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CONVICT CRIMINOLOGY IN ENGLAND: DEVELOPMENTS AND DILEMMAS

ROD EARLE*

Convict criminology is the criminology of prisoners or ex-prisoners who combine their prison experience with a higher degree in criminology. It has been associated with the carceral conditions of the United States, the exceptional scholarship of John Irwin and the activities of the US Convict Criminology group. In the United Kingdom, a vibrant prison research culture has combined with the expansion of higher education and the continued growth of prison populations to generate potential for convict criminology in England. This article combines personal experience of imprisonment, prison research and interviews with suitably 'qualified' criminologists to explore this potential. The author argues that lived experience of imprisonment can extend the boundaries of the criminological imagination and foster novel approaches to criminological practice.

Key Words: convict criminology, reflexivity, auto-ethnography, prisons, prisoners

Introduction: Criminology's Debt to Criminals

It is relatively well established by critical and Marxist traditions of criminology that 'crime' has no ontological reality. Crime is a socially defined category fixed to behaviours that can be, and are, categorized in other ways in other social, cultural or historical contexts. The criminal, however, enjoys slightly less ontological ambiguity. Karl Marx (1861/1935: 371) waxed lyrical on the paradoxical creativity of the criminal:

A philosopher produces ideas, a poet makes poems, a priest provides sermons, a professor summarizes, and so on. A criminal produces crimes... The criminal not only produces crimes, but also the criminal law and with it the professor, who gives lectures on criminal law... The criminal furthermore produces the whole of the police and criminal justice, the constables, judges, hangmen, jurors etc. And all these different trades... develop different abilities of human imagination, create new demands and new ways of satisfying those [demands]... The criminal produces art, literature, novels and even tragedies.

And now maybe even criminology. Convict criminology is an attempt to bring first-hand experience of crime and criminal justice more firmly and consciously into criminological reasoning. This is not entirely new or original, and the 'convict' terminology bequeathed by the United States (Ross and Richards 2003) does not always travel well, but I argue that it can be a productive contribution to the discipline, a further addition to the un-choreographed expansion of criminology (Bosworth and Hoyle 2012). The disruptive particularities of convict criminology are challenging, but the intention of

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this article is to suggest it can be an experiment worth undertaking, worth developing and deserving of further criminological encouragement.

The article is concerned with the emergence of convict criminology in Britain and starts by briefly acknowledging the roots of this approach in US scholarship. I continue by exploring the significance of my own experience of imprisonment and its almost accidental relationship to the wider field of prison ethnography and criminology more generally. This provides the basis for a discussion of auto-ethnography's potentials for convict criminology. I then report on a series of interviews with a small number of criminologists in the United Kingdom who draw, in varying ways, on their imprisonment in their criminological practice. This includes a critical discussion of the diverse forms this practice can take. This discussion serves to demonstrate the tensions in convict criminological practice between the ontological and the epistemological i.e. what it is (and implicitly, who we are) and what it produces. I conclude with an appeal for both conventional and convict criminologists to extend their interest in this experiment with the restless soul of criminology.

A Brief Word About Convict Criminology in the United States

Writing *Against Criminology* in 1988, Stan Cohen concludes with a short chapter called 'The Last Seminar'. It is a hallucinatory, apocalyptic vision of a university social science faculty collapsing into the chaos, trauma and disorder it has hitherto only studied from afar. The account begins innocently enough as the criminology lecturer (Stan himself, we presume) notices an unfamiliar face in the lecture he is giving on prison:

He was not making any attempt to take notes but seemed to be concentrating... His eyes never left my face... In a strange way he seemed familiar. What must have struck me, even then I suppose, was that he looked very much like a prisoner. There was a certain grayness of the complexion, something about the hairstyle... (Cohen 1988: 298)

The man is identified as a recently registered mature student, 'Jeff Bridges', and at the end of the next lecture he walks up to the front of the class and says to Cohen 'You don't know anything about it, do you? It's all a game to you... Prison. You think because you've spoken to a few cons you understand it all. Well, you don't, you just don't' (Cohen 1988: 299)

The episode marks the start of the university's unravelling as one thing leads to another and armed guerrillas from Latin America start popping up in lectures on Development Studies and catatonic psychiatric patients rock mutely in the suddenly derelict corridors of the psychology department. Cohen's playful narrative hints it is not the campus that is spinning into the abyss so much as the mind of the academic, who eventually drives off at full speed into the beckoning lysergic horizon. It is not quite Hunter S Thompson¹ but the tone is very much 'fear and loathing in the groves of academe'.

¹Hunter S Thompson's 'Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas' is justifiably famous as a heartfelt, drug-addled paean to the loss of California's utopian dream. Its opening lines evoke a scene I think Cohen had in mind for his last seminar: 'We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold. I remember saying something like "I feel a bit lightheaded; maybe you should drive..." and suddenly there was a terrible roar all around us and the sky was full of what looked like huge bats, all swooping and screeching and diving around the car....'

Nearly a decade later, this scene of a convict confronting a criminologist is invoked in 'Convict Criminology: The Last Seminar', the 1997 launch event of convict criminology in the United States at the American Society of Criminology annual conference. However, Cohen's imagined implosion of a discipline, a campus and a society torn apart by its internal contradictions fails to materialize and instead criminology thrives, as if on steroids rather than cannabinoids. Transformed from the obscure bohemian 'brothels of intellectual muscle' lampooned by 1960s Situationist graffiti, criminology departments now resemble corporate fitness gyms where academics pump intellectual iron ahead of advertising campaigns inflating the employability of their products.

