and reform, identifies ways this has been done, and suggests strategies for creating or networking with organizational outreach. This chapter would be useful for those in any subdiscipline involved in social action.

The concluding chapter is an assessment of the future of CC and offers possible strategies for building on its successes and overcoming its weaknesses. Unlike many works written by advocates, despite being a founder and unwavering advocate of CC, Ross does not propagandize; his critique of weaknesses and missteps offers a candid assessment of how to build on the paradigm and develop its academic and activist potential. CC, he notes, has existed for less than three decades, a relatively short time compared to other academic subdisciplines, and remains a work in progress. Among his key points are: First, the need to emphasize that CC is not simply for or about convicts; it's designed for all those interested in prison and related systemic issues. Second, it should become more demographically and experientially inclusive. Third, it must rigorously engage in constant critique of goals, strategies, and effectiveness. Fourth, although CC is gradually expanding as an international organization, it should accelerate efforts to connect with an international audience. The concluding chapter brings the reader full circle from what CC is, where it's been, and why it appears to have a vibrant future.

Ross's discussion of the evolution of CC is reminiscent of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in which he argues that science does not proceed in a straight line, but either undergoes paradigm shifts or dies. Although not Ross's intention, in describing the messy evolution of CC, its adaptation to weaknesses, and possible transitions for the future, he offers a lens to observe in real time how one paradigm continues to transform itself to avoid extinction and provides a model for others to follow in their disciplines.

Ross writes clearly and simply (but not simplistically), deftly organizes the chapters linearly, and the prose is all wheat and no chaff. ICC's glossary, exhibits, chapter summaries, and

extensive bibliography make it valuable reading for both graduate and undergraduate classes in criminal justice. It would also be appropriate for related courses in the social sciences and is easily accessible to lay readers. It would also be of interest to those involved in any discipline who look for methods to mentor students. It is an insightful, engaging, and highly accessible volume.