

Beyond Bars: re-joining society after prison

Jeffrey Ross and Stephen Richards (2009) Alpha Books pp 224

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We academics have many talents, but building social movements is not typically one of them. We are too fiercely independent-minded (save, sometimes, for loyalty to one's PhD supervisor – or at least one can hope) and ego-driven. We get a buzz from publications and citations and prizes. We want to be the researcher who makes the big discovery or the theorist who writes the great book, and sometimes this means stepping on (or indeed tearing apart) the competition to get to be top of the pile. We have a giving and nurturing side too, of course. We spend our weeks trying to help our students and graduate students become great thinkers, editing endless drafts and departing our wisdom in seminars. Yet, when it comes to the wider academic field, we tend to switch into Hobbesian mode - attack or get attacked in the war of all against all.

This makes the achievement of Jeffrey Ian Ross and Stephen C. Richards all the more remarkable. Ross and Richards deliberately and methodically set out to create a movement (a "new school") of convict criminology in a series of meetings at academic conferences beginning in the late 1990s. I was there at the first or one of the first of these meetings - to break the awkwardness of asking us to put our chairs in a circle, the legendary Chuck Terry explained that this was like a recovery group for ex-positivists. And, the damned thing is that it worked. They did it! The convict criminology panels, now to be found in the British Society of Criminology as well as the American Society of Criminology, are without a doubt the most interesting, informative, and important panels at any academic conference. They are the only panels where I have ever seen panelists, afterwards, in floods of "tears of joy" from the session. The rooms are always packed, the buzz gets more exciting every year, as new members join every year, each carefully mentored and nurtured by senior members, in particular Ross and Richards themselves. In short, *they did it!*

Of course, Ross and Richards would insist, rightly, that “we did it”. True. Two people do not a movement make. There have been dozens of inspired and inspiring voices in the convict criminology movement that have kept this fire going in important ways. Yet, there is no questioning the sustained leadership that Ross and Richards provided from the very beginning along with the Obi-Wan Kenobi role played by the late great John Irwin. Their achievement is nothing short of remarkable.

True to form as an academic movement, books have played a key role in solidifying this process (although Convict Criminology has also been energised by a web presence from early on), the most important of these, *Convict Criminology*, was co-edited by Ross and Richards. They also co-authored *Behind Bars*, beginning with the immortal words “You’re under arrest” and intended to provide an account of the stages of incarceration from the perspective of the person experiencing it. Ross and Richards’ *Beyond Bars* represents an important sequel to this work. The book is intended to fill a gap in the literature between the huge number of academic books written about probation and parole (which, the authors point out “are generally written for a student audience by people who typically have very little first-hand experience with prisoners and parolees”) and the relatively small number of “self-help” books on prisoner reintegration which, although frequently authored by former prisoners, are typically “out-of-date and hard to locate” - indeed often sloppily edited, poorly documented and self-published. Like its predecessor, *Beyond Bars* is meant to be a systematic resource - appropriate for the curious undergraduate students as well as the recently released prisoner (but clearly the authors are most concerned with the latter readership) - written from perspective of the ex-prisoner.

Actually, the perspective taken in the book is not of one ex-prisoner, but rather two, somewhat inelegantly referred to as “Joe and Jill”. To be fair, it is primarily Joe’s perspective as a generic male ex-prisoner that is featured for most of the book, although Jill has a well-written chapter (12) devoted all to her experiences. By design, Joe and Jill are stock characters, an “everyman” and “everywoman” intended to represent the average experiences of many ex-prisoners based on Ross and Richards’ research, life experiences and readings of the wider literature. Yet, for this reason, of course, neither comes to life in any

real way and these passages (sample sentence: “In prison, Joe and Jill lived with boredom, stress and violence”) can drag as a result. It might have been better to have chosen the specific and varied experiences of some actual individuals that illustrated these more general themes that trying one’s hand at fiction.

Of course, we are often told, as academics, not to generalize from single cases (and this is a - misguided and unfair - criticism of some of the early convict criminology publications focusing on telling one’s own story first). One person’s story we are told is “only” an anecdote. Social science needs to aggregate these individual narratives and tell generic stories about what happens to most people, to the average person, to Joe and Jill. Yet, in reality, there is no ‘average’ ex-prisoner, any more than the ‘average’ citizen or ‘average’ family with 2.4 children. It is only in the collection of original and unique stories – indeed like the life stories in the book *Convict Criminology* and the list of prisoner autobiographies the authors mention in *Beyond Bars* – that these general trends can be understood and appreciated.

Still, this work has been a part of the convict criminology idea from the beginning. The goal was always to draw on *both* autobiographical wisdom as well as rigorous academic research and, indeed, to challenge the field to account for how these two ways of ‘knowing’ actually differ (if they do). Understood in that context, as part of the wider convict criminology project, *Beyond Bars* is a crucial contribution - a sort of generational gift of wisdom from a collectivity who has “been there, done that, and gotten the PhD” to the more recent cohort of ex-prisoners (future convict criminologists, hopefully!) based on an aggregation of cautionary tales. The book says, learn from our successes, but also learn from our mistakes. This book was not around when John Irwin or Stephen Richards got out of prison years ago, but today’s prisoners are lucky to have the resource of their collected wisdom.