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**Developing Insider Perspectives in Research Activism**

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# INTRODUCTION FROM THE ISSUE EDITORS

## Developing Insider Perspectives in Research Activism

*Andreas Aresti and Sacha Darke*

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Convict Criminology (CC) was established in 1997 in North America, by pioneering academics Jeffrey Ian Ross and Stephen Richards (Richards and Ross, 2001; Ross and Richards, 2003). From its initial inception the primary aim was to develop an intellectual enterprise that not only challenged and critiqued dominant models of practice and policy within the penal system, but also the dominant discourses and pre-existing knowledge surrounding prisoner experiences and the realities of prison life (ibid.). Critically, the aim was to “privilege the voices of current and former prisoners in debates concerning penalty” (Larsen and Piché, 2012, p. 1). The absence of these voices within these debates, and more broadly speaking, academic knowledge production, led to a distorted picture of the realities of prison life. Given this, CC’s aim was to develop a critical research agenda grounded in first-hand accounts of prison life, as well as current and former prisoner-led academic engagement with prison authorities and activists (Jones et al, 2009; Richards and Ross, 2001; Ross and Richards, 2003).

Complimenting this conception of an academic enterprise, CC developed a mentoring programme with the primary objective being to bring the prisoners voices onto the criminal justice stage, through collaborative works that highlight current issues within the penal system. In particular, its aim was to highlight the dehumanizing prison conditions experienced by those incarcerated and the poor treatment of prisoners (Richards and Lenza, 2012).

In short, and as previously articulated elsewhere, “CC was born of the frustration ex-convict professors and graduate students experienced when reading the academic literature on prisons” (Jones et al, 2009, p. 152), much of which ignored the lived realities of prison life (Richards and Ross, 2001; Ross and Richards, 2003). Its attempts to reverse this disparity, and its recognition of the importance and value of privileging the voices of those incarcerated, have been critical in terms of providing an alternative lens for examining the criminal justice landscape.

Since its inception, two decades ago, CC has evolved, and its continual development and success is evident in the plethora of academic articles, research contributions, conference/panel contributions, policy/practice recommendations and other publications, which challenge and critique a wide range of criminal justice issues. It is specifically concerned

with developing insider perspectives within critical criminology, while challenging “managerial criminology, criminal justice, and corrections” (Richards and Ross, 2001, p. 183), and “the way in which crime and correctional problems are traditionally represented and discussed by researchers, policy makers, and politicians” (Jones et al, 2009, p. 152). Although those that research within a CC perspective, do not necessarily promote complete abolition, CC shares with critical criminology an interest in deconstructing the contradictions, biases and failings of prison (see Kalica, this volume). As such, it has attracted the interest of a broad range of academic criminologists and criminal justice practitioners concerned with radical prison reform. Moreover, CC’s success is clearly apparent in its gradually expanding network of members both in the US and more recently across the globe, and its ability to stand the test of time, evidenced in not only its ongoing academic contributions and activism, but also its contribution to the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP) through a special edition which commemorated its 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2012. This current special edition of the *JPP* commemorating CC’s 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary lays testament to this and in particular reinforces the view that we are crossing borders internationally.

Two decades on, CC’s continual development and success is unquestionable, and although there is a shift towards the internationalization of CC, this process has been relatively slow. Our colleagues in the US are the first to acknowledge this criticism, and despite their efforts, up until most recently, CC has predominantly been a US endeavour. As Ross and colleagues (2014, p. 127) articulate, “one of the criticisms that CC has faced over the years concerns the absence of a transnational outlook”. This of course has a variety of implications for understanding the lived realities of incarceration and for penal practices in other countries given the significant differences in criminal justice systems, practices, treatment, conditions, laws and policies (Ross et al, 2014).

