

Convict criminology without guarantees: Proposing hard labour for an unfinished criminology

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The subfield known as ‘convict criminology’ is difficult to define but largely involves criminological and penological research produced by people who combine first-hand experience of imprisonment with criminological training and insight. Its aims are to promote prisoners’ voices and experience to redress their general absence within the discipline. In doing so it offers an alternative lens on criminological issues grounded in ‘lived experience’ (Darke *et al.* 2020; Ross and Richards 2003; Booth and Harriot 2020). Until relatively recently convict criminology has been almost exclusively associated with criminology in the USA. In this chapter we sketch those origins in the USA and seek to demonstrate how they have been extended in the UK. We start with a brief excursion into the pre-history of convict criminology to demonstrate that while this approach to research is a relative ‘youngster’ in formal academic terms, it has roots that reach deep into the history of the discipline. As a collective endeavour by people who have been imprisoned and are active in convict criminology in England, we present some of its emerging forms of practice. The chapter concludes with a sustained and critical engagement with the question of lived experience as a source of knowledge for criminology and as the defining feature of convict criminology.

Early Days and Debts: Peter Kropotkin and Frank Tannenbaum

Introduction

Although convict criminology was only formally launched in the last decade of the twentieth century (Gaucher 1999; Ross and Richards 2003), the first study of prisons that combines social scientific methods and personal experience of incarceration is probably Peter Kropotkin’s *In Russian and French Prisons*, published over 100 years earlier in 1887. Between 1882 and 1886, Kropotkin was confined in a ‘model’ French prison. Building on his previous incarceration in a Russian prison between 1874 and 1876, Kropotkin seizes ‘an opportunity of obtaining a personal insight into the results achieved by detention’ (Kropotkin 1887:21). This, in so many words, is what is involved in convict criminology. Kropotkin suggests that to see through the veils thrown over the darker parts of prison life, or to get around the obstructions placed in the researcher’s path, there is a remedy: ‘To know the reality, one must oneself have been a prisoner’ (Kropotkin 1887 :63). This is the basic premise of the convict criminology group first launched in the USA over 100 years later.

Prisons fascinate Kropotkin not because they demonstrate the efficacy of deterrence— they do not—but because his personal experience reveals the resilience of the humanity they contain. He notes how a prison ‘kills all the qualities in a man which make him best adapted to community life’ (Kropotkin 1975:45). He makes clear he is not just talking about prisoners. Prison guards are victims of a prison’s corrupting power as well: ‘it is the institution which makes them what they are—petty, mean persecutors’ (*ibid.*:56). Many of us in convict criminology know the penetrating truth of this observation from bitter experience, as Kropotkin did himself, even while we concede there are many who do not fit this description.

As the prototype convict criminologist who combined his experience of imprisonment with innovative research methodologies, Kropotkin made substantial contributions to criminological thinking and the political philosophy of anarchism. This philosophy connects the nineteenth century of Peter Kropotkin to the twentieth century and the second progenitor of convict criminology, Frank Tannenbaum. Many of Kropotkin's books and pamphlets would have been found in the New York offices of the magazine *Mother Earth* where its anarchist editor, Emma Goldman, encouraged a young, Jewish émigré, Frank Tannenbaum to mobilize the homeless workers of New York. Tannenbaum's efforts were rewarded by prosecution for 'unlawful assembly' and he was sentenced to one year of penal custody on New York's notorious Blackwells Island.

Tannenbaum's 12 months in prison were no easy ride. Yeager's (2011) invaluable archive research reveals that Tannenbaum spent two months of his sentence in punitive solitary confinement for his agitation with other prisoners against prison conditions, mistreatment, and neglect. His subsequent articles about his imprisonment in which he describes, at the beginning of the twentieth century, men dying of tuberculosis being locked up with healthy prisoners, bears disturbing comparison to prison conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic of the early twenty first century (Maruna *et al.* 2022).

At the heart of Tannenbaum's (1938) influential analysis of crime is the nature of social conflict, reaction, and social interaction. His work with young men and boys involved in street level illegality had revealed to him how potent their reaction was to being seen as problematically different. He identifies both the moral loading and glamorous appeal that the descriptive vocabulary of crime carries with it and the forceful authority with which it is applied to the young person. He outlines what in the 1960s would be re-theorized as 'secondary deviance' and 'deviancy amplification':

The process of making the criminal, therefore, is a process of tagging, defining, segregating, describing, emphasising, making conscious and self-conscious; it becomes a way of stimulating, suggesting, emphasising, and evoking the very traits that are complained of (1938:20).

Tannenbaum, who had felt the force and lasting consequence of a criminal conviction, presents the basic principles of labelling theory, perhaps the most enduring and influential set of ideas associated with critical criminology:

The person becomes the thing he is described as being . . . the emphasis is upon the conduct that is disapproved of . . . The harder they work to reform evil, the greater the evil grows under their hands . . . The way out is through a refusal to dramatise the evil (1938:20).

