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Everything you Wanted to Know about Convict Criminology but Were too Afraid to Ask (doi: 10.1447/99929)

Autonomie locali e servizi sociali (ISSN 0392-2278) Fascicolo 3, dicembre 2020

Ente di afferenza: Università degli studi di Trento (unitn)

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Everything you Wanted to Know about Convict Criminology but Were too Afraid to Ask

Jeffrey Ian Ross

This article provides a brief introduction to the field of Convict Criminology (CC). It tackles six main topics that would interest audiences unfamiliar with CC. These include: What is Convict Criminology? Who counts as a Convict Criminologist? What is the history of CC? What has CC accomplished? What have been the major criticisms of CC? and What has been CC's response to these criticisms? The article concludes by both summarizing the contents of the piece and makes some suggestions for the future.

Keywords: Convict Criminology, Corrections, Criminological Theory, Prisoner Reentry, Penology.

1. Introduction

Every so often, new ways of approaching traditional subject matters are developed and disseminated. One of these topics is Convict Criminology (CC) (Ross and Richards 2003). Originally conceptualized in the 1990s as a reaction and a way to combat inadequate scholarship in the field of corrections, CC has matured and, in 2020, has morphed into an official division of the American Society of Criminology (ASC), the largest academic society that represents the interests of scholars and instructors in this field.

In order to provide a brief, but relatively comprehensive introduction to and an understanding of CC, I have reviewed the discipline's growth and will attempt to answer six basic interrelated questions that many observers unfamiliar with this subject may have about its origins and significance. These questions are as follows: What is CC? Who counts as a Convict Criminologist? What is the history of CC? What has CC accomplished? What have been the major criticisms of CC? and What has been CC's response to these criticisms? In conclusion, this article makes a number of suggestions for potential future goals and developments for CC.

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2. What is convict criminology?

Starting in the mid-1990s, a handful of scholars, most of whom were formerly incarcerated, formed a loose group under the label of Convict Criminology. They initially met at the 1997 American Society of Criminology (ASC) conference in San Diego, where they joined each other on a panel and presented papers about their experiences in prison and about the fields of criminology and criminal justice in general¹. Shortly thereafter, they officially organized around a handful of loose principles and adopted the name Convict Criminology. They recognized that the convict voice was typically ignored in current research and policymaking in the fields of criminology and criminal justice in general, and corrections in particular. And in order to correct this imbalance, they wanted to create a body of scholarship that was primarily conducted by convicts or formerly incarcerated people who had a doctorate or were in the process of earning one.

In general, although some members and outsiders to the organization were concerned about the appropriateness of the label for this collection of individuals, the name remained intact. Over its nearly three-decade history, CC has variously been called or referred to as a field, group, movement, organization, school, theory, or network (the term that I personally prefer). Although CC has elements of all these labels, simply using one of them ignores the nuances of the others that are relevant to CC. The challenge of settling on a single label is compounded by the fact that, among its members and adherents, complete unanimity regarding a shared vision of CC does not exist. Needless to say, people calling themselves Convict Criminologists are united under the original goal of sharing the lived experience of convicts and excons in an honest manner that is capable of withstanding scholarly scrutiny.

Also as a scholarly discipline, Convict Criminology is *anchored in the fields of corrections* and *Critical Criminology*. In the North American context, corrections is basically «a broad encompassing term for the institutions/facilities, policies, procedures, programs, and services we associate with jails, prisons, inmates, correctional officers, and administrators, and other correctional workers» (Ross 2016, 12). Although the affiliation with corrections is self-explanatory, what is the connection to Critical Criminology? In short, Critical Criminology has a longstanding interest in understanding and helping marginalized people – the dispossessed, the powerless, etc. – who have been negatively affected by the criminal justice system (e.g., DeKeseredy and Dragiewicz 2018). Most convicts and excons clearly fit under this umbrella. Additionally, Critical Criminology has had historical concern for progressive critical inquiry. This element is often lacking when it comes to understanding corrections, which predominantly has a managerial orientation. This also explains why, pretty much since its orientation.

¹ Numerous overviews of the history of Convict Criminology have been published (e.g., Ross and Richards 2005; Ross *et al.* 2011; Earle 2016; Jones *et al.* 2009; Newbold 2017; Newbold *et al.* 2010; Richards *et al.* 2007; Richards *et al.* 2009; Richards and Ross 2005).

gins, CC panels have been sponsored or recognized by the Division of Critical Criminology of the ASC.

