



Introduction to Convict Criminology by Jeffrey Ian Ross

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This book review provides an overview of the author's introduction and presentation of the central ideas, main themes and development of the criminological sub-discipline of convict criminology. The review outlines the author's purposes of the text and touches on specific content across three thematic areas, 'scholarship, mentoring and activism'. The review further suggests an added value of the book to the field of criminology; the reader is witness to the early stages and evolution of a sub-discipline of criminology and gains tangible insight into the discussions, debates and future direction of convict criminology.

In addition, this review raises some potential concerns regarding the perspective of the book's readers in the context of what the author refers to as the convict criminology network and how a reader may be challenged to understanding how they fit within this network given certain defined conditions they do not meet or characteristics they do not have.

General Overview

The book, *Introduction to Convict Criminology* offers a front row view of the creation and evolution of a sub-discipline of criminology through the eyes and experiences of the author who has had connection to it from its inception. For those who have little to no familiarity with or exposure to the concepts of convict criminology, this book provides not only a definitional understanding of the field, what it means, what it focuses on, how it came to be and its evolution; the reader will additionally come to value its potential benefit to criminal justice and carceral policy.

The author has taken great care to present this introductory text as a highly organized and easy to follow design in support of the book's stated pedagogical goals. At the beginning of each of the chapters, the author asks a series of relevant and building questions that are answered in brief sections with title headings highlighted in bold, several with subcategories with italic subheadings. This organizational style provides quick and comprehen-

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sive answers to many areas of interest in the field. The author has not sacrificed details in this outline style presentation; the book has nearly 75 footnotes across its preface and nine chapters for those who are inclined to dig deeper into the chapter concepts. Each chapter also includes 'exhibit boxes' designed to provide examples that complement and highlight parts of the chapter; there are eighteen exhibit boxes within the nine chapters of content. The book's two appendices, Chronology of the History of Convict Criminology (1938 to 2023) and Keywords (99 relevant words, ideas, concepts with concise, single paragraph definitions) have stand-alone value to those looking to quickly understand convict criminology's history and/or who are looking for foundational definitions of key convict criminology concepts.

As part of the author's intended use for this book as a classroom text, he points to external resources published through a companion website available through the publisher. Although the companion site was accessed during the preparation of this review, commentary on its content and utility is not presented here.

With regard to specific content, the Preface of this book is a must read (Preface: Getting Started with Convict Criminology). The Preface does an excellent job of laying the foundation of the book's goals and defines readers' expectations. It tells the reader why this book is important and how it can be useful in the teaching and study of convict criminology. The author refers to three convict criminology 'activities' which round out the content of the upcoming chapters, these being research scholarship, teaching mentorship and activism policy. The author further suggests that the book can and will be updated based on new research and developments.

The author organized the primary chapters into three main themes as mentioned, each with three full chapters in support of these themes. The main convict criminology subject areas covered fall under the broad categories of 'Part I: Introduction and Scholarship' (chapters 1–3), 'Part II: Teaching and Mentoring' (chapters 4–6), and 'Part III: Activism and Public Policy Work' (chapters 7–9),

Within the opening chapters with the Part I thematic section of the book, the author outlines and defines in a thorough way, what convict criminology is and is not and what are the misunderstandings that those external to the science have about it. He describes the evolution and growth of the field including several of the areas of debate and ongoing discussion. For example, the lack of consensus on matters of convict criminology like terminology and how the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated should be referred. It covers important details; for example, where the name 'convict criminology' came from and why it was chosen.

An important bridge is made between the convict criminology concept of hearing the ignored and marginalized voice of the convict and the importance of the integration of the lived experience into scholarly activities. Convict criminology does not only seek to hear the voice but endeavors to hear this voice through scholarship. Convict criminology seeks to consider the expertise gained through the lived experience and how this experience can inform problem identification, understanding and resolution through formal research. The author argues that the peer review process is critical to provide necessary legitimacy.

The author additionally attempts to explain the theoretical underpinnings of the convict criminology perspective and where it mainly fails as a sub-discipline of criminology. Labeling, life course and desistance are suggested as the primary theories of convict criminology focus. As a field that focuses on the marginalized voice of the incarcerated/formerly

incarcerated who are predominantly represented within the poor and powerless, convict criminology has a firm connection to critical criminology.