### **THE EMERGENCE OF BRITISH CONVICT CRIMINOLOGY (BCC)**

Despite Ross and Richards (2003) attempts to extend prisoner perspectives in criminology/criminal justice beyond North America, this goal, as noted, has until recently been met with moderate success. Ross and colleagues (2014)

observe that a variety of inhibiting factors have prevented CC from broadening its appeal and academic work. Whilst a detailed account is provided in their article “Developing Convict Criminology Beyond North America” (ibid), suffice to say that many of these barriers are practical difficulties including the inability for many ex-convict academics to travel to other countries due to travel restrictions as a result of their ‘ex-offender’ status. Such restrictions are not unique to the US and in our experience we have had similar issues when inviting CC members to the UK. In 2014, one of the contributors to this special edition, Elton Kalica, was prevented from joining the guest editors on a panel they had convened at the annual conference of the European Group of Deviance and Social Control (the European Group) in Liverpool. As an Albanian national, Kalica was required to apply for a tourist visa prior to travel. The second named author wrote Kalica a supporting reference and was subsequently interviewed by UK immigration authorities. Even so, Kalica’s passport was held for several months and returned to him only after the conference had concluded. Earlier that year, UK Immigration Rules had been amended to introduce a lifetime visa ban for people who have served a four-year prison sentence, or above. A one to four-year prison sentence attracts a ten-year visa ban. Those that have served a prison sentence of under a year are banned for five years (The Information HUB, n.d.).

Relative to this, travel restrictions have meant that US CC academics are unable to establish themselves in other countries and, in particular, Europe. We would also argue that geographical positioning (distance) and travel restrictions combined, have been a major barrier in developing prisoner perspectives beyond American borders. Whilst some headway has been made, through attending conferences and academic collaborations with other Convict Criminologists in other countries, the lack of a consistent ‘physical’ presence in the UK and Europe has impacted on CC’s development beyond the borders of the US.

Amplifying this, apathy from academics in other parts of the world, especially the UK and Europe has also been a barrier for the internationalisation of CC. Ross and Richards (2003) put out a call for interest in CC and invited colleagues abroad to join the CC network. However, the call was met with little interest.

Despite these issues, and with the support of our American colleagues, in particular Ross and Richards, a handful of British academics, working within a CC framework, began to push forward with the idea of developing

a CC network in the UK. In 2012, the guest editors, along with Rod Earle, established the first CC group outside of the United States. What materialised was the emergence of British Convict Criminology (BCC). Since that time, BCC's founding members have organized panels and presented papers from a CC perspective at numerous universities and conferences in the UK, as well as in the US (e.g. at the 2016 Annual Meetings of the American Society of Criminology), Brazil and continental Europe (Italy, Norway, and Bosnia and Herzegovina). They have also published over a dozen CC-related academic articles, as well as one book (Earle, 2016). These efforts have not only helped to give BCC a wider presence in academic criminology, but also support its vision, shared with colleagues in other countries, that it is time for CC to move beyond the Anglophone countries of the Northern hemisphere (see Ross et al, 2014), which we discuss more about below. BCC now has over 100 members, two-thirds of who are serving or former prisoners studying in higher education. It is in contact with approximately 10 former prisoners who have obtained full-time positions in Criminology or are otherwise studying for a PhD in Criminology and are teaching undergraduate students part-time.

In the past four years, BCC has initiated four schemes for supporting prisoners in higher education: an academic mentoring scheme, which to date has matched around 40 prisoner social science students with full-time academics, and higher education projects at three prisons, taught at foundation degree level (at HMP Pentonville, London), third year undergraduate degree level (HMP Grendon, near Oxford) and master's degree level (HMP Coldingley, a short distance from London). Each of these latter projects involves groups of Westminster University criminology students studying alongside prisoners.

The Pentonville project involves an accredited semester long (12 week) introduction to criminology course. It runs twice a year. Outside learners study the course as part of their BA Criminology degree, while inside learners gain credits they might use towards a foundation degree. Lessons are taught each Wednesday afternoon in the prison library. HMP Pentonville is a local prison that mostly holds prisoners on remand and/or for the first few months of their sentence. The project was cited as an example of good practice in the Coates (2016) UK Ministry of Justice review on prison education. The Grendon and Coldingley projects are on-going and include year-round monthly reading groups. HMP Grendon

