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## Conclusion What have we learned and what does the future hold for Convict Criminology?.pdf

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## 16 Conclusion

### What have we learned, and what does the future hold for Convict Criminology?

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#### Introduction

This book has brought together a diverse range of scholars who in their own way have contributed to the scholarship, mentorship and praxis of Convict Criminology (CC). This concluding chapter is an attempt to synthesize the major ideas that emerged in this book, and to organize our thoughts about what still needs to be done with the field of CC. In the first part of the chapter, our responses are framed as questions, in an attempt to make the discussion more engaging. In the second part, we look more specifically at how European Critical Criminology can further the field of CC at large.

#### Questions asked and answered by the conference and book

Nine principle questions can probably be asked and answered regarding the current status of CC and the future that beckons. They are not listed in any particular order, but are advanced here for acknowledgement and continued discussion.

First: Why is it important to assemble the papers delivered at the conference and have them published in an edited book? There is a community out there that can benefit from what we have to say, and one of the best ways to accomplish this goal is through a book like this.

Second: How can those who are incarcerated best contribute to Convict Criminology? They or their contacts outside of correctional facilities must reach out to one or more of us. Like most academics, we are incredibly busy and frequently multitasking – and sometimes we also have short attention spans. It is important to keep on trying to contact scholars involved in CC. We have collaborated with individuals behind bars in scholarly pursuits in the past (Ross, Zaldivar, & Tewksbury, 2015). Change often takes place at a glacial speed, not just in correctional facilities, but in academia, too. So please be patient.

Third: What is the appropriate role of outsiders in Convict Criminology? Both insiders (those who have done time) and outsiders (those who have not done time and those who are justice impacted) have and can make valuable contributions to CC and can push the insiders to better explain what is happening behind bars. Team research has historically been a cornerstone of the kind of scholarship that

CC has conducted. This has been the policy and practice of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, that requires all papers be authored or co-authored by someone who is either currently or formerly incarcerated. In addition, so many previous CC papers have focused disproportionately on the positionality/reflexivity of ex-cons in relationship to the prison. Here we attempt to go further than this approach.

Fourth: What is the proper way to characterize Convict Criminology? CC is not only a group, organization and network, but, to quote Elton Kalica, it is also an experiment and a work in progress. Thus, we continuously need to take risks, and occasionally make mistakes.

Fifth: How can we best address gaps in the scholarship and places where Convict Criminology can make a contribution? The international conference upon which this edited volume is based has helped to fill in some of the missing information for a wider appreciation of CC. We also have to constantly be on the lookout for places where CC can advance the literature, as well as serve as a better platform for mentoring people who are incarcerated.

Sixth: Why can't the field of CC progress simply through the world wide web and reading others' publications? Although e-mail exchanges and periodic Skype, FaceTime and Zoom meetings are helpful, it is also important to bring experts from different countries together, and to better inform our understanding of prisons and the carceral experience in face to face contexts. We believe that the conference "Convict Criminology for the Future" has assisted us in this capacity.

Seventh: How can we encourage the international dissemination of CC information? Our Italian colleagues shared with us their knowledge about their country's practices of incarceration, and their attempts to employ some of the CC approaches in this context, topics that many of us knew relatively little about. Most of our Italian colleagues who we encountered have been doing CC research for a long time, but for one reason or another, we did not know about this. Again, international conferences, like the CC one held in 2019 in Padua, are great forums for this sort of thing, since they enable us to meet face to face. Some form of simultaneous interpretation is helpful to further the mission of enhancing the international dimension of our work.

Eighth: Given how prominent and/or visible white males are or have been in Convict Criminology, just how inclusive is CC? It is important for all of us to reach out to women, visible minorities and members of the LGBTQ communities, but it is also important to educate others about our longstanding and historical efforts to do just this (Ross, Jones, Lenza, & Richards, 2016). Recent attempts to create a Division of Convict Criminology as part of the American Society of Criminology have reinforced the diversity of members, and as we move forward, we will have a significant number of people from less represented groups not just as members, but on the executive team.

Ninth: Given developments in the field of corrections, and subtle changes in Convict Criminology over the past two decades, is the name CC still appropriate? Although most people who have come to CC believe in our mission, some former and current members have never been completely comfortable with the name. There are certainly arguments for and against abandoning the name. This issue

has been discussed at our annual meetings, and a recent vote was taken at a CC business meeting, to continue with the name. It appears that the more important question is: if we abandon the CC name, then what should we call ourselves?

