

CONVICT CRIMINOLOGY in Britain? Background, Proposal and Invitation

Some background – Convict Criminology in the USA

At the 1997 meeting of the American Society of Criminology (ASC) a small group of criminologists with criminal convictions met to propose the establishment of a Convict Criminology group. The group emerged out of frustration that they, as ex-convicts, experienced with the established methods and conceptual priorities of US criminology. They realised that an indirect consequence of the explosive growth of the US penal population was to generate a small number of academically qualified ‘internal critics’, convicts with PhDs and other academic qualifications who had made the transition from prison yard to college campus. They also recognised the isolation and marginality of these individuals, and the uniqueness of their perspectives.

In 2001 two of the instigators of the grouping, Stephen Richards and Jeffrey Ross, published their ‘manifesto’, ‘The New School of Convict Criminology’, in the journal *Social Justice*. This was followed shortly afterwards with a co-edited collection of essays *Convict Criminology* (Richards & Ross, 2003) establishing their perspective and methods.

Convict Criminology has grown with increasing momentum over the last decade, establishing a vibrant website, publishing articles and presenting conference papers, lobbying for reform and making policy interventions. They have supported the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, established in 1988 by likeminded academics keen to foster the publishing work of convicts and ex-convicts. Led by former prisoners Convict Criminology takes a critical approach to criminal justice. In particular it challenges traditional understandings of crime, the penal system, prisoners & former prisoners and how such matters are conceptualised, represented and discussed. Importantly, Convict Criminology approaches existing practices, research and political commentary in the USA with a critical lens focussed through personal experiences (Jones *et al.*, 2009).

British Cons, Criminology and Conferences

At the 2011 British Society of Criminology annual conference in Newcastle a small group of academics discussed the viability of establishing a Convict Criminology group in the UK,

drawing from the success of Convict Criminology in establishing a presence in the USA. As in the US, for several of us these discussions arose from personal experience of conducting prison research and becoming more aware of the significance of corresponding experiences of ‘doing time’ and ‘crime’ among the British criminological community. It is possible that in the UK the expansion of both University criminology courses and prisons over the last twenty years may have also generated an otherwise unlikely convergence of experience that we feel is potentially productive but overlooked and underexplored (Earle 2012).

As noted, a Convict Criminology group here could be loosely modelled on the ‘New School of Convict Criminology’ in the USA because we recognise our common starting point in trying to bring forward and develop the perspectives of prisoners, ex-prisoners and ex-offenders in British criminology. Whilst there are significant differences between the US and UK regarding crime, criminal justice and penal system issues, the underlying philosophy and critical theoretical orientation of the US Convict Criminology group is relevant to the UK. As in the USA a principle aim of the group here is to work collectively to challenge misrepresentations of crime, prisons, the criminal justice system and particularly prisoners and former prisoners.

British criminology has an established record of critical innovation, evident in much of the work of critical criminologists and a new generation of prison ethnographers. However, what may have been neglected is a much needed ‘insider perspective’, the experiences of those that have been through the criminal justice machine and who can provide analysis and theorisation as academics rather than simply offer their perspectives as research subjects. Therefore, whilst in keeping with the US New School’s strategic aims and guided by its theoretical and methodological orientations, the group here needs to be flexible in its constitution and approach. Although the group here could benefit from establishing and maintaining a strong connection with the US group, we also need to be independent and foster our own network. In an international context this is likely to include European relations, where they are relevant and can be identified, as much as those across the Atlantic.

The lived experiences of prison life are, perhaps, universally resonant on a number of levels, but it is also manifestly true that they can be quite divergent, especially when the focus is more detailed, elaborate and local. Therefore, regardless of the more self-evident similarities and differences between the UK and US, we need a strong and active voice here in the UK that can push forward alternative, distinctive, criminological perspectives, that may, in turn,

feed into policies, strategies and initiatives that are more humane in their recognition of prisoner's experiences.

Establishing Aims/objectives for British Convict Criminology

We recognise that there are likely to be a variety of strands to a Convict Criminology group here, but our over-riding concern is to establish a collective basis for developing a more inclusive, creative and critical approach to research around prisoners and prison. Central to this objective is the relevance of our personal experiences of the criminal justice/penal system and /or our work in this field. We are convinced, on the basis of our experience in British criminology, that there is a great need for critical and 'insider' perspectives on prison research and its associated policy implications. For example, resettlement strategies and initiatives directly impacting on prisoners and their families may benefit from the more structured development and inclusion of academic accounts generated by prisoners and ex-prisoners.

Importantly, whilst much of the focus of the group is on prisons, prisoners and former prisoners we also need to consider the experiences of those former offenders with non-custodial convictions, who like many former prisoners still experience the negative consequences of their label 'ex-offender', particularly in the context of widespread malpractice surrounding the Criminal Records Bureau.

We suggest aspects the group's aims and objectives include:

- Providing support to prisoners and ex-prisoners in establishing themselves as academics in criminology and its cognate disciplines
- Developing critical perspectives on prisons and research with/on prisoners and former prisoners
- Utilising our collective knowledge, experiences and expertise to influence, or at least attempt to influence, policy change through our academic work and connections to advocacy/campaign groups
- Developing strong links with non-statutory sector organisations in the field i.e. penal reform advocacy & campaign groups
- Developing the membership and profile of the group through organising seminars, guest lectures and conferences
- Sharing experiences and developing ideas that draw from the convergence of academic study of prison and experience of it as a prisoner.

Next Steps: Convict Criminology membership

The group is not intended to be only for those with prison experiences (i.e. ex-convicts in the US vernacular) and we welcome wider support. Disclosure of any such relevant past is a matter of personal discretion that should be respected by all participants in the group. We want to avoid privileging or stigmatising particular convictions or time inside. Having said that, we don't think it would be appropriate for ex-prisoners to be a minority in the group and we need to be able to identify this factor. We would thus respectfully ask people, when contacting us at this stage, to declare an absence of convictions by just putting 'non-con' after their name. The last thing we want to do is operate as some kind of reverse CRB vetting procedure but doing so will help us to establish the contours of interest in the group.

In terms of organisation we recognise the need to have nominated individuals steering the development of the group and guiding its formation. Currently, the authors of this document are taking this role and will continue to do so as long as this seems appropriate. We will invite others to join this Steering Group as the organisation develops momentum, reviewing such structures and their suitability as it, hopefully, grows.