has perhaps the most progressive regime of any prison in the UK. It is a democratic therapeutic community that holds only long-term prisoners. HMP Coldingley is a low-security training prison. The Coldingley reading group is held in the prison's education centre, while the Grendon reading group is held in the common room on one of the prison wings. To date, both reading groups have focused on academic books and articles written by former prisoners, including Irwin's (1970) classic account of prison culture in California, US, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. Three prisoner or former prisoner students are currently applying to commence PhD studies under the guest editors' supervision in January or September 2019. Whilst one prisoner involved in the Coldingley reading group has transferred his long-distance based degree studies to Westminster University, now that he has moved to HMP Standford Hill, an open prison. Similarly, and coincidentally, another prisoner from HMP Standford Hill has also transferred his long-distance based studies to Westminster University. They are both completing their final year of the degree on campus and are actively involved in some of the guest editors' BCC projects at the university.

Beyond academia, BCC works closely with a number of voluntary sector prison activist and prisoner support groups, principally the Prison Reform Trust (PRT) and the Prisoners Education Trust (PET). In 2018, the guest editors hosted the annual PET Prison University Partnerships in Learning conference at the University of Westminster. Along with our inside learners at HMP Coldingley, we are active members of PRT's recently launched Prisoner Policy Network.

Following BCC's emergence and its successful development and continual evolution as a research activist movement (see Aresti and Darke, 2016; Darke and Aresti, 2016; Ross et al, 2014), our more recent work has involved collaborating with Thomas Mathiesen and Astrid Renland (Norwegian Association for Penal Reform), as well as Francesca Vianello and Elton Kalica (University of Padua), to extend this internationalisation programme in an attempt to develop a European-wide CC. Relative to this, we are also working with academics and activists in other countries to further the internationalization of CC beyond Europe. With Jeffrey Ian Ross (University of Baltimore), Maurício Dieter (University of São Paulo) and Juan Carlos Oyanedel (Andres Bello University), we are planning to hold a CC conference in the near future in Ecuador, Chile or Brazil (see Ross and Darke, this volume).

Much of BCC's success is attributable to both Ross and Richards, who have been pivotal in the emergence of BCC, especially during the early stages of its development. In recognition of this, we would like to dedicate this special edition to Ross and Richards, and offer our gratitude for their intellectual contributions and support over the years.

### THIS ISSUE

The contributions in this special edition are an eclectic mix of articles by established ex-con and non-con academics, prisoners and former prisoners, who are making the educational transition to academia. Contributions from activists from different professions are also provided. In short, we are particularly keen to provide a platform for our new members who are developing their careers in academia and/or the voluntary sector. Given this, the central themes considered in this special edition include the coproduction of knowledge, auto-ethnography, action research, supporting current and former prisoners in education and the internationalization of CC. All of the papers in this special edition cover at least two of these themes. Given the relatively recent (and, in our view unjustified) criticism of CC by Joanne Belknap (2015), we have attempted to privilege marginalized voices, in particular women and ethnic minorities.

Belknap (2015) in her 2014 American Society of Criminology presidential address, voiced her concerns with CC, and more broadly speaking, critical criminology, in relation to its lack of engagement in 'criminology activism'. She also highlighted that the CC network suffered in terms of constitution, because it was/is dominated by white males. Hence, it was also guilty, like criminology in general, of neglecting the voices of "marginalised cohort", specifically, the voices of women, ethnic minority groups and individuals from the LBGTQ community. More specifically, she argued that absent from the CC network were the scholarly voices of these marginalized populations.

In a recent special edition of the journal *Critical Criminology*, guest editor, Bruce Arrigo (2016), invited CC members to respond to Belknap's (2015) critiques. In response to these criticisms, the guest editors of this special issue, provided a detailed outline of how BCC is actively engaging in "criminology activism", and how it is dealing with the issue of the absence of "marginalised voices" (Aresti and Darke, 2016).

Prior to Belknap (2015) raising her concerns regarding the lack of marginalized voices in CC, the editors of this special edition had actively acknowledged this problem. As outlined in our response to Belknap (2015), we provided details of strategies that we were implementing to overcome this issue (see Aresti and Darke, 2016). We also highlighted the reasons why it was difficult to recruit scholars from these communities and/or populations, as detailed below.