In the United States, the 'New School of Convict Criminology' still announces itself on its website by invoking the legacy not only of Taylor *et al.*'s (1973) Marxist reconstruction of *The New Criminology*, but also the Frankfurt School of critical theory. Notwithstanding the vaulting ambition of this announcement, convict criminology has established itself as a regular presence at US criminology conferences.

The history of convict criminology in the United States can be read elsewhere (Jones *et al.* 2009; Earle 2016; Ross *et al.* 2016) and this article will focus less on its American origins and outputs than on considering the possibilities of convict criminology in the United Kingdom. The people associated with the British Convict Criminology group, or otherwise eligible to be considered that way, are few and far between. Using the criteria adopted by the US group, a convict criminologist is someone who has been, or is, imprisoned and has a doctorate in criminology or something similar, or is approaching the completion of such a study. With funding provided by the Independent Social Research Foundation (ISRF) I recorded semi-structured interviews with six academics who meet these criteria and are, broadly speaking, working within British criminology. The article draws on these interviews, my own experience and other interactions within the group to explore the extent of common experience and perspectives on convict criminology.

Going Back Inside: From Ethnography to Auto-Ethnography

In 2007, I was confronted with some criminological dilemmas as I emerged from an ESRC research project about men's ethnic and racialized identities in prison (Phillips and Earle 2010; Phillips 2012; Earle and Phillips 2013). I had anticipated disclosure of my criminal convictions as part of the vetting and access procedures, and was relieved they did not prove to be an obstacle to becoming a researcher in prison. I knew I might be uncomfortable returning to prison some 25 years after being released from one but I was not prepared for the epistemological consequences that began to gather as I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in two English prisons. How could I have been? The only available literature on ex-prisoners as researchers was American, rarely cited and mostly unfamiliar to me. It was remote from my experience, and the 'convict' terminology seemed clumsy, arcane and alien to my relatively brief episode of incarceration so many years earlier. I did not think of myself as ever having been a convict and was only just beginning to think of myself as a viable criminologist.

In an ethnography there is no avoiding that you are the primary research instrument and no escaping an encounter with yourself (Davies 1999; Rowe 2015). Because of the double penal context of this encounter for me, the process has become increasingly

auto-ethnographic and hence personal. For example, a long-held but unspoken memory from my prison sentence kept surfacing as I approached the fieldwork, and eventually became the thread that I followed to fashion my own account of convict criminology (Earle 2016). It was about the exercise yard I walked around in as a prisoner in Her Majesty's Prison (HMP) Norwich in 1982 where a ghastly ring of green slime had been formed by the coughed up and spat out phlegm of the men (including myself) who walked round and round the high-walled yard on each exercise break. Would there be one in HMP Maidstone 25 years later, I wondered? There was not a ring of green slime, although the men pacing a similar circle around the fenced exercise yards were a depressingly familiar sight. Spitting, it seems, had gone out of fashion, although the men found plenty of other ways of registering their collective contempt for their surroundings, as it did for them. It seemed to express a kind of low key, vaguely malign, collective fellowship that is, I suspect, a resilient and enduring feature of men's imprisonment (Sykes 1958).

In my research some quotidian aspects of imprisonment were curiously familiar and some less so. Access to a telephone was unheard of, possibly undreamt of, in HMP Norwich in 1982. But now there were official phones on each landing and plentiful other options. The prospect of televisions in each cell would have been dismissed by my cellmates as the drug fuelled, deranged fantasies of the most utopian optimist. Let alone game machines. In-cell sanitation, an undoubted advance on slopping out a bucket of piss every morning, was qualified by the realization that a prison cells' dimensions so closely resemble those of the average domestic toilet. Serving time (days, months, years, hours, minutes, seconds, eating, sleeping, socializing) in a slightly modified toilet is a reasonable approximation of a prison sentence. Penal progress, as any criminologist knows, is nothing if not full of perverse ironies. In the idle, smoke-filled hours of cell life I remember thinking how much a prison resembled an ashtray with us prisoners distributed in various ways as cigarette ends, burning, fuming, stubbed out, abandoned and broken: unwanted detritus. Now it was self-evidently a sparsely furnished toilet.

Ethnography involves understanding the way people talk about themselves and other people, but is also about learning how to place oneself in the world (Das 1998). I was struck by how similar my feelings in prison were as an ethnographer the second time around to those as a prisoner the first time round (Earle 2014; 2017). These feelings manifested themselves in similar ways at the start of the research project—feelings of being in the wrong place, feeling vulnerable, awkward and exposed in ways I could not always control. These feelings are familiar to many prison researchers but their symmetry and correspondence to my feelings as a prisoner were intriguing. I recalled the sense of trying to adapt and find ways to fit in, to keep to myself but find people I could engage with. As a researcher, the keys changed everything: the anxious vertigo that accompanied their collection a trade-off for the security, access and freedom they provide, everything a prisoner loses.

