

A Challenge From and A Challenge to Convict Criminology

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In criminology, attempts to destabilize the field are frequent (Hil and Robertson, 2003, p. 91), as old debates are rehashed in an attempt to reconstitute the *raison d'être* and the *modus operandi* of the discipline (Martel *et al.*, 2006, p. 636). Often, these discussions focus on methodological practice (e.g. Austin, 2003) or the application of social theory (e.g. Matthews, 2009). Agenda setting conversations outlining specific questions that require criminological attention (e.g. Zedner, 2007), as well as whether and how scholars should engage in normative politics (e.g. Chancer and McLaughlin, 2007), also feature prominently in the literature. Rare, however, are interventions that put into question the whole enterprise in a manner that challenges the core assumptions of the discipline itself and provokes a reorientation of the way scholars conduct research (e.g. Taylor *et al.*, 1973; Cohen, 1988).

Convict Criminology (Ross and Richards, 2003; Richards, 2009) is among the most recent attempts to provoke such a discussion. As gleaned in this issue, those who identify as Convict Criminologists generally critique their mainstream colleagues for uncritically making use of state constructed descriptors (e.g. 'crime', 'community corrections') and categories (e.g. 'criminal') in their analyses, for marginalizing and/or completely silencing the voices of the criminalized, and for deploying theories and methodologies that produce knowledge that does not map onto the realities of victimization, criminalization, and punishment that they themselves have encountered. To differentiate themselves from their mainstream counterparts Convict Criminologists integrate their firsthand experience as criminalized individuals into their criminological analyses. In so doing, the argument is advanced that a richer understanding of penalty is produced and a new school or perspective of criminology emerges.

As Co-managing Editors of the *Journal of Prisoners of Prisons*, a forum that aims "to bring the knowledge and experience of the incarcerated to bear upon [...] academic arguments and concerns, and to inform public discourse about the current state of our carceral institutions" (Gaucher, 1988, p. 54), we certainly agree with the need for, and importance of, having the voices of the criminalized at the centre of debates on punishment. The emergence of Convict Criminology has challenged many to revisit the questions of *who can know* or *who can be the knower* in criminology and Convict Criminologists are to be commended for this important contribution.

With this being said, we question claims that Convict Criminology currently represents a new school of thought or operates as a distinct perspective within the discipline. Our position is based on three particular observations. First, there appears to be a lack of a common vocabulary amongst the various contributions attributed to the Convict Criminology perspective. This suggests that there is an absence of a broader set of theoretical commitments that unifies them in a manner consistent with other approaches in criminology (e.g. Functionalist, Interactionist, Marxist, Feminist, Foucauldian).

Second, the diversity in research methods deployed, including autoethnography and surveys, has implications for the broader epistemological claim made by Convict Criminologists that experience – in this case the experience of victimization, criminalization and punishment – constitutes knowledge. In studies that veer away from methods that explicitly place experiential knowledge at the centre of research endeavors, it is unclear how it is incorporated into scholarship. This undermines the ability to maintain methodological coherence that is the cornerstone of scholarly perspectives. On a related note, if an emphasis on experiential knowledge is understood to be central to the Convict Criminology perspective, it is important to reflect on *whose* experiences and voices are consistently represented and whose are under-represented. As Katherine Irwin (this issue) notes, this collection and the collaborative intellectual project that gave rise to it would benefit from the inclusion of voices of women and other marginalized groups. In saying this, we acknowledge that the Convict Criminology Group is expanding, and we appreciate that maintaining an inclusive movement or initiative is an ongoing – and often challenging – undertaking.

Third, while it is clear that Convict Criminologists are involved in concrete actions on the ground as a matter of practice, the degree to which some authors reproduce the language of the state and its penal institutions in their own discourses, and as part of their participation in benevolently-couched programs of social control, needs to be addressed if Convict Criminology is to fulfill its promise of offering alternative understandings of victimization, criminalization and punishment. We note that many contributions are informed by critical or radical criminologies, incorporating critiques of organized oppression and class conflict, and working to demystify the languages and logics of the carceral. Others, including some contributions to this special issue, make use of elements of official vocabularies and ‘controltalk’ (Cohen, 1985) without problematizing them.

The Group's website, drawing on Ross and Richards (2003), proposes that "Convict Criminology represents the work of convicts or ex-convicts, in possession of a Ph.D. or on their way to completing one, or enlightened academics and practitioners, who contribute to a new conversation about crime and corrections" (see <http://www.convictcriminology.org/about.htm>). We suggest that this definition accurately reflects the body of work that is associated with Convict Criminology. It emphasizes the importance of shared experience and the pursuit of a novel conversation, without making explicit the theoretical and epistemological commitments of the Group. Accordingly, as it currently stands, Convict Criminology appears to be more of an example of standpoint theory than a fully-fledged scholarly perspective. This observation, like recent critiques concerning Cultural Criminology as a 'new' approach to criminological research (see Spencer, 2011), should not be read as an indictment. Nor should it be interpreted as an argument in favor of stultifying rigidity or uniformity in scholarly work. Rather, the issues we have raised here offer as an opening for proponents to clarify what is understood by Convict Criminology – theoretically, methodologically and normatively – as they continue to work towards developing a distinct perspective or new school of criminology. Such reflections would likely not only sharpen the critical edge of Convict Criminology, but also the discipline as a whole, which would benefit from more perspectives that are not intimately connected to the ideological and material reproduction of state repression.

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