First, BCC is relatively new and is still establishing itself in British (and European) criminology. Whilst we do have a presence in the academy, this has probably not filtered down to the grass roots (students/university), where we are more likely to find potential candidates. Second, given the significant difference between male and female prison populations in the UK, it is difficult to contest that recruiting women prisoners or former prisoners who fit the credentials will be no easy task (Aresti and Darke, 2016, p. 536).

We went on to provide details of BCC's membership constitution, highlighting that BCC does have members from BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) communities, although also acknowledged that these members were at varying stages in their academic trajectory, and none had yet obtained a PhD (Aresti and Darke, 2016, pp. 536-537). Whilst this is not ideal, we need to consider that to date, there is only a handful of Convict Criminologists with a PhD in the UK. However, in the next few years we hope to have more individuals with a BAME background educated to PhD level. As acknowledged earlier, we have some prisoners/former prisoners in the process of applying to complete doctorates at Westminster University under the supervision of the guest editors of this special edition.

Relative to this, since the time of writing the response to Belknap, BCC has developed further, both in terms of "criminology activism" as outlined above, and in terms of developing its membership. We have more prisoners/former prisoners from BAME populations, and more female members. We now have one former female prisoner active member who has recently attained a PhD, and one that is due to start her PhD in January 2019, Safak Bozkurt, who contributes to this edition. Despite this, we do acknowledge that more needs to be done to recruit members from marginalized cohorts, so that we can provide them with a platform to articulate their voices. This special edition, with its diverse selection of marginalized voices is a shift towards providing this platform.

In terms of the issue of “criminology activism” outlined by Belknap (2015), again this was addressed in detail in our response to Belknap (see Aresti and Darke, 2016). However, as noted above we are developing our activism in a variety of ways, principally but not restricted to our work supporting prisoners and former prisoners through higher education and into academic criminology, through which we are also involved in campaigns to improve educational provision to prisoners. For instance, the second named author’s involvement in the Prisoner Education Trust’s Prisoner Learning Academic Network and the first named author’s contribution in PET’s & UNLOCK’s campaign to ‘ban the box’ on university applications. As a result UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) will no longer require people to disclose a past conviction when applying for most university courses (PET, 2018).

As suggested by the title to this introduction, we support the original vision of CC as a research activist movement (see Jones et al, 2009; Richards and Ross, 2003). As CC initiatives, our prison teaching and mentoring projects are grounded in the traditions of critical criminology as much as participatory action research and the development of insider knowledge and standpoints. As Newbold and Ross (2013) emphasize, it is crucial to CC that our activist work is grounded in high quality academic research. BCC aims to support prisoners and former prisoners to articulate their first-hand experiences (Aresti et al, 2016). Our most academically advanced group of serving prisoner members, the inside learners on the HMP Coldingley project, have participated in several workshops on sentencing and prison reform as part of the PRT’s Prisoner Policy Network. They have also been visited and received an official response from representatives from the Open University, after writing a document critiquing existing weaknesses in distance learning provision to prisoners. At the time of writing (October 2018), the group is working towards submitting evidence to the UK Parliament Justice Committee’s inquiry *Prison Population 2022: Planning for the Future* (see <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/justice-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/prison-population-2022-17-19>).

In the first section, Safak Bozkurt and Paula Harriott provide a much-needed gendered insight into the penal system and prisons. Speaking as women who have both experienced incarceration, they provide an often absent, but much valued female perspective. Each account is primarily an

auto-ethnographic contribution, although the papers are also a collaborative venture, developing insider perspectives, via the coproduction of knowledge. In this instance, the first named editor has provided academic support although refrained from tarnishing the autobiographical dimensions of these papers, enabling Safak Bozkurt and Paula Harriott to articulate authentic, heart-felt accounts of their experiences. Whilst much of the intellectual credit and personal/theoretical articulation must be given to Safak Bozkurt and Paula Harriott, some support was provided by the first guest editor, in the form of theorizing these authors' experiences, structuring the articles, and intellectual contribution. Typically, we need to acknowledge that key to developing the 'insider perspective' in many instances is collaborative work, whereby the knowledge production involves 'expertise' in a variety of forms. We need to acknowledge that in some situations our prisoner/former prisoner members have not always got sufficient academic training to theorize, articulate, and analyse their experiences of incarceration and the criminal justice system (Darke and Aresti, 2016).