Prison ethnographers wrestle with the penal particularities of the insider/outsider threshold around and across which an ethnographer must travel (Drake *et al.* 2015). Researchers are not imprisoned. They do not get convicted and there is no danger of them 'going native' in the conventional anthropological sense. They cannot become a prisoner. The convict criminologist is in a very different position, one that implies a degree of 'staying native' (Gillard *et al.* 2010) that is almost as equally unattainable as

the reverse is for the conventional researcher. Convict criminology creates new opportunities between these polarities.

Technically, you are only a prisoner as you serve the sentence but it tends to stay with you in various ways. I may have only served three months in HMP Norwich in 1982 but the threshold that I crossed is not one I will ever cross as a prison researcher, despite spending more time in prison as a researcher than as a prisoner. The only way of interrogating this difference is through auto-ethnography, an approach to research and writing that analyses personal experience to better understand cultural formations. Conventional prison ethnographers are precluded from traversing this particular route between the inside and the outside. Neither are the implications of conventional ethnographic immersion so legally toxic, socially enduring and personally disabling.

The Ghostly Essence of Enduring Criminal Records

Criminal convictions, as tattoos once were, are often believed (by the middle and upper classes) to be exclusive indicators of negative class distinction, of being unworthy. Writing about the British convict criminology group's first ever symposium in 2017, [Larsen \(2017\)](#) juxtaposes the tattooed arms of one participant with the croissant and coffee he is helping to dispense—the one signifying threat and danger, the other (apparently) civilization and safety. The tattooed and thus possibly dangerous ex-prisoner is too tempting a cliché even for this sympathetic anthropological journalist.

[Sandhu \(2017\)](#) captures the sense of being seen as a lurking threat: 'Ex-prisoners are often feared. They are treated as ghosts and contaminants.' I have found from personal experience that as I age, having a prison record is to live with a biographical shadow, revealed like a tattoo by certain kinds of metaphorically ultraviolet light. The shadow is like a two-dimensional fictional identity trailing around behind me, attached to my heels by the mechanism of the criminal law as firmly as any iron shackles.

A shadow usually bears some resemblance to its original object but it can also be a grotesque distortion, controlled by the light casting it. So it is with criminal convictions. Since the routine disclosure of criminal records has become normalized and popularized in the United Kingdom through the operation of the Criminal Records Bureau, the shadow jumps out more and more frequently, spooking me if I need to travel internationally, apply for jobs, volunteer, do community work or seek election ([Earle 2016](#); [Grimshaw 2017](#); [Henley 2017](#); [2018](#)). Criminal records are becoming the leg-irons of the immaterial social relations of a liquid modernity ([Bauman 2000](#)).

The shadows cast by a criminal record gives visible shape but no real substance to the symbols of trouble that [Cohen \(1980\)](#) found to be stalking the modern imagination. It is a kind of personalized folk devil that can be summoned into all kinds of public performance. As well as setting practical obstacles to employment, travel, accommodation, commerce and democratic participation, it also has metaphysical, existential ramifications. The shadow cast over the character of the convicted person falls into that intuitively felt gap between a person and their representation. It exposes a general existential truth regarding the impossibility of fully projecting a singular, private self into the public world. The sense of slippage between the 'I' that speaks and the 'I' that is spoken of is one that many postmodern social scientists might recognize sympathetically but few will ever feel at such regular intervals, or with such manifestly raw

or concrete implications as a convict criminologist. As a result, I think I am entitled to try to bend that identity to my own preferred identity as an academic. Indeed, in some respects, as a criminologist, I feel I am obliged to do so.

Increasingly, and apparently irresistibly, a criminal record provides a distinctive form of qualified, second-class citizenship that has become so extensive and racialized in the United States that it has been defined as carceral citizenship (Allen 2017; Miller and Stuart 2017; Henley 2017; 2018). This class of citizenship involves an involuntary, more or less permanent, intimate and visceral relationship to the state. As a prisoner you become the property of the state and this sense of possession, and of being dispossessed of oneself, is hard to cancel. The novelist John Cheever (1977: 204) evokes its ambiguous, paradoxical grip in his story, *Falconer*, about an imprisoned academic who reflects thus on his carceral condition: 'How strange to be living and to be grown and to be carried.' Once this hold of the state is established, it is hard to shake off or ignore. Miller and Stuart (2017: 537) argue:

A criminal record renders the conventional citizen translatable, as criminal, to the networks of responsabilized actors empowered to manage them. To be translatable in this sense refers to the communication of a person's 'essence', in much the same way that a translator communicates the essence of a text (Benjamin 1968). Here, a criminal record makes the essence of the criminalized subject legible, or readable, to others.

For a convict criminologist the experience of being reduced to a legal category by translation is reasonably familiar, but the academic struggle to turn this around in a reflexive, auto-ethnographic act of self-translation is far from easy and even less straightforward. Auto-ethnography is an increasingly recognized form of sociological introspection (Ellis 1991; Dashper 2015) that develops connections between the persona of the researcher and the cultural phenomena being studied. For convict criminology it is an approach that brings their lived experience of incarceration into the process of generating knowledge about prison, conducting research and teaching criminology. It involves investing in reflexivity and autobiographical writing that is relatively rare and perhaps not even welcome in criminology (Phillips and Earle 2010).