Tannenbaum could triangulate his theoretical formulations with what he saw and felt as a prisoner, with what he knew of the way prison was perceived by those outside, and how it was presented by those invested in its workings. Tannenbaum was convinced the labelling effect of criminal justice contact 'plays a greater role in making the criminal than perhaps any other experience' (1938:21). This juxta-positioning of intimate experience and intellectual effort lies at the core of convict criminology and resurfaced in the life and career of John Irwin, the pivotal scholar behind its origins and development in the USA in the 1990s.

Launching with Attitude: The Invention of Convict Criminology in the USA

In 1952, aged 23, John Irwin robbed a petrol station in Los Angeles and was sentenced to five years in prison. During some of that time he developed a taste and an aptitude for learning and started to study through a university provided extension programme. On release he began an undergraduate degree in physics at the University of California, Los Angeles, (UCLA) before being persuaded, by the eminent US criminologist Donald Cressey, to switch to sociology, with a major in criminology. Irwin was unsettled and surprised that he could not recognize his experiences of imprisonment in the prevailing academic literature on prison life:

I was introduced to the sociology of the prison, particularly to some of the new theories about the inmate social system. I considered the theories, tested them against information that I could dig out of my memory, and discovered they did not fit. Extended discussions with Professor Cressey eventually led us to interview many ex-convicts and revise the current theories (Irwin 1980:xxi).

Thus conceived is the project and method of convict criminology in a nutshell: how can direct, first-hand experience of imprisonment correspond with its theorization and academic representation in criminology. It led to the development of a conceptual model of prisoner's social relations, the importation model, which has become a mainstay of penal theory (Irwin and Cressey 1962). Rather than Gresham Sykes (1958) 'Society of Captives' model of prisoner's identities being formed primarily through solidarity with each other's common predicament as prisoners, Irwin and Cressey showed how prisoners bring their many cultural habits and social bonds into the prison to shape their identity in prison instead of leaving them at the gate as Sykes had proposed.

John Irwin never concealed his criminal convictions and although his successful academic career preceded the formation of the US convict criminology group in 1997, his outstanding academic reputation and status meant that his endorsement and support for the movement was instrumental to convict criminology's emergence. Reviewing the structural contexts for this emergence, Ross (2021) identifies the major significance of the massive growth of incarceration in the USA during the 1970s and 80s, heavily fuelled by a crackdown on drug use and accompanied by the aggressive and predatory policing of African-American communities. Several individuals caught up in this carceral expansion emerged from their sentences and followed Irwin's path into academic study. Like Irwin, they quickly became disillusioned with the criminology courses they had studied and were now starting to teach at university. Meeting with Irwin in the mid-1990s and comparing their more recent experiences to his, they reported their sense of a discipline obsessed with intrinsic criminal difference: 'many criminologists . . . see [criminals] as less than human, as inferior or evil deviants' (Irwin 2013 :xix). Alongside an anthropological fascination with 'exotic specimens' in the booming and restructured US university system, criminology seemed to 'tolerate or participate in the inhumane and counterproductive treatment' (Irwin 2013: xix) of prisoners by fostering an ideology of pathological, essential difference.

The toxic implication of much conventional US criminology was that prison is where 'monsters' are kept away from ordinary folk and trained to be less 'monstrous'. By contrast, what these ex-convicts knew as scholars was that most prisoners were people quite like themselves, but they found this knowledge counted for almost nothing. In US criminology departments, some said they felt themselves compromised by having to teach an approach to crime they did not believe in and could not reconcile with their own experience. Having been through a variety of criminal justice procedures, culminating in imprisonment, their knowledge of its shortcomings, injustices, and idiocies combined with their experiences of its pervasive and enduring stigma (see Tietjen and Kavish 2021) should be welcomed by the discipline, not rejected, Irwin told them. Inspired by their sense of collective potential, this group of scholars resolved to announce themselves to the 1997 American Society of Criminology annual conference. Their panel '*Convicts Critique Criminology: The Last Seminar*' was the first time a group of self-declared

ex-criminals, ex-prisoners or ex-convicts presented themselves as academics with something distinctive to say about the discipline and criminal justice. A larger alliance of supportive non-convicted criminologists (sometimes referred to as 'non-cons'), such as, among others, Jeffrey Ian Ross, William S. Treaga and Barbara Owen, emerged from the 1997 ASC panel and in 2003 the first anthology of explicitly articulated convict criminology was published (Ross and Richards 2003). This foundational collection established the academic viability of the model and the credentials for its originality. Combining inputs from convicted and non-convicted academics has since become a hallmark of convict criminology, demonstrating the potential of working across the penal divide. Ross and Richards subsequently guided Convict Criminology along two principal forms of activity: collective publishing projects and teaching or mentoring ex-convict graduate students into professional positions. Along with other core members of the founding group, such as Rick Jones, Alan Mobley, Chuck Terry and Greg Newbold, Ross and Richards have devoted substantial resources to correspondence, teaching, support and co-ordination. As a direct result of their work, convict criminology in the US has grown and flourished. Much of this work is invisible and does not register in conventional metrics of academic performance but without it there would be no convict criminology (Richards *et al.* 2018; Tietjen 2019).