Given this, it is essential to our interpretation of the CC perspective that prison research (or other related knowledge) is not premised in a dichotomy of researcher and research participant (or academic and student or prisoner), but instead insists on treating academics and prisoners as co-producers of knowledge (Darke and Aresti, 2016, p. 27). We hope that this is evident in the works that follow by Safak Bozkurt and Paula Harriott. A brief outline is provided below.

Safak Bozkurt's experience is particularly unique as she provides an insight not only into what it is like to experience the criminal justice system and prison as a female prisoner, but also as someone that prior to her incarceration worked as a prison officer. Enriching this unique and diverse experience, is Bozkurt's background – she is a mother of two and of Turkish ethnicity.

In contrast, Paula Harriott talks about her experiences of the criminal justice system, both as a former prisoner and as someone who has dedicated the last decade or so to prison activism. She combines her personal experiences of the criminal justice system and her work with high profile voluntary sector organisations working in this field. Like Safak Bozkurt, her experiences are multi-dimensional, providing a unique perspective. Paula Harriott is also a mother, her partner is from a minority ethnic group and her children are of mixed heritage. Her partner has also been to prison and was

involved in crime. Moreover, two of her children (they are now adults) have also had contact with the criminal justice system.

Whilst there are some clear convergences between Paula Harriott and Safak Bozkurt's accounts, there are also some clear divergences in their narratives. Safak Bozkurt's narrative deals with her attempts to negotiate her transition from being a prison officer to a prisoner. A 'first time offender', she outlines the emotional and psychological implications of this transition and how it impacted on her identity as a mother. Importantly, she highlights the impact of her incarceration on her children, and the struggle to negotiate the vicarious moral emotions she experienced shame, guilt and embarrassment. In contrast, Paula Harriott's narrative takes an activist stance. Like Safak Bozkurt, she details her story, but contextualizes it within wider structural and institutional constraints; pre-existing dominant ideological frameworks and belief systems, which serve to oppress and marginalize certain communities and populations. In stark contrast to Safak Bozkurt, who attributes her 'law breaking' activity to her own personal situation, Paula Harriott considers her personal experiences within the framework of the wider social order, and how it is structured to criminalize certain people and communities. She deals with the issue of racism, sexism and classism to varying degrees when arguing her point.

Regardless of these divergences, both women come from very informed and unique positions, as evident in their auto-ethnographic accounts. A brief summary of Safak Bozkurt's unique position is provided. For Paula Harriott, her activist orientation is quite distinct to Safak Bozkurt's academic trajectory. Activism is central to Paula Harriott's trajectory. Her passion and desire to redefine the criminal justice landscape, has led to the development of the Prisoner Policy Network mentioned above; a clear indication of her desire to privilege the prisoner's voice and her 'call for action', a clear demonstration of her intention to not just talk about change, but to actively make change happen.

The second section contains two papers authored or co-authored by men studying university degrees while serving time. The first, written by six HMP Grendon and five University of Westminster students who participated in the guest editors' prison-university partnership programmes, reflects on the authors' personal experiences of studying higher education inside, individually and as part of the BCC reading group. The insider learners' narratives highlight the importance attached by prisoners to higher

education as a route to advancing, both personally and professionally, as well the benefits of education more generally for supporting a more positive prison environment and for giving prisoners something constructive to do to fill their time. Just as important, what stands out from the accounts of both sets of students are the benefits they gained from studying alongside each other. In each of our projects, we have been struck by the potential prison-university partnerships have for countering negative preconceptions of prisoners. We have found this to be just as important to our inside learners, who before the first session are often just as nervous of how the outside learners might view them, as the outside learners are of entering a prison and meeting prisoners for the first time. Moreover, we hope the reader will agree that the undergraduate inside and outside learners who planned and wrote this piece together, demonstrate a depth of intrinsic understanding of the limitations of the mainstream of academic writings on prisons where the main subjects, prisoners, are no more than research participants. As we have written in more detail elsewhere (Darke and Aresti, 2016), as an insider perspective, CC potentially also has much to gain from work co-produced by people with and without prison experience.