Developing Convictions in Reflexive Criminology

Some senior and well-established criminologists have revealed their motivations and biographical investments in conventional criminology, taking a cautious approach to any potential epistemological benefits it might provide (Holdaway and Rock 1998). Any academic who tangles with reflexivity and auto-ethnography exposes themselves to a variety of academic dangers. Self-indulgent narcissism, obsessive subjectivity and a pre-occupation with personal identity rather than social structures are familiar, well-documented enemies. In criminology, where the business of the discipline is transgression, censure, stigma and breaking the law, disclosing a personal investment in this currency rather than the simple virtues of social justice that variously propelled Holdaway and Rock's protagonists can multiply these dangers.

Sociology as a discipline has been somewhat more accommodating than criminology to reflexivity (Dean 2017; Twamley *et al.* 2015). This may be because of a more long-standing exposure to C. Wright Mills' early exhortations to connect private troubles

with public issues, and more sustained engagement with its epistemic benefits and implications (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Mills' exhortations to locate private troubles in public issues and connect them to history and social structures are a guiding light to convict criminology. He says:

...you must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship is the centre of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you work. (Mills 1959: 196)

In sociology the diversity and vitality of feminist theories and methodologies that stress positionality, 'affect' and 'standpoint' have been more quickly and openly embraced than within criminology, albeit not without struggles and resistance (Harding 2004; Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002). Feminists insist there is no view from nowhere, no perspective without perspective and no single objective 'master' position that guarantees a sociological claim to be a truly scientific discipline. The personal is sociological, and vice versa. The reflexive priorities of convict criminology can thus be challenging to some of the dominant historical traditions and positivist predispositions of criminology.

As Wakeham (2014) notes with some urgency and strong example, reflexivity is an approach to criminology that is catching on and starting to refresh the connections between personal experiences and academic activity, social practices and conceptual knowledge. Cultural criminology, with its stress on the value of ethnography, is particularly active in these developments (Ferrell and Sanders 1995; Hayward and Young 2004) but convict criminology is well placed to reanimate some of the principles of 'situated knowledge' and 'standpoint epistemologies' as they apply to imprisonment and criminal justice. Autobiographical writing and subjective accounts of imprisonment have an important role to play in this project.

Curating Imprisonment: Prisoner Autobiography and Creativity

Autobiographical accounts of imprisonment (Irwin 1970; Boyle 1977; 1984; Chevigny and Prejean 1999; Morgan 1999; Hassine 1999) indicate how prisoners live through the contradictions, ambiguities and entanglements that the criminologists helpfully identify in their studies (Brown and Clare 2005). Prisoners' writings reveal themselves as neither the mutes nor the brutes of popular imagination but as people fashioning themselves to their circumstances with the usual distinguishing features of human agency; dignity, humour, intelligence and integrity. As the artist Antony Gormley (2017) noted in his curation of the 2017 Koestler exhibition² of prisoners' art and writing, their work 'realises the prisoner as a creative being' rather than a contained one and subverts their conventional representation as beasts best kept out of sight and in cages. Gormley goes so far as to describe the finest prison artists as 'the psychonauts of the 21st century, telling us things we do not know about inside worlds, the truths we lock up, and thus helping the outside world to know itself better' (Gormley 2017). For Gormley, prisoners' art emerges as much from the 'mania of the wings' as it does from the 'hermitage

²Arthur Koestler was a writer who campaigned throughout the 1950s in the United Kingdom for the abolition of capital punishment and then established a fund to foster ways of 'stimulating the mind and spirit of the prisoner'. <https://www.koestler-trust.org.uk/exhibitions/developments>

of cell life'. Creating work from the 'induced paralysis' of prison, the prison artist is an 'expert witness' on what prison does and how it can be seen. They produce reports from the 'front line of the human imagination', 'phenomenal testimony' about how to live in lifeless conditions. Gormley reveals himself as someone who speaks from personal experience of imprisonment in the United Kingdom (for drugs), Iran and Afghanistan (for art).

Notwithstanding the richness of such art and literature it cannot necessarily be taken as representative of the general prison population (Brown and Clare 2005) and neither is it intentionally criminological. Prisoner autobiographies in particular are commonly propelled by a variety of specific motives such as indicating the author's personal innocence, a miscarriage of justice, literary or journalistic ambition or the desire to give cautionary advice to future generations. However, even as critical criminologists dissolve the ontological reality of crime with the concomitant definitional diffusion of the so-called 'real criminal', prisoners as 'convicts' remain ontologically, materially and existentially intact. It is this resource that convict criminology is well placed to exploit. It can write from within the discipline and theorize from personal experience of its most iconic institution—the prison. Convict criminology can shift the emphasis from the peripheral incidental benefit provided by autobiographical accounts generated outside the discipline (with all their compensatory subjective vitality) to a more central role in developing critical knowledge of prison life by incorporating their lived experience of it within criminology. This involves shifting the conventional nomothetic emphasis of a criminology seeking generalizable relationships of cause and effect to an idiographic approach producing richer understandings of cultural and subjective experience. The necessary work on the personal and relatively unique experience of crime, prison and criminology has only just begun within convict criminology in the United Kingdom. The singularity of personal experience and the challenge of weaving together a collective intellectual project from disparate strands of experience are plainly revealed in the group of scholars I interviewed.

