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British convict criminology: developing critical insider perspectives on prison

**Andreas Aresti¹
Sacha Darke¹
Rod Earle²**

¹ University of Westminster, UK

² Open University, UK

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British Convict Criminology: Developing critical insider perspectives on prison

Andreas Aresti, Sacha Darke and Rod Earle

Convict Criminology is a branch of criminology started in the late 1990s by American university academics dissatisfied with the absence of prisoner and former prisoner voices in research on crime and justice. It combines two main approaches to academic research on crime and justice. The first is made up of critical perspectives that seek radical reform of the criminal justice system. The second is made up of campaigns, organisations and activism around prisoner's experiences, prisoner's families and resettlement post-release issues. The idea of Convict Criminology is to bring these together with prisoner and ex-prisoner 'insider' perspectives that emphasise the need to develop academic accounts generated by people with more direct experience of criminal justice procedures.

In the past ten years Convict Criminology in the United States has established a vibrant website and has presented conference papers and published a number of books and articles in leading journals such as *Social Justice*, as well as supporting the unique *Journal of Prisoners on Prison*. Convict Criminology has also acted as a support group for prisoners and former prisoners studying in higher education and pursuing academic careers. In 2003 the group published its most important piece of work to date: the book *Convict Criminology* (Richards and Ross, eds., 2003), a collection of over 20 essays, half of which were written by people with prison experience.

From teaching at Westminster university and the Open University, and through our personal involvement / contact with support groups such as UNLOCK and the Prisoners Education Trust, we have become increasingly aware that more and more prisoners and former prisoners in the UK are studying for degrees in Criminology/Criminal Justice and related subjects like Sociology, Psychology and Law. Some have gone on to study at postgraduate level. When the three of us met last year, we decided that it was time to establish a Convict Criminology group here, drawing from the success of the group in the USA. In July 2011 we presented our ideas at the British Society of Criminology annual conference in Newcastle. In the Autumn we launched a call for people interested in establishing Convict Criminology here in the UK to get in touch with us. Over 50 people have responded to this appeal in the newsletters of the British Society of Criminology, Howard League for Penal Reform, European Group for the Study of Deviance and Social Control and UNLOCK. Nineteen are former prisoners, sixteen of which have already graduated. Three of the graduates are doing master's degrees and another three are doing doctorates. Two have completed their Ph.D. The other eight are working for prisoner and ex-prisoner support groups. However, we are only aware of two former prisoners (two of us writing here) that have secured full-time

work as university lecturers or researchers. We suspect there are others, and expect some will eventually join. Hopefully some of our members that are currently studying will choose academic careers.

So far we have only one serving prisoners represented in the group. We know that many prisoners are doing degrees in criminology or related subjects. We hope that after reading this article, some of you will get in touch either to join the group or just to ask to be put on our mailing list. In the short term, we can put you in touch with others that have studied at undergraduate or postgraduate level in or after prison. In the longer term, you may be interested in becoming an active member of the group. In our first year we have set up an advisory panel and developed a number of potential ideas for collaborative research and publication. This July we returned to the British Society of Criminology annual conference, with a bigger panel of speakers. In the autumn we will start our first research project, an audit of prisoners studying or hoping to study for degrees and the support and/or difficulties they are facing.

Following this we will turn our attention to submit papers for publication as a special edition of a peer reviewed criminology journal. We also plan to edit a book that will make clear how Convict Criminology can contribute to the way society understands and responds to issues of crime and punishment. With our emphasis on 'insider' perspectives, it is essential that all our work gives privileged status to the voices of prisoners and former prisoners. However, like Richards and Ross' book in the US we will not discriminate between those that have or do not have personal experience of prison, but will instead insist that all contributors have at minimum had close personal contact with prisoners, through research, teaching or work.

We look forward to hearing from you and please pass the word around. Please send written correspondence either to Sacha Darke or Andy Aresti at University of Westminster, 309 Regent Street, London W1B 2UW.

In the meantime If you do have access to the internet you can contact us on.....

Central email contact: bcc4bcc@hotmail.co.uk

Individual email contacts: Rod Earle r.earle@open.ac.uk; Sacha Darke s.darke@westminster.ac.uk; Andy Aresti a.aresti@bbk.ac.uk

For more detail on the aims/objectives of British Convict Criminology and our biographies and recent publications, see our page on the US group website:

<http://www.convictcriminology.org/bcc.htm>

View Convict Criminology Research Papers on Academia.edu for free. Prisoners wanting to complete their studies have reported to face a unique set of administrative, social, and academic challenges that have significantly impeded their progress. Even university academics are often unaware of the predicament of their incarcerated students. Written by a prisoner and his university educator, from limited access to the Internet behind prison walls, this paper looked into the experience of prisoners in accessing higher education via ODL while in prison. Using the qualitative autoethnography design, this paper explored the experiences of a group of prisoners in Mala