Because convict criminology is centered on research and scholarship exercised by those with lived carceral experience as well as others touched by the system, Part II advises the reader about the state of prison education as a critical piece of the generation of a pool of such convict criminologists. He discusses financial constraints, correctional operational challenges and lack of prison management and societal priority for educational initiatives despite the evidence that successful educational pursuits have a recidivism reduction benefit. He provides several examples of college type programs that have been run and, in this Part, he presents educational programming ideas from other countries. Providing details of educational approaches implemented in correctional jurisdictions within other countries provides the reader with a broad perspective on how to think about and perhaps design and implement such programs in the United States.

Mentoring of convict criminologists is also a key ‘activity’ or priority of those who are currently engaged in study and scholarship under the convict criminology discipline. The author outlines the importance and value of good mentorship, not only as it applies to convict criminology but in general as well. He describes the roles of the mentor and gives advice to the budding and/or junior convict criminologist on how to find and approach an appropriate mentor that has strong experience and shares areas of interest.

Part III helps the reader understand the role that scholarly research can have on contributing to positive societal change. Specifically, convict criminology and the problems it explores regarding the current criminal justice approach and systems of punishment and the solutions it suggests in resolution to these problems, has real utility for good public policy. In addition to a thorough description of various types of activism both in terms of history and form, the author provides an overview of the debates and challenges of engaging in activism from the academic perspective.

Part III also asks: ‘What Does the Future of Convict Criminology Look Like?’ In trying to answer this question, the author takes a unique evaluation approach: a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats). Each of the four critical areas under SWOT are covered in detail under the convict criminology context. This approach not only gives the reader a good feel of how such an analysis can inform future organizational trajectories but additionally reinforces the basic, foundational definitions and components of convict criminology as presented in the earlier chapters. The author provides some suggested answers to this important question.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The author does an excellent job of providing basic information to those who may be unfamiliar with the concept of convict criminology, what it is (and is not), its history and its goals and priorities. The organizational style of presenting the chapters based on the three main themes of convict criminology, scholarship, mentoring and activism, provide a natural nexus between what convict criminology is trying to achieve and how it plans to get there. The listing of the key questions to be answered in the chapters at the beginning of each chapter defines the learning expectations and outcomes in support of the author’s goal of pedagogical value.

An added benefit of this book is that the reader feels like they are actively interacting within this dynamic process of an evolving sub-discipline of criminology. The book is a snapshot in time; readers do get the sense that they are witness to a journey, a journey that is very young and is still defining itself and its ultimate path. Students often hear about schools of criminological thought but in this case, the book provides direct witness to the process, the ‘front row view’ as referenced above. This book could additionally spark a curiosity in students to explore the creation and evolution of other criminology sub-disciplines of interest. The book could possibly motivate students and teaching faculty to think about an evaluation of schools of criminology using the SWOT concept. Very interesting, very unique.

Understanding that the convict criminology network is in fact dynamic, in that its membership and who may be considered a convict criminologist is still under exploration and consideration given the newness of the field, the current reader may still feel some confusion on if and where they fit in the network if they do not have some or all of the author’s suggested criteria to be considered a convict criminologist. The reader may not have lived experience of jail or prison and may not have system engagement. As a proposed textbook for upper level undergraduate and/or graduate coursework, the students may not pursue an advanced degree. They may not currently be involved in or be qualified to be engaged in mentorship or activism. Through this book, the reader has a strong foundational understanding of convict criminology scholarship, mentoring and activism. It is somewhat unclear that if a reader leaves with the belief that the convict voice is not only marginalized but has an important role in research and policy discussion, how can they actively participate in the field if they lack some or all of the characteristics that define convict criminologists.

In closing, in the chapter on how convicts can engage in scholarship through collaboration with mentoring faculty, the author makes the following observation: “Convicts could also offer to write book reviews, a relatively thankless task that many professors are often requested to undertake, though few actually do.” (page 110). Reading Jeffrey Ross’ book *Introduction to Convict Criminology* and preparing a review of it was far from a thankless task; it was a privilege and a pleasure.

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