Peeling Back Some Criminal Labels

The criminological demographics of the ISRF Positive Convictions interview group ($n = 6$) are relatively predictable, reflecting much of the conventional criminological wisdom and established 'criminological facts' of crime, but also some of its complications. There was one woman among the respondents. All but one are white, and diversely so, with two volunteering 'White British' ethnicity, one 'Mixed ethnicity' and the others qualifying their white ethnicity with a 'secondary whiteness' (Alexander 2017) from a variety of minority 'mixed' markers. Between them the group have nearly 80 convictions, although again, this simple aggregation belies a complex distribution. For one person (the one female 'convict'), seven convictions arise from a single trial resulting in a custodial sentence that marks the beginning and end of criminal sanctioning at a relatively late age. For another respondent, criminal sanctions began age 11 (formal police caution) and ended six years later, aged 17, with a life/indeterminate sentence. The prison sentences range from three months to 'life', and some were served in a single prison, some in several. With over 30 years of custodial experience, the group covers nearly all the categories of penal detention, from pretrial remand, youth

detention, military detention, high-security prisons, punishment blocks and open conditions dating back to the 1980s.

Three of the male members of the group were first sanctioned age 12 or less, while for the two others, 17 was the age at which they were first convicted. All of the men report leaving school at 16, or earlier, with poor or non-existent qualifications. All the men received their first criminal sanction before they had reached the age of 18 and all had been in prison by the time they reached their late-20s. None of the group has less than five convictions, and one has over 20. The offences sanctioned range from property and drug offences through to varieties of serious and fatal violence. I place myself mostly within this range and contribute further to its internal diversity by having a somewhat later age of exiting full-time education and acquiring a first criminal sanction.

A prison sentence is a sanction that tends to preclude academic career options while the more conventional avenues into criminology lie along a mostly seamless and selective progression from school to university, then onward and upward. The road much less well travelled into criminology, convict criminology, runs more laterally and downhill from school failure to the revolving prison door, and out again. In this respect, convict criminology can be (to some extent) a proxy for working class perspectives in criminology. Although this has not been my route³ or possible proxy, it has for each of the men interviewed for the small study I report from in this article.

The absence of black participants in the study does not mean that there are no eligible black criminological academics, or aspiring academics. The process of identifying respondents for the ISRF study depended on a small social network established by the British Convict Criminology group since it was set up in 2011. Although diverse white ethnicities and class backgrounds are represented in the group, no black students or academics are currently active in the group, although there is some anecdotal evidence that black scholars with criminological interests and experience of imprisonment are starting to emerge. The group currently reproduces some dynamics of whiteness as a selective, self-reproducing, self-referential social network, and the group is working to recognize and disrupt these dynamics. The over-representation of black men and women in the criminal justice system relative to their presence in the general population and the under-representation of black men in universities (and their disproportionate exclusion from schools) combine perversely to make their absence from convict criminology, both in the United Kingdom and the United States, a particularly significant feature, with all its concomitant epistemological drawbacks (Belknap 2015; Ross *et al.* 2016; Aresti and Darke 2016).

A positive feature of the expanding reach and resources that the ISRF research funding facilitated was the inclusion of two women ex-prisoners in an academic symposium organized during the course of the research, one with a completed PhD under review, and another at an earlier stage of undergraduate criminological inquiry. Given the vastly different scale of men's imprisonment, the gender composition of the British convict criminology group and the interview sample is less unrepresentative than is the case with race.

³I completed my A-levels at a private school, proceeded to university, breaking various laws and pushing a few boundaries on my way out to an early exit.

Rogues Playing to the Gallery?

Even though prejudice and discrimination against people with convictions is endemic, usually unjustified and frequently toxic, for some of the men in the group, some of the time, it is not all bad news, victimization and struggles against cruel injustice. Without wanting to diminish or distract from those pejorative dynamics, it is only fair to recognize there can also be less malign dynamics at work that tend to have a distinctively masculine register. The romanticized image and criminological traction of ‘the bold outlaw’, ‘the loveable rogue’, ‘the defiant rebel’ or ‘the cheeky non-conformist rule-breaker’ receives relatively little critical attention within criminology, and even less within convict criminology.

One of the convict criminologists I interviewed, ‘Ron’⁴, successfully deploys a twitter-handle that refers playfully to his double identity as a criminologist and ex-convict, along the lines of ‘ronthecon@twitterfeed’. ‘Ron’ is comfortable disclosing his past as a prisoner and has been centrally involved in developing convict criminology in the United Kingdom. He wears his convictions relatively lightly on his academic sleeve, as it were, saying ‘I think I’ve always had more sympathy for those on the wrong side of the law, and I’m very critical of the criminal justice system in my teaching’. He has no difficulties disclosing that he has criminal convictions and enjoys a creative teaching partnership with a colleague that plays to their respective strengths:

Students absolutely love it. I co-teach and we play as a team. She is young and hip, and they love her because she’s so nice, and then I stand up and say ‘I’ve been to prison’ (in so many words) and they just go ‘what!?’ And they spend the next three years trying to guess what I was in for because I don’t tell them that, and we play with that. First years are always a bit dumbstruck, and what I tell them is ‘you should never judge a book by its cover’. I tell them I’m not on any lists, like the sex offender register or anything like that, and I try to be light and humorous about it, but I tell them that as they are going to learn a lot over three years ‘who would you rather was teaching you about prisons and criminal justice? Someone who has read all the right books or someone who’s been through it? Or someone who’s done both?’ which is how I put myself out there to them.