As CC evolved, the network determined that it would make *three important contributions: scholarly research, mentorship, and policy work/activism* (e.g., Ross *et al.* 2012). It was also understood that not all of us had an equal interest in participating or contributing to each of these components. Some of us were more interested or effective at devoting our energy toward one area over the other.

Finally, although there have been a considerable number of theoretical and conceptual pieces, in terms of methodology, early CC emphasized auto-ethnography (Newbold *et al.* 2014). This decision was predicated on the fact that it was difficult for scholars to gain access to correctional facilities to conduct research, and both incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people had a number of important experiences that were not being captured by traditional quantitative criminological research, especially that which was done on prisons. This sentiment was echoed by Wacquant (2002) and in a later renaissance in prison ethnographies (Drake *et al.* 2015). Nevertheless, since that time, it has also been acknowledged that CC also includes additional types of qualitative research including direct observation, face-to-face interviews, semi-structured interviews, and retrospective analysis (Richards 2013). There has also been some progression to quantitative research. For instance, in 2109, Daniel Kavish chaired the first panel of its kind on quantitative research in CC at the annual meeting of ASC.

3. What are the theoretical assumptions of convict criminology?

Despite its frequent identification as a theory, scholarship in this aspect of CC is thin. One article makes this abundantly clear. As Richards (2013) specifically states, «[o]nly fifteen years old in the US and just recently gaining attention in Europe, it is not yet a theory [...] Despite our progress, the Convict Criminology Theoretical Perspective requires more formal development if it is to become operational as a theory that can be empirically tested. A formal theory requires research hypotheses that can be discussed at length». Richards then posits a handful of hypotheses amenable to testing. Although these could be examined in detail here, this is not the purpose of this article. It is safe to say that, as a theory, CC requires further development. Also, the CC theory is best encapsulated in the idea that the lived experience (i.e., phenomenology) is central to any understanding of the field of corrections. This was certainly part of arguments articulated by John Irwin (1929-2010) (e.g., Irwin 1970; 1980), a former felon and professor of criminology/criminal justice, who has been credited with being an inspiration to many in the CC network.

More recently Tietjen (2019, 118-119) acknowledging that CC has made significant strides in theoretical development, also recognizes that a considerable amount of additional work needs to be done in order for Convict Criminology to become more developed and widely accepted. He then outlines a three-part explanation that is important in the development of that model. To begin with the insider perspective may enable exconvict scholars better access to information that may not be available to traditional criminologists. Formerly incarcerated academics may also be more attuned to verbal and nonverbal behavior displayed in correctional institutions, than researchers without this kind of experience. Moreover, people behind bars may feel more comfortable with formerly incarcerated outsiders who come in to jails and prisons to conduct research than those without that kind of experience. In turn, mentorship and collaborative experiences inside CC enable those prisoners to make connections between their lived reality and existing scholarship. Finally, both the experience of prison and the stigma encountered as an excon enable these budding scholars with more reflexivity in order to provide additional insights into the field of corrections and criminal justice.

4. Who counts as a convict criminologist?

Over the years, there has been some discussion and much confusion over who can legitimately be considered a Convict Criminologist (Ross *et al.* 2016). Although numerous people have identified with CC, until recently, there has neither been a formal organization dedicated to furthering the interests of the network, nor some sort of test that is administered like a licensure. So the natural question is what qualifies someone to be a Convict Criminologist? Ostensibly, a Convict Criminologist an individual who: *a) has spent a significant amount of time in jail or prison*², *b)* is *in possession of a Ph.D. in criminology/criminal justice, or a related field, or is in the process of earning a Ph.D.* (i.e., doctoral student) in these academic disciplines, *c) self-identifies* as a Convict Criminologist, *d) believes that the convict voice is underrepresented in scholarly research and policy debates*, and *e) participates in corrections based research/scholarship, mentorship, and activism.*

Further, it must be noted that a significant portion of the CC network is comprised of what CC members refer to as «non-con» members. This includes Critical Criminologists/Activists who have NOT been incarcerated, but who possess a Ph.D. and are committed to goals of the CC network. Such members have been actively involved in CC scholarship, mentoring, and activism since the group's inception. So, what does this mean? It is inappropriate to label someone a Convict Criminologist unless they have met the criteria above and have self-identified as a CC (Ross *et al.* 2016).