### **Integrating the ideas put forward in this book**

Chapters included in this book have complementary objectives. Some have placed CC in a historical context that accounts for the academic, intellectual, social and political movements that existed at the time. What becomes clear is that CC emerged not only because of the efforts of its founders and contributors, and an audience hungry for this kind of information and activity, but due to structural influences that existed at the time.

Over time, Convict Criminology has found its voice among a variety of helpful constituencies, and has tried its best to navigate the uncertain and frequently hostile waters, criticisms and blind spots, etc. We adapted and did our best to integrate a variety of marginalized voices (i.e., women, people of color, LGBTQ communities, prisoners suffering psychiatric disabilities, political prisoners, etc.) that make up carceral environments. Again, just because a particular subject or viewpoint has not been reflected in this book does not mean that the editors did not try to find one or more appropriate experts who could write about this subject.

Subjects discussed include the negative representations of prisoners and carceral conditions and attempts by convicts and ex-convicts to clarify misconceptions and myths that are perpetrated by the news media. Also part of the discussion are constituencies that, while important, have not received as much attention in a scholarly sense from Convict Criminology. This includes the importance of mothers who are incarcerated, and families who may have a loved one behind bars. Another item that contributors discussed is the complexity of teaching inmates who are doing time, this extends not only to navigating the prison authorities and university administration, but related issues of tutoring and mentoring convicts and ex-convicts. This theme is carried forward in other contexts not just in the advanced industrialized Global North, but also in the Global South.

There is also an appreciation of Convict Criminology's methodology. The role of ethnography, especially autoethnography, is discussed, including its relevance, benefits and drawbacks. In addition to this unique methodology is the recognition of how difficult it is to do prison research and the challenges that outsiders have trying to get official approval to collect data inside correctional facilities.

The book also considers that as ideas change, so do organizations, and this why there is a whole new generation of convict criminologists who are publishing, teaching and making their ideas known to the wider public.

### **Lessons from European Critical Criminology applied to Convict Criminology**

European Critical Criminology has a strong tradition of collaborative research and activism involving prisoners, former prisoners, prisoner support groups and



university academics (Mathiesen, 1974; Van Swaaningen, 1997). It assembles a number of researchers who share a common concern and goal to adopt prisoners' and former prisoners' voices at the center of Criminology and prison reform. Articulated experiences, the co-production of knowledge and action research is embedded in Convict Criminology. The 2019 conference in general, and this book in particular, is an important step towards starting a discussion of how we might consolidate a European critical research agenda, which is grounded in first-hand accounts of prison life, as a means to fully disclose the true nature and impact of prison sentences.

The constitutive belief of the CC perspective is that active convict voices are needed in academic Criminology (Ross, Darke, Aresti, Newbold, & Earle, 2014). This is the first consideration, and it underlines that there is a great scarcity of sociological research on life in prisons in Italy, and no current voices are coming from prisoners or former prisoners. (The writings of prisoners that are part of the CC body of literature date back several decades, and all come from members of the "Armed Struggle," also known as "Red Terrorism," which occurred in Italy primarily during the 1980s). The academy never took them seriously, with the exception of Gallo and Ruggiero, the authors of *The Immaterial Prison* (1991), who had both emigrated to London. Occasionally, convict voices appear in sociological works in the form of interviews, which are considered useful in the analysis of criminal careers, but these voices never speak to the daily living conditions inside the prisons. These voices are instrumental to our goals, since the interviews can confirm or debunk the theories advanced by the researchers. Even the point of view seems to be that of the interviewee; the speaker is always the researcher, who echoes the convict's words, placing them in the context of critical scientific discourse.

CC requires us not to speak on behalf of prisoners and former prisoners, or to interpret their voices, but to facilitate a process in which prisoners and former prisoners articulate their own experiences and analytical perspectives (Brich, 2008). As Ross and colleagues have pointed out, convict voices can widen the vistas of social justice against "the narrowing horizons of criminal justice" (2014, p. 127).

What we can add to this material is qualitative research conducted by and with prisoners and former prisoners (Ross et al., 2014). Our work must focus on the description of living conditions in overcrowded prisons. We can listen to and record convicts in individual interviews and group discussions. We should try, as far as possible, to work "with" prisoners rather than "on" them. Once the general theme is jointly defined, we can ask prisoners to suggest issues which they can subsequently discuss in "communicative discussion groups." So far, the work has been addressed on a variety of topics, including overcrowding, prison labor and affective relationships with family and children. Some of the interviews could be carried out by the convicts themselves with their fellow prisoners, under professional supervision.