The second contribution in this section is single authored. It is written by an inside learner involved in the HMP Coldingley reading group and mentored by the second named guest editor. It explores the theoretical underpinnings of CC as an insider perspective. Specifically, Mark Alexander focuses on the particular privilege CC attaches, or he argues should attach, to the knowledge and standpoint of serving prisoners. Towards the end of the paper, Mark Alexander contrasts this with a critique of the position taken by many in the discipline of criminology that the involvement of ‘non-cons’ in the CC movement “dilutes [its] importance and distinctiveness [as] an insider perspective”.

The third section contains one paper written by Elton Kalica, a former prisoner in Italy who has recently completed his PhD on the outside . Like Mark Alexander’s piece, Elton Kalica’s contribution is theoretically focused. It centres on CC’s potential as a research activist movement. Elton Kalica provides a detailed analysis of the links between CC and critical criminology. As previously suggested, while acknowledging that most convict criminologists do not define themselves as prison abolitionists, he makes a call for CC to work alongside the abolitionist movement in “problematizing the concept of prison”.

The two *Responses* in the final section focus directly or indirectly on future directions in CC. Each is written by people that do not have prison experience, but have worked extensively with prisoners and former prisoners. The first article, co-authored by the second named guest editor with one of the founders of CC, Jeffrey Ian Ross, outlines the efforts CC is making to internationalize beyond the English-speaking global North, specifically South America. Both authors have professional and personal links with the region. More importantly, alongside Central America, South America has the unfortunate record of having the fastest growing prison populations of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Just as unfortunately, at least for CC, with the notable exception of Argentina, the region's prison systems have a relatively poor record for prisoner and former prisoner involvement in higher education. The paper ultimately serves as a call for interest directed at Latin American readers. For the time being, we have heard from only one former prisoner academic in the region.

The special edition concludes with a chapter from emeritus professor Thomas Mathiesen's (2017) professional biography. The chapter outlines the history and purposes of the Norwegian Association for Criminal Reform (KROM), a research activist critical criminology group (our words, not theirs) that at its height in the 1970s counted among its members nine in ten Norwegian prisoners. As many *JPP* readers will already be aware, there are important parallels between the work of CC and KROM. We outline these in a little more detail in an editorial introduction to the book chapter. In summary, the work of both organizations is co-produced by prisoners and academics. Over the past five years, the guest editors have convened four panels exploring similarities in our approaches to prisoner involvement. Three of these were held in Norway at KROM's annual conferences. The fourth panel was held at the 2014 European Group annual conference in the UK, which also included CC activists from Italy. Mathiesen briefly refers to our earlier meetings in the concluding section of the chapter.

Given the multitude of unique experiences and perspectives here, one thing we are particularly conscious of is the development of CC theoretically. To complement its original conception, we are particularly keen to utilize a diversity of voices to develop CC in terms of its theoretical and epistemological positioning. We want to develop this and overcome some of the tensions and criticisms CC has encountered over the years (see Belknap, 2015; Larsen and Piché, 2012; Newbold and Ross, 2013). The

aim to develop CC both theoretically and epistemologically is an on-going project, evident in many of our writings and some of the contributions in this special edition.

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*Sacha Darke* is Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Westminster and is Visiting Lecturer at the University of São Paulo. His teaching and research focuses on Convict Criminology, prisons, state crime, as well as comparative and transnational criminal justice. He is currently involved in research projects on the use and experience of imprisonment in Brazil, and the internationalisation of Convict Criminology (with Andreas Aresti and Jeffrey Ian Ross). With Andreas Aresti, he delivers an academic mentoring for prisoners and criminology programmes at HMP Pentonville, HMP Grendon and HMP Coldingley.