² Undoubtedly this begs the question of what qualifies as a significant period of time. There are no hard and fast rules for this criteria. Although some have suggested that in order to fully identify as a Convict Criminologist one needs to go to prison as opposed to jail, but after careful reflection this distinction is probably insufficient to understand the carceral experience.

5. What is the history of convict criminology?³

Convict Criminology has an interesting history, and a number of articles and chapters published in scholarly books have reviewed it. To begin with, if we look back far enough, we can detect elements of CC thinking that pre-date its 1990s origins (Earle 2016). This thinking is dominant in the writings and activities of formerly incarcerated individuals who later became scholars of Criminology, like Frank Tannenbaum (1893-1969), Gwynne Nettler (1913-2007), and John Irwin (1929-2010).

The next step in the development of CC occurred in the mid-1990s, when Ross and Richards met and developed the «Convict Criminology» idea prior to organizing panels on CC at American Society of Criminology conferences. Early CC panels included, but were not limited to the participation of William G. Archambeault, Bruce Arrigo, James Austin, Marianne Fisher-Giorlando, John Irwin, Richard S. Jones, Alan Mobley, Daniel S. Murphy, Greg Newbold, Barbara Owen, and Charles M. Taylor. These activities eventually led to the publication of *Convict Criminology* (Ross and Richards 2003). This compendium included the work of people who were formerly incarcerated and those who were aligned with the CC mission. Shortly after this milestone, Bob Grigsby assisted members of the group to establish a CC website. This website was significantly revised and replaced in 2020 under the direction of Daniel Kavish.

Another step has been the global expansion of CC and has included representation by individuals in Europe, Australia, and New Zealand (Aresti and Darke 2016; Ross *et al.* 2014; Earle 2018). For example, scholars such as Andy Aresti, Sacha Darke, and Rod Earle in England; Ikponwosa (Silver) O. Ekunwe in Finland; Greg Newbold in New Zealand; and Francesca Vianello and Elton Kalica in Italy helped to promote CC in their countries and networks.

As the initial members of CC aged and retired, a younger generation of scholars emerged as a second generation of Convict Criminologists in the US (Tietjen 2019). These individuals were young criminologists who were either completing their doctorates or had just graduated. They are now primarily the leadership of the group as founding members have focused on other scholarly commitments, retired or passed away.

Another milepost was reached in May and June 2019, when Jeffrey Ian Ross and Francesca Vianello held a conference, exclusively devoted to CC at the University of Padua. The majority of the papers from the conference were assembled into an edited book, *Convict Criminology for the Future* (Ross and Vianello 2021).

Finally, in April 2020, Convict Criminology became recognized as official division of the American Society of Criminology, joining the sixteen other divisions that the ASC hosts.

³ See, for example, the chronology included as the appendix in Ross and Vianello (2021).

6. What has convict criminology accomplished?

In its relatively short history, CC has accomplished a number of things. These include the following, ranked from least to most important. To begin with, *selected members of Convict Criminology have made news media appearances* where they provide commentary on corrections-related news stories. These have been broadcast on regional, national, and international news media outlets. Many of these opportunities have allowed us to spread to viewers and audiences the core messages of CC.

Additionally, CC has been responsible for *organizing and participating in numerous panels* (at community forums, academic conferences, etc.) that focus on corrections and the problems of reentry. These events have served multiple purposes including stressing the importance of the lived experience of incarceration as that basis for knowledge and the importance of the convict voice to scholarly and public policy debates.

More importantly, over the past three decades, scholars associated with the Convict Criminology field have *published numerous articles and chapters in scholarly journals and academic books*. In these contexts, CC has been able to shed light on more obscure, but no less important aspects of prison life.

Moreover, some of us have *participated in important policy debates* (e.g., National Institute on Medicine) (Richards *et al.* 2011). Similarly, some of us have given lecture in or taught in prisons. In 2000, Richards along with other colleagues, at University of Wisconsin Oshkosh administered a program at the Wisconsin Department of Corrections-initiated Inviting Convicts to College Program. In England, Aresti and Darke, based at the University of Westminster, have taught a number of classes at prisons and established a prison-to-college pipeline (Darke and Aresti 2016). Convict Criminology has also enabled formal research opportunities for convicts and excons (Aresti *et al.* 2016).

