

Lessons for prison re-entry from the feminist movement

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Abstract The convict criminology and prisoner re-entry movements are at a seminal moment in their development. This moment shares many characteristics with the feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s. In the interest of not repeating the missteps of the past, the author believes that is important to draw from the lessons of the earlier feminist movement. For the prisoner re-entry movement, the experience of the rape crisis centers and domestic violence shelters in becoming aligned with the state is of particular importance. Convict criminology can benefit from the lessons of intersection theory and begin to draw on the diversity that exists within the community of formerly incarcerated individuals

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As I read the forum statement, I was struck by the degree to which the present state of the prisoner re-entry movement is similar to that of the women's movement in the 1980s. Both were originally activist in nature, and they each sought to raise the consciousness of their constituencies. However, a key part of the women's movement, the rape crisis and domestic violence shelters that sprung up in the late 1970 and the 1980s became subsumed by the social work and medical bureaucracies and became an arm of state control over women (Bumiller 2008 p. 115). In addition, during the 1970 and the 1980s, feminism was largely a response to the issues of one group of women, white women from the middle and upper-middle classes. In a parallel development, convict criminology, the activist portion of the academic

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criminology community can be seen as relaying the experiences of a specific sector of formerly incarcerated people—white males originating from the middle class. In the remainder of this essay, I will expand upon these arguments and present strategies drawn from the academic section of the feminist movement.

Shelters and rape crisis organizations developed as “feminist organizations” that were explicit about the importance of democratic decision-making and having women work with the women who were seeking assistance. Thus, violence was understood as a collective experience and “there were no rigid boundaries between organizers and the women who sought help” (Bumiller 2008; p. 5). However, as the organizations and demand for their services grew—the need for state funding led to “review and evaluation by government bureaucracies” (Bumiller 2008; p. 108). This led to a professionalization and a new hierarchy of both rape crisis and domestic violence shelters. It also led to the growth of an academic field of study surrounding rape and domestic violence. Bumiller argues that this has led to the increased regulation of women and a decreased ability of the women to define their own problems. The women in domestic violence shelters have to meet a series of behavioral objectives in order to maintain services—and this ensures that the agencies and the state will be able to measure success rates (Bumiller 2008; p. 116).

Many re-entry programs such as the Fortune Society and the Muslim Re-Entry Initiative run by Citizens Against Recidivism are still able to rely at least in some ways upon earlier social movement forms of organizing such as consciousness raising and the sharing of information between formerly incarcerated employees and those who use the services. However, as these programs begin to compete for federal, state and philanthropic funds, there is some concern over the amount of autonomy they will be able to maintain. For example, the site where I conduct my research attempts to have the job developers seek at least semi-skilled labor with a possibility for advancement. But, if the conditions attached to the federal monies the site just received require measuring the number of placements, there is a likelihood that the outcomes could be measured by the quantity of jobs, not the quality of the jobs found. It is also possible that the program could begin to screen out individuals who would take more time or investment of effort to make job ready. In turn, this would contribute to the already prevalent surveillance of the participants by the state.

The formerly incarcerated population is extremely diverse—spanning attributes such as social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and ablebodiedness. Each of these greatly impacts how an individual experiences the carceral institution and re-entry. Factors such as the amount of economic, social and cultural capital available to an individual also contribute to the experience of the prison. For example, one of my informants at my field site comes from an upper-middle-class background. She was able to take money that had been sent to her commissary account and parlay that into merchandise for a clandestine store. Not only was she able to sell items for a profit, but people also owed her money and favors. Another informant worked in the kitchen. He and some friends were able to steal the makings for a fruit crumble which they would ‘bake’ and then sell. From my field work, it appears that those individuals who had more economic, social and cultural capital when they entered the carceral institution have better outcomes in terms of

re-entry. In particular, they seem to evidence a lesser degree of the embodied behaviors of the prison. However, those individuals with less capital, who have to work harder to do 'easy time', display behaviors, such as the 'yard face' associated with a carceral habitus to a greater degree. In addition, the security level and location of the prison also have a great impact on an individual's experience. Formerly, incarcerated people from federal minimum security facilities appear to have the most favorable prognosis of any of the groups while those who served time in state maximum security were more severely affected.

The differences that result from inequalities in social, cultural and economic capital extend into the re-entry process. For example, whiteness carries a certain amount of privilege that extends into the job search (Pager 2007; p. 86–116). In addition, having the cultural and social capital associated with the white middle class is related to prospective employers' ratings of potential employees (Moss and Tilly 1996; p. 261–272). This is particularly important in the FIRE (finance, insurance and real estate) sectors that are a key source of employment in the Tri-State New York city metropolitan area. In these sectors, the actions of African American men are often interpreted as aggressive and frightening. Unfortunately, it also appears to be a requirement for employment in an academic setting, as I found to my consternation while watching a department reaction to an academically successful African American male's presentation of self. Programs may attempt to enforce specific models of African American male deference to produce docile bodies to fill menial positions such as porter work. This can be seen in my field site where African American men are cautioned against being perceived as too confident, even arrogant. This is in contrast to the white and Latino students who did not receive such instruction. In addition, the African American men received instructions on the way to sit, the way to smile and present themselves as non-threatening.

I remember being at a roundtable on the sociology of crime at an ASA meeting. The professor moderating the roundtable expressed some disappointment over the papers and applications he had received for a grant committee all being about the same topics. One of the reasons given was that many graduate students use the same resources for their papers and dissertations. Another reason, borne out by examination of the attendees at the sociology of crime sessions, was that the majority of the attending researchers were white and from middle class to upper-middle-class backgrounds. Additional reasons behind the corresponding lack of diversity of scholars of criminology include the 1994 abolition of Pell grants for incarcerated persons by the Congress. This makes it very difficult for incarcerated persons to pursue an education beyond a high school diploma or GED while inside. Upon release, many formerly incarcerated people are mandated by parole to secure employment and attend other programming that may interfere with attending college or university. Parolees are often required to pay a proportion of their wages in restitution or back child support. These requirements can stretch a small paycheck to the limit and leave very little time or money for attending college. Thus, college functions as a gate-keeping mechanism, keeping the majority of formerly incarcerated people from participating in the academic conversations that help to shape policy surrounding re-entry. This becomes important because the criminology and sociology of crime elites tend to establish the boundaries for what is acceptable

discourse surrounding re-entry. If the narratives of working class and men and women of color are not allowed to reach these levels, there is little hope of these groups of people achieving the representation necessary for bringing their issues to light.

I would argue that the responsibility falls on those of us in the academy to investigate the intersecting oppressions that impact the formerly incarcerated population and to insist upon the advancement to the academy of more females and people of color. We need to recognize that much as the 1980s feminist and African American studies programs ignored the intersecting oppressions that impacted African American women much of current mainstream, and convict criminology ignores the intersecting oppressions of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people of color and from the working classes (Hill-Collins 2000; p. 127). This involves the process of othering in which people become objectified as they are made into objects (Hill-Collins 2000; p. 71).

Those of us who see ourselves as members of the critical and convict criminology disciplines must take on a more activist role. First, we must find a way to open the academy to a wider range of individuals. This means fighting for improved access to financial aid and reaching out to groups such as the Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions at Medgar Evers College. Another step that can be taken is allowing for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people's voices to enter public discourse through venues such as the *On The Count* radio show, which is produced by a group of formerly incarcerated individuals. Finding a diverse group of formerly incarcerated people and introducing them to the fundamentals of research, co-authoring and bringing their work to academic conferences such as the ASA and the ASC.

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