

## **Convict Criminology**

***Jeffrey Ross and Stephen Richards (Eds) (2003) Wadsworth pp 387  
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Most people in the UK (or indeed elsewhere in Europe) who read this American book when it first came out ten years ago probably liked and appreciated its passion and originality but would have been hard pressed to say in what niche it would have belonged in any criminological discourse outside the USA. It appeared at around the same time as “cultural criminology”, which did have broader international appeal, and because of their shared emphasis on understanding and appreciating authentic offender experience, the two “new schools of thought” were seen here as related developments, but with “convict criminology” very much the subsidiary. The book itself is evenly divided into chapters by ex-cons, people who have served time in American prisons and subsequently become academics, and a set of non-cons, career academics who, by dint of close working ties with prisons (as researchers or prison educators) have developed a consistently critical position on mass incarceration in the USA, akin to that of the ex-convicts themselves. The ostensible aim of the collection was to give voice to insider experiences of imprisonment and parole and to demand of criminology more generally, firstly, that it made room for ex-cons within its professional structures and, secondly, that it lent more of its established academic weight to criticising penal practice, and less to complacent, collusive research which either ignored the tough questions or simply and cruelly served state interests and legitimised the status quo.

The late John Irwin (1929-2010), who served time for armed robbery in the mid-1950s, and subsequently became a renowned professor, was indirectly the father of “convict criminology” and wrote a fine preface to this book. He noted that when he and one of its other ex-con contributors, Edward Tromanhauser, first made the transition from prison to university in the still rehabilitatively-inclined 1960s it was marginally easier than it was for the majority of the younger prisoners writing here, who made the transition in more punitive times, when educational opportunities in prison were less, and the stigma of being an ex-con, even in allegedly liberal institutions like university criminology departments, was

that much greater. Many of them would not have been imprisoned at all had it not been for the war on drugs and the escalating effect it had on incarceration rates in the 1980s. Stephen Richards, the co-editor of *Convict Criminology*, served a single sentence of eleven years (more than twice as long as Irwin) in nine prisons, including maximum security institutions like Marion and Leavenworth for nothing more than drug offences, and earned to the right to make every one of his eminently reasonable proposals for penal reform, which to many European ears would not sound all that radical.

Irwin details the roots of “convict criminology” in workshops at the annual American Criminology Conferences from 1997 onwards, in which the ex-con academics came together for the first time. Many of the papers in this volume date from those late nineties/early ‘noughties’ conferences (or cognate events) and were thus slightly dated even when the book first appeared, let alone now. Irwin acted as a mentor to the movement, but was not alone in supporting it, and like him, the ex-con writers are generous in their appreciation of the established criminologists and faculty members who opened doors for them and helped get their careers started. Not all had the same experiences, or had the same ambitions. Richard S Jones served a one year sentence, experienced both support and rejection in his early career, and admitted that like many ex-cons “managing a spoiled identity” there were still friends and neighbours outside academia from whom he would hide his history as a prisoner. All the contributors to the book, ex-cons and non-cons alike, share a commitment to the ethnographic method as a way of grasping penal realities, and a touching faith that more of this would be a significant counter to the politically and media induced myths about prisons and prisoners (elaborated here by Jeffrey Richards). Even the non-cons share autobiographical information in a way that isn’t really usual in academic texts, even now, and certainly wasn’t then; who knew, for example, that Barbara Owen’s interest in prison, which produced an exemplary study of women’s imprisonment (Owen 1998) was kindled by a brief liaison with a “bad boy” whom she subsequently visited in Vacaville, leading her to switch from art history to sociology and to then cross paths with John Irwin. William Archambeault’s chapter on Native Americans in US prisons is the most academically conventional in the book, but tells a neglected story of abuse and atrocity, not without bitterness, which may reflect his own Native American ancestry.

Some academic books on imprisonment and parole are boring despite themselves. This one is not, and tends to be memorable precisely because of the autobiographical information it contains, some of it angry and emotional. It gained added kudos from the fact that it helped launch and consolidate a movement, in which convict criminologists (and aligned non-cons) show solidarity with the incarcerated, openly advocate reform, and support serving prisoners studying for degrees in prison. The appeal of authenticity apart, the book is also a fine advertisement for the kind of C Wright Mills-inspired sociology that inspires people to recast and rethink their “private troubles” as “public issues”, and vice versa - to see how larger structural and cultural forces shape experience and identity. The paradox of the convict criminology position is simply the ex-cons’ belief that by gaining an academic platform they will somehow be taken more seriously and become more influential as reformers, despite otherwise recognising that academia can all too often be moribund and conservative, and hostile to almost everything they stand for.

There have always been cons and ex-cons, in the USA and elsewhere, who sought to use their authentic experience as the basis for excoriating imprisonment without becoming academics, whether as novelists, journalists or social workers, even as lawyers. Some acknowledgment is rightly made of people like Edward Bunker and Wilbert Rideau in Ross and Richards’ “invitation to join us” at the end of the book, but maybe not to the full extent that it should have been, and Ross’s analysis of the many ways in which corrections can be misrepresented in popular culture tends to play down the positive impact that fiction, drama and even movies about imprisonment can have, if debate about them is carefully orchestrated and channeled. Ross plays down the wider “cultural politics of penal reform”, in which prison-focused art, drama and fiction in many guises has a key part to play, in favour of a conviction that academically-based argument will always be more objective, credible and influential. It is no criticism of this book, or of the ambitions of some ex-cons to become academics, and certainly not of the movement’s achievements so far, to say that that ain’t always so, in the US or here. Any new updated edition of this book - to which ex-con academic James Kilgore (2012) could usefully contribute on electronic monitoring, a subject inexplicably neglected here - needs to be a little more reflexive about the limitations of academia. It could also perhaps be more international in its selection of contributors -

New Zealander Gregg Newbold is the only foreign ex-con here - because the US is no longer alone in creating “convict criminologists”.

## **References**

Kilgore, J. (2012). Progress or More of the Same? Electronic Monitoring in the Age of Mass Incarceration and Parole. *Critical Criminology* (published online November 2012) DOI 10.1007/s10612-012-9165-0.

Owen, B. (1998). *In the Mix: struggle and survival in a women's prison*. Albany: Suny Press.