Finally, the CC network have *mentored numerous convicts, excons, and* graduate students enabling them to complete of bachelors, masters and doctoral degrees (Ross et al. 2011; Ross et al. 2015; Ross 2019; Tewksbury and Ross 2019; Tietjen et al. 2020). These individuals were either ignored in their programs or felt like they could benefit from our assistance through engagement in writing letters of recommendation, co-authoring research with them, providing feedback on job searches, and helping them acclimate to the norms of academic culture (Custer et al. 2020).

7. What have been the major criticisms of convict criminology?

Over its close to three-decade history, Convict Criminology has had its fair share of critics, internal to the group, on the periphery of the organization, and on the outside of the network. Some of this criticism has been self-generated by individuals closely associated with CC (e.g., Larsen and Piché 2012; Newbold and Ross 2013), and other forms of criticism have been leveled by individuals outside of the group (e.g., Belknap 2015). In

short, there are four primary shortcomings that have been leveled against CC.

To begin with some individuals have suggested that, in terms of methodology, CC is not rigorous enough. Indeed, during the early years of CC, some of the papers given by excons, presented at academic conferences, sometimes sounded like war stories, that tended toward self-aggrandizement in their narration of all the tough times the paper giver experienced before, during, or after incarceration. Later, when it was clear that a disproportionate number of the early research studies in CC were autoethnographies, those who were reading the autoethnographies often did not understand the epistemological context of this type of research method. Another problem pertained to the misperception that CC tended to be exclusive, that only certain types of people can be members or be affiliated with CC (e.g., convicts or excons), or that CC gives certain people a privileged status in the academy. One final unfounded criticism is that CC has excluded women, ethnic minorities, and members of the LGBTO community. On some levels, some of these criticisms had some merit, but they also demonstrated a superficial understanding of CC (i.e., they did not do the hard and necessary work of reading the scholarship, but simply depended on attending a panel or two or learn from word of mouth about CC).

8. What has been convict criminology's response to these criticisms?

The people who were closely affiliated with CC did not sit idly by when they and the field that they worked hard to build were criticized. This was mainly because the CC network welcomed thoughtful critiques, having already publicly stated that they believed well-founded and articulated criticisms would force them to improve what they were trying to accomplish (Newbold and Ross 2013). CC members found that, in general, many of the assessments were based on misinformation or a lack of understanding. So a large part of what members affiliated with CC have tried to do since then has involved correcting the imbalances in information.

In response to criticisms that CC failed to engage in rigorous empirical analyses, CC encouraged individuals who were part of the network to not be content to simply presenting papers at conferences, but to submit them to journals where they would be subject to peer review, to co-author papers so that they could learn from each other, and avail themselves to an informal mentoring process that CC engaged in. This also meant understanding the process of autoethnography rather than assume is was simply a synonym for a memoir or autobiography.

CC has also tried to more effectively explain its attempts to recruit women, visible minorities, and members of the LGBTQ community. These criticisms were addressed in a seminal article (Ross *et al.* 2016) where members of CC provided empirical evidence of their efforts to be as inclusive as possible.

Furthermore, there was a perceived need to reemphasize the need for people who claim to be Convict Criminologists to have adequate/appropriate training. In other words, the lived experience of time spent behind bars does not necessarily mean that an individual has scholarly expertise that is earned through formal training in an accredited Ph.D. program.

In order to address some of the criticisms, CC members increased their mentorship activity (Ross 2019; Ross *et al.* 2015). Finally, because of the efforts of selected members of CC, more than half of the executive board of the ASC Division of Convict Criminology (DCC) are women, including people of color. Furthermore, diversity and inclusion are primary goals of the DCC executive board, who are currently in the process of planning collaborative events with peer divisions that also represent marginalized populations in the ASC.

9. The future of convict criminology

Like all academic fields and specialties, the future of CC is unknown. Part of its success will be tied to its ability to achieve its modest goals. Convict Criminology will survive. CC has a great and energetic leadership that is diverse and vested in the success of the organization. But CC will also need to create meaningful feedback loops with our membership and audience and be mindful of what CC can do in a more strategic way. For example, CC should more closely track what their members do in terms of mentorship and activism. This will help the network to better explain their accomplishments to a wider audience. CC also needs to do a better job encouraging people to read their scholarship and to not simply jump to conclusions about what they think they know about the field. Other things CC should do in the future is to be mindful of inclusion and to prevent the naysayers and bomb throwers from distracting it achieve their mission. Finally, Convict Criminology needs to work more on teasing out a theory that is meaningful to our membership and multiple audiences.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to Rachel Reynolds, Grant Tietjen and the anonymous reviewers of this journal for comments on this article.

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