As ‘Ron’ puts it he was ‘no stranger to breaking the law’ and his prison sentence was the culmination of that familiarity. He had ‘spent enough time in handcuffs’ to know he was headed for a prison cell. His sustained experience of criminal justice, his convictions, has become an integral part of his teaching style.

For ‘Gavin’, a sustained involvement in relatively high-level drug dealing also has a complex hinterland that belies simple references but because his convictions cluster around a relatively familiar criminal categorization (drug dealing) his experiences vary accordingly. When he discloses them to students, he sometimes gets frustrated by those who then imply they have equivalent criminal experience because they cut a few drug deals among their friends, as if they are seeking out a kind of criminal fraternity they have neither ‘earned’ nor actually exists as they imagine. He concedes there is an easy glamour attached to his dealing convictions that students respond to with relish. It helps to make him popular with them, he says, and is seen as being consistent with what they know of his character and teaching style:

⁴Pseudonyms have been used because although several respondents are openly aligned with convict criminology, others are not and the process of disclosure should always remain with the individual concerned.

I don't put on any airs and graces and I'm quite popular with students because of the topics I teach, and when I disclose it's like 'Oh, yeah, we're not surprised' and they find the story quite fascinating, but that's the nature of the offence.

For some, however, public disclosure remains either too painful, too complicated or too distracting to be viable, and they eschew the convict criminology label, continuing their criminological practice without recourse to its possibilities or pitfalls.

According to [Hobsbawm \(1959: 5\)](#) the not-so-reluctant admiration of the lawless and the criminal are historic legacies of important class struggles. The bandit's perennial appeal lies in their capacity to stir 'longings for lost innocence and adventure' and evoke sentiments of 'freedom, heroism and the dream of justice'. Hobsbawm (1969) lists nine characteristics of the 'noble bandit' myth, many of which beckon seductively at the self-image of the convict criminologist. For example, in myth, the robber is the victim of some prior injustice that propels him (for it is usually a male figure in myth, legend and reality) to commit a crime, and he is often involved in righting some other wrong. He takes from the rich to give to the poor and is persecuted by those more powerful than himself. These are almost foundation myths of critical criminology, and their persuasive force has long animated tensions within critical and realist criminologies ([Scruton 1987](#); [Lea and Young 1993](#)). Feminist criminology has exposed the neglect of gender analysis in criminology's fixation on men's behaviour and social orders. Men in criminology, convict or otherwise, draw from patriarchal dividends ([Connell 1987](#)) that propel their academic practice and convict criminology's men may need to be wary of the avenues it opens for them.

The symbolism of 'the outlaw' is a potent and intoxicating cocktail for criminological thinking, full of tempting, testing, simplifications to attract the eager, questing minds of undergraduate students, or the vaguely curious. The imagined criminal is an intelligible object in an increasingly unintelligible world—the elemental figure conjured by Marx whose social presence produces 'art, literature, novels and even tragedies'. Steeped in conflicts between the rich and the poor, the country and city, the modern and the premodern, and law and disorder, the figure of the outlaw animates both folk memories and popular cultures. Hobsbawm's ideas about 'primitive rebels' suggest the enduring appeal of an archetype, masculine figure of protest and refusal finding a new home in a modern context where organized threats to capitalism and alternative social visions have been in recession. Sympathy for the devil persists well beyond Mick Jagger's leering postures, Keith Richards' guitar riffs and [Alain Touraine's \(1981\)](#) theorizing. However, it remains locked within a relatively convenient neoliberal focus on the individual and 'his' wrongs being contested. The 'convict' evoked in the 'convict criminology' epithet banks some of this doubtful intellectual capital in a rather abstract semantic challenge to official structures of power and law (see [Earle 2016](#)).

The remarkable growth of criminology feeds on these popular myths, even as it critically engages with the symbolism of crime and the vicarious pleasures that can accompany its study. Convict criminology exists, with varying degrees of comfort and discomfort within this nexus where the criminal symbolizes a struggle for justice, and the convict is an emblem of injustice. Convict criminology, just as much as conventional criminology, can be an intellectual sublimation of a narcissistic fascination with the image of the criminal 'other', a partially rationalized, partially repressed admiration for what the fantasy figure, usually masculine, is imagined to represent ([Duncan 1996](#)).

Convict criminologist's personal proximity and potential for complicity with, or challenge to, these masculine schematics can make it better equipped to dispel, challenge or critically interrogate the gender dynamics of the appeal of such myths (Earle 2017).

There is much work to be done within convict criminology to critically interrogate how the criminal label is decommissioned in our work, the stigma laid to rest and the intellectual capital mobilized according to the different 'originating' crimes. It is also open to question, given the gendered dynamics of crime and punishment, if this 'rogue' persona is ever likely to be viable for women convict criminologists. The only woman within the interview group has struggled to secure a teaching position. Most recently (2017) her selection at interview by a leading British university criminology department was overruled by Human Resources who cited as justification an 'unacceptable risk of reputational harm' would accompany her appointment.