These research experiences have led us to think that the relationship between CC and Critical Criminology should be a major priority. CC argues that convict

voices can offer “the potential for counter-hegemonic criminological perspectives that can challenge the instrumental priorities of correctional policy and law” (Ross et al., 2014, p. 15). CC, of course, is successful in revealing the internal ambiguity of all those studies whose first goal is to support the management of criminal justice agencies; but what is really hegemonic in criminological perspectives is not (or not only) the administrative paradigm, but the correctional one. We need to vigorously challenge not only administrative Criminology, but also the correctional paradigm which remains dominant. Unfortunately, this is an ideology the prisoners themselves believe; in other words, the terrible idea, as Foucault (1977/1995) says, that “you’re in jail to pay off your debt to society and to be rehabilitated.” Positive personal experiences cannot make us forget that, inside prisons, the resources in question are available only to a few prisoners, and should have been accessible for these individuals far beyond the prison context. That is to say that prisons should be abolished. In short, counter-hegemonic perspectives cannot avoid showing that prison is never good. Focus on individual pathways and identities must not divert attention from structural factors – beyond the individual experiences – which support and reproduce the ideological justifications of punishment.

### **Some practical suggestions**

We conclude this chapter with five recommendations that CC should consider for future activities. To begin with, CC panels must be organized to accommodate the growing interest in the group. A question we should ask ourselves is, if we are interested in developing this perspective, is: how could CC talk to the academy at large, not only to Criminology? There may be a wider space in conferences and books on sociology for subjects like, for example, the concept of situated knowledge, developed since the late 1980s by feminist theorists (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991); the theory of political positioning; the possibility – and the difficulty – of talking from a subordinate position (Spivak, 1988) or, from a methodological point of view, reflection on how to do ethnographic research while being part of the field.

Additionally, we must strengthen our active involvement in prisoner education. Recently, many countries are working on coordinating different experiences and preparing set of guidelines for the expansion of university centers throughout the prison system (Prina, 2018). The goal should be to claim the absolute autonomy of Academia with respect to the correctional and rehabilitative project: the main objective of the guidelines should be to propose Academia as the primary agent for the breaking down of the cultural and logistical barriers that prevent access to educational programs in prison environments, and not (as is often seen by the prison framework) as a partner of rehabilitation and treatment.

Moreover, one defining aspect for future endeavors should be the development of contacts within the nonprofit sector (e.g., Foundations) and among prisoner support groups which advocate for prisoner rights and criminal reform and carry out awareness-raising campaigns.

One more issue is to take seriously the challenges of internationalization (Ross et al., 2014; Ross & Darke, 2018; Vegh Weis, Chapter 9 of this volume) and their limits. The first hurdle is language. The majority of people who call themselves or identify with CC primarily speak English. Moreover, most of the world's scholarly journals are published in English. As we did during this conference, CC efforts should involve more scholars and activists from various countries in workshops, panels, edited books and reviews in order to allow them to participate in the debate, so that they can become known to an international audience. Thus we should translate our published works into different languages to increase ease of access.

Finally, it might also be useful to develop new opportunities inside the university environment (visiting professorships and exchanges for Ph.D. students) dedicated to former prisoners (which also means finding the funding for this purpose). This would provide at least a partial solution to what has been referred to as the "final factor" that has made it difficult for CC to internationalize: the limits placed on travel for those with criminal convictions. In order to develop a scholarly career in Criminology/Criminal Justice, attendance at international conferences is important. An experience abroad, researching or teaching, is very important. A network of activists could be created in Europe and the United States for mentoring people (former prisoners) working from the CC perspective.

## **Conclusion**

We hope this book has sensitized readers to the fact that some people, particularly those with advanced degrees and who have endured the lived experience of correctional facilities, have much to offer in terms of scholarly insights on prison conditions, rehabilitation and desistance, and should therefore have a more prominent place in criminological and criminal justice debates.

Convict Criminology does not ignore the harm that many of the people who are incarcerated have inflicted on loved ones and society, and their message should not be interpreted as a subtle form of reverse victim blaming. There is often both fascination and resistance to the knowledge produced by prisoners and ex-cons. We hope that readers not familiar with the Convict Criminology perspective have carefully read the contents of this book and learned from the insights provided by the chapter writers. In this day and age of mass incarceration, and the COVID-19 global pandemic, where state and federal budgets devoted to incarceration will be severely cut, we need solutions – and where better to look than to the people who have had first-hand experience, those who have lived and/or worked in correctional facilities?

For those who attended the original conference, we hope you enjoyed it as much as we did; learned something relevant, new and important; and met people whom you would like to know better and perhaps collaborate with. For those of you who have read this book, we thank you for coming along on our journey. Perhaps you are new to Convict Criminology, and this is the first time that you have been exposed to the subject. We hope that you enjoy being part of this voyage.

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