

## Reflections on Convict Criminology

Robert Johnson

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In response to this thorough and thoughtful issue of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP), I would like to reflect on how I came to appreciate this valuable, indeed essential, perspective on prisons and imprisonment. I came to study Convict Criminology (CC) because of several key people, and through those people, hundreds of prisoners who were willing to talk and write about their experiences behind bars.

The first person to expose me to the theoretical perspective that eventually became known as CC was Hans Toch, who showed me how to do prisoner interviews and listen carefully to what the prisoners had to say about their world, a world very different from my own. Toch helped me to listen to prisoners as they grappled with the “pains of imprisonment” on their own terms – terms we tried to present in our work together, notably *The Pains of Imprisonment* (1982) and *Crime and Punishment: Inside Views* (2000). The second person was John Irwin, honored in this journal issue. As a graduate student, I admired John’s first book, *The Felon* (1970), but thought he was too hard on the prison staff. At the time, I was doing a study of officers who formed what I came to call “informal helping networks” to assist prisoners in crisis. John rather patiently listened to me, and suggested I sample a broader range of officers before I came to conclusions on the nature of prison staff and their effectiveness. By the same token, John was willing to look at the work I was doing and factor it into his thinking. For me, that was an early lesson in open-mindedness, which reinforced nicely what Hans Toch was trying to teach me and his other students.

Among those other students of Toch’s was Tom Bernard, also honored in this issue of the *JPP*, who studied at State University of New York Albany with me in the 1970s. Tom was the third person in my education about Convict Criminology. Some years back, Tom discovered a thoughtful prisoner named Victor Hassine, who asked Tom to read a manuscript he was writing. Tom agreed and the end result was the first edition of *Life Without Parole: Living in Prison Today* (1996). A few editions later, Tom asked me to come on board and help edit Victor’s work. Eventually, I took over the main editorship, working with graduate students at American University – first Ania Dobrzanska (on the fourth edition, 2008), now with the Department of Justice, and then Sonia Tabriz (on the fifth and current edition, 2011), now a law student at the George Washington School of Law. None of these subsequent editions would have been possible without the original work of

Tom Bernard. I knew Victor, in particular, was deeply grateful to Tom and proud to have a book published by Oxford University Press.

The fourth person who was integral to my thinking about Convict Criminology was Victor Hassine. Over the years we became friends, talking over the phone every week. We wrote fiction individually and together, much of that creative writing found in the book, *Lethal Rejection: Stories on Crime and Punishment* (2009). Victor also contributed to a small press I run, *BleakHouse Publishing*, one goal of which is to give a voice to the voiceless including, of course, convicts. Two notable examples are Charles Huckelbury, who published a book of poetry with the press entitled *Tales From The Purple Penguin* (2008), and Erin George, whose book of poetry, *Origami Heart* (2009) was also published by my press. Sadly, Victor took his life in 2008, during the twenty-seventh year of his confinement. The current edition of Victor's book features an examination of his prison journey as a whole, from its difficult beginnings to its tragic conclusion. The new title, *Life Without Parole: Living and Dying in Prison* (2010), captures the sad trajectory of Victor's life, and indeed the likely fate of all prisoners sentenced to life without parole, who are serving what I and other authors have called "America's other death penalty". Victor's death was a blow to many convicts and to all of us who knew and admired him. It is hard to imagine a person who worked harder to earn a shot at freedom and who, moreover, had clearly established that he had much to contribute to society. To honor his life, we at *BleakHouse Publishing* created an award in his name, The Victor Hassine Memorial Fellowship, generously funded by the Hassine family.

There are now several key figures in the CC Group, notably Stephen C. Richards and Jeffrey Ian Ross, who coined the term "Convict Criminology" and have pushed hard to get recognition for this original and important work, and those who contribute to their voices. Richards and Ross (2001, 2004) co-authored the article "The New School of Convict Criminology" and then co-edited the seminal book *Convict Criminology* (2003), which features eight autobiographical chapters by ex-con professors. This wonderful edition of the aptly named journal, the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, would not have been possible without them and the many writers they have supported and encouraged over the years.

Over the past 15 years, the CC Group has worked to promote and expand the collaboration of academic criminologists and convicts. This Group is composed of ex-con professors and "noncon" professors, like myself.

The CC Perspective includes a remarkable collection of published work, which has profoundly improved what we know, not just about the prison world, but also about how a small number of prisoners survive the ordeal of imprisonment and then go on to work their way through graduate degrees to join the academic ranks. The ex-con professors took on the hard work mentoring and advising prisoners exiting prison to enter universities, and eventually complete their doctorates. This effort has produced a growing number of hybrid authors, convicts that became criminology professors, like many of the authors in this collection of articles.

I am honored to have the opportunity to write about my experiences studying CC, and to be associated with so many original and important voices that have shaped my continuing education on crime and punishment. In addition to those persons mentioned above, I would like to offer a special thanks to Susan Nagelsen, an original creative writer and frequent writing partner of Charles Huckelbury, noted briefly above, himself an award-winning creative writer, and Erin George, also noted briefly above, who, in addition to her evocative poetry, has written *A Woman Doing Life* (2010), a remarkable ethnography of her life in a prison published by Oxford University Press. Happily for me, Nagelsen, Huckelbury and George serve as staff members for *BleakHouse Publishing*, together working to give the press a distinctive and inclusive voice on matters relating to crime, punishment, and social justice.

Today, prisoners have many venues for their voice to be heard. The *JPP*, CC Group publications and website, as well as *BleakHouse Publishing*, all provide space for the creative and intellectual expression and aspirations of these men and women, who have much to teach us about prison life and the dream of freedom that sustains them.

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