Women's journeys into and through penal custody vary considerably from men's. Women make up less than 5% of the prison population and are more likely to be serving short sentences—more than 70% of women entering prison in 2016 were sentenced to six months or less. There are thus fewer women who spend long enough in prison to engage in further or higher education, so their journey is less likely to start there than men's. Further, around 60% of women in prison are mothers and are more likely to be the sole carer of their children (Prison Reform Trust 2017). This frequently limits their ability to access education even in the community. Convict criminology's focus on prison experience and men can implicitly marginalize women's distinctive penal experience. It must find ways to address that exclusion and develop a convict criminology that fits with women's differing experience of criminalization and punishment. The potentials of feminist convict criminology and the distinctive features of women's approach to convict criminology are just starting to emerge in the United States with the first panel of feminist convict criminology convened at the American Society of Criminology 2016.

None of those interviewed have had an easy ride into academic life on the back of their convictions. The doors that have opened have, for the most part, been forced open by the determination and perseverance of scholars convinced they have something distinctive to offer criminology. It is not as if convict criminologists have nothing to lose but our epistemological chains and an academic world to win. Along the way we face discrimination, academic precarity, social awkwardness and any combination of embarrassment, shame and stigma.

Different Convictions, Convincing Differences

In my conversations and interviews with other criminologists who have a double exposure to prison life and penal orders, both as prisoners and as researchers, differences of experience and perspective emerge. Where I twice encountered what Bourdieu (1977) describes as 'hysteresis'—a sense of being out of place—both as a researcher and a prisoner, some of my respondents remark on the unwelcome familiarity of prison life, a place where they feel they are among people like themselves. 'Gavin' declares he has frequently found university life more intimidating and estranging than prison life, particularly in the early days of his academic studies. Returning to teach, research or conduct advocacy work in prison, he is uncomfortable with the paradoxical sense of still

being more at ease on the wings and landings of the prisons he visits than the corridors of the universities where he works.

For 'Mike', entering prison for the first time confronted him with the long-deferred pains of withdrawal from opiates. The imposition of a prisoner identity and status was almost secondary to his 'user' identity. He talks of contending now with two 'spoiled identities', those of a prisoner and those of an addict as he attempts to craft an academic identity. Like 'Gavin' in prison, he found familiar faces and men like himself:

My neighbour was in, or my sister's neighbour was in... And so there was familiarity around me and people knew my family. I come from quite a big family. So I wasn't completely isolated. And many of us would shuffle around together because we would be withdrawing and coming off certain things. But then there were people who would be from your estate as well, who you might not know well, but you'd know well enough to identify with them. So it was quite a familiar space.

The 'rattle' of withdrawal symptoms combined with the regular pains of imprisonment to shape 'Mike's' survival strategies. These centred on elective therapeutic regimes where he also found a volunteer teacher who not only recognized his talents and his troubles, but also took the vital step of telling him so:

There was a volunteer who had absolutely no agenda except to try and inspire people to learn... Anybody could see that 'Mary' was just fully invested in trying to change lives. And she said something to me one day that has just stayed with me. She went, 'you know, 'Mike', you really, really talk like you're very, very intelligent. Your words are very, very considered words, you are very intelligent. And there's a massive disconnect between what you say here and how you put it down on paper'. And she said 'you're a very, very intelligent young man, but you can't write and you clearly struggle reading. Has anyone ever considered that you might have some particular kind of [impairment]?' And that just stayed with me really and I took that out.

'Ron' also talks of prison as a familiar fate where he expected to find familiar faces:

I sort of knew what to expect. From my brothers who'd been to prison, and others. For a long time I wasn't what you'd call an upstanding member of the community. The people in prison, though I didn't know any of them personally, I knew their type, they were people like me.

Like 'Mike', he also stumbled into the pivotal inspiration provided by a third party that propelled him into an academic path. Working alongside a student in a cinema after his release, he was struck by her remark that if she were to write down half the things he was saying to her in one of her essays, she would be getting a First in her criminology degree. Convinced by her arguments, he completed a UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) form the next day, and was accepted after submitting a sample essay. With the encouragement of a sympathetic and supportive professor (take a bow Eamonn Carrabine), he has never looked back.

'Steve's' first custodial experience was in the army, and it was brutal; the first of several episodes of incarceration. Steve's struggles with mental health and criminal activity eventually resulted in serving time alongside lifers where he found a sense of sanctuary, stability and safety. Education with The Open University proved transformative and 'Steve' began to nurture ambitions of combining his prison experience with his criminology. He refers to it as his 'lightbulb moment':

I thought I can study my own people here, I can become a criminologist, I can become a lecturer, this is what I want to do, this is where I want to go, so I'd planned on doing what I'm doing now way back then, and I've stuck to that. I wanted to prove myself to all those that said I'd never make it, I'm a waste of space, I'm this, I'm that and the other. I thought if I can prove it by completely turning this on its head, I'll show them.

For 'Hazel' the shock of custody was intense, but mitigated only slightly by an unanticipated sense of relief that a long period of uncertainty and indeterminacy was over. Her memories are of the overwhelming sense of dread and the challenge of a particular kind of performance required of her if she were to survive the ordeal. She relates how the prison had a performance of its own, a kind of unexpected gender work that involved stripping her and the other women of the comforts and conventions of their femininity:

I've never seen bodies ruined like that. Bits of bodies just hanging in ways I've not witnessed in my everyday life. Because in prison people are wearing clothes that don't fit them, and also they're very damaged through lots of things that have happened in their life. Some were very ill. Some were recovering from drugs. I'd never seen women with no teeth before, and their dyed hair growing out, hair extensions all falling out, weaves grown out. Nails awful. It was like their ability to hold themselves together had been taken away.

Despite her criminological studies and voluntary work with young men in custody, she felt unprepared for the human dereliction she encountered in the women's prison.

'Marcus' was propelled rapidly from the 'shallow end' of the criminal justice system in his teenage years, to its deepest waters. His first encounter with custody was marked by spontaneous and sustained violence. Now an established and widely respected lecturer, 'Marcus' recognizes his experience in penological terms as 'entry-shock' and intense, ritualistic mortification. His response to the prospect of a long sentence was a conscious and deliberate investment in stoic resistance, personal education and intellectual development.

The discordance of my middle class habitus contrasts sharply with several of my respondents where theirs was a mostly working class habitus that has the prison gate never very far from their door. For some of them, this familiarity is reversed when the institutions are switched and the university becomes 'an environment... too distant from that in which they are objectively fitted' (Bourdieu 1977: 78). Their habitus makes them feel like a fish out of water at university, in criminology, while I have never felt more at home in a job.

I cannot tell their stories or manufacture their convict criminology, but convict criminology and criminology-at-large will be a better place when they do. The three month sentence that I served is the same in length as Ron's, but there are few other similarities in our biographies. Does three months incarceration qualify either us to speak of prison in ways a conventional criminologist cannot? Ron is unequivocal and self-consciously adamant that it makes a difference:

I tell students, and parents on open days, they are going to learn from someone with first-hand experience. I tell them how it helps to have been there, to have seen the humanity in prison, and the opposite, to have been part of it, and how everyone in prison is being judged by the worst thing they've done in their life, but that no-one will see the good they've done. Convict criminology can change that. I paid a price to get this knowledge, and the price I paid I'll never get back, and you

can't get it from a book. I think being a prisoner in prison, compared to being in prison in any other way, as a researcher, an academic, a visitor, no matter how much time you spend in prison, its vastly different time when you are a prisoner. I've got that different perspective.

He recognizes the value of conventional criminological studies of imprisonment. They are distinguished by the detailed, insightful and innovative accounts of the academics concerned but they constitute a presence and practice that can and will be supplemented by his 'convict' accounts and practice, and those of other convict criminologists.

Just an Illusio? Convict Criminology as Justice Reinvestment

The possibilities of convict criminology are not to produce the last word on prison, definitive accounts of prison life otherwise missing from criminology. The inherently ideographic and auto-ethnographic approach precludes the generation of masterful overviews proclaiming an exclusive authenticity; the real truth of prison life or 'telling it like it is' because ordinary, decent criminologists can't or won't. In place of this ambition I refer to the distinction made by Lionel Trilling (1972) between sincerity and authenticity: sincerity is a consistency between who we say we are and the way we behave and act, while authenticity implies an essential or intrinsic truth to ourselves. The differences between our penal experiences, revealed even within my tiny interview group, do not preclude theorization of collective convict criminology perspectives but the strength of convict criminology can be built on the particular riches of each sincere account. The common thread in this collective diversity arises from having crossed the penal threshold and a common purpose to offer each other support and example; we are here to stay until prisons cease to proliferate on the back of the criminological project; we are here to help build a more egalitarian dialogue between two institutions at the opposite ends of the social structure, and with sometimes opposing social missions. The epistemological challenge—what kind of knowledge can we produce—is work that has just begun and cannot be rushed.

The apocalyptic visions of 'The Last Seminar' invoked by the launch of convict criminology in the United States might correspond with the atrocities of the penal system in the United States, but they do not travel easily across the Atlantic. There is no arguing with the existence of convict criminologists (the ontological issue) but there are plenty of arguments about the criminology (the epistemological issue). It is not the paradigm shattering revelation conjured by Stan Cohen's 'Last Seminar', and alluded to by The New School in the United States. It cannot fulfil Marx's prescription and lay claim to the whole of criminology, but Hobsbawm's *Bandits* offer a clue to one significant potential. If criminology is to be something other than a branch of sociology stripped of its emancipatory foliage and pruned to the requirements of cutting crime, it needs its sense of injustice. Few people emerge from a prison sentence without one of those because they have been through the travesty of how it is known from the outside and how it is experienced from the inside.

Convict criminology's 'illusio', Bourdieu's (1977) term for worthwhile and fulfilling life pursuits around which people's lives are lived, includes rare opportunities to combine intimate, visceral understandings about the loss of liberty, the meanings of confinement, the power of the state, the force of punishment, finding freedoms, earning privileges, expulsion from society and re-entry, and most of all, the transcendent

potential of teaching and learning. Each of my respondents was nothing less than a passionate teacher and had learned their criminology the hard way. That combination of lived experience is a precious resource. It may not ever amount to much more than a handful of individuals but minority experience need not be marginalized experience (Phillips and Bowling 2003). In prison reform and abolitionist campaigns, policy alliances and service delivery, the ‘citizen expert’ with lived experience of the issue is becoming increasingly vocal. Criminology can critically interrogate this development and be part of it—it needs its ‘experts by experience’ and can help to make more of them.

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