Since 1997, convict criminology in the US has made its presence felt in each of the subsequent annual gatherings of the American Society of Criminology (ASC) by organizing panels and roundtable discussions. In 2020, this work achieved recognition when the Convict Criminology Division of the ASC was formally established. This secures convict criminology as a distinctive current and influential collective presence in the

largest association of professional criminologists in the world. This work has been supplemented, and in some senses pre-figured, by the establishment in Canada of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prison (JPP)* in 1988. The *JPP* embodies many of the principles that convict criminology promotes. It publishes prisoners accounts and analysis of imprisonment, crime and punishment in a regular peer-reviewed journal format. It's formation and survival is testimony to the vitality of prisoner and ex-prisoner voices.

As the criminal justice system in the USA has created the largest convict population on the planet, it is understandable that convict criminology has been an academic movement mostly associated with criminology in the USA. However, the field has started to grow across parts of Europe and South America. In Italy, through the work of Elton Kalica, Francesca Vianello, Alvise Sbraccia, Simone Santorso, Alessandro Maculan and others at the Universities of Padua and Bologna, convict criminology has begun to establish itself. In 2019 an international conference of convict criminologists was hosted by the University of Padua resulting in another significant milestone—the publication of the first largely European collection of convict criminology (Ross and Vianello 2021). It includes contributors from the USA and South America and succeeds in establishing the diverse scholarship emerging in Italy. It demonstrates the potential for convict criminology to become more widespread across Europe.

While there is little evidence that convict criminology has gained any traction in Africa, Asia or the Caribbean, in South America, particularly in Argentina and Brazil, there are positive indications that convict criminology perspectives and practice are starting to emerge (see Ross and Darke 2019). South America has some of the highest rates of incarceration in the world and large prisoner populations. Alliances are being developed with a radical university sector that combines prisoners' eagerness to learn with a distinctively South American practice of prisoner self-organization (Weis 2021; Darke 2018). It is starting to produce distinctive potentials.

However, unless convict criminology is to remain a Northern and androcentric perspective, it will need to adapt and respond to a multitude of local and global challenges. Among these are the tendency of convict criminology to be composed of and reflect men's experiences of incarceration. These contexts and issues form the basis of the next two sections and are followed by a detailed engagement with the methodological and epistemological issues of lived experience around which convict criminology stakes its claims.

Just Boys Doing the Business? Women's

Challenges in, and to, Convict Criminology

The historic tendency of convict criminology to consist mostly of white men has been subject to critical scrutiny (Belknap 2015). Belknap's intervention in the USA prompted both a vigorous defence of convict criminology's efforts to be meaningful to marginalized and oppressed groups and a redoubling of those efforts in the USA. Convict criminology in the USA is now formally recognized as a Division of the American Society of Criminology and women occupy several leading roles on the executive board of the Division. A sub-group of feminist convict criminology reflects and consolidates their presence (Ortiz *et al.* 2022). Similar gender dynamics prevailed on the formation of convict criminology in the UK, which was also almost entirely composed of white men.

So this section of the chapter focuses on why women may 'struggle to stick their heads above the parapet and label themselves as convict criminologists' (Darley and Earle 2022). Darley draws from her experiences of 'outing' herself as a convict criminologist to insist on the merits of ensuring the voices of female academics who have experience of the criminal justice system are heard loud and clear.

As president of the American Society of Criminology, Belknap (2015) raised some of the concerns she had about the Convict Criminology movement in the USA. Specifically, she criticized convict criminology for its predominantly white and male make-up. Belknap suggested that the network often misses the academic contributions of people from marginalized or oppressed groups who have experience of the criminal justice system. These arguments in the USA beg questions about why the number of female academics who are involved with convict criminology in the UK, convicted or otherwise, is so low. Why might women who have experienced the inside of a prison cell not feel they can identify with, contribute to or benefit from involvement with the convict criminology movement in the UK? One response is to present it as a numbers game. Ross *et al.* (2016) adopt the 'available population' thesis and suggests that fewer women align themselves with convict criminology than men simply because both the UK and US prison populations are predominantly made up of men. As a result, the pool of women for convict criminology to draw from is relatively small.

The gender dynamics that generate massive gender differentials in rates of incarceration in which 90–95 per cent of the global prison population is made up of men are the result of disparities in social and personal power, relative privilege and patriarchal hierarchy—they reflect the violence and iniquities of the prevailing gender order (Connell 1987). Given convict criminology's preferences for qualitative and experiential methodologies, it is to the meanings of such experience rather than the numbers of a prison population that convict criminology should turn. Ross *et al.* (2016) go on to argue that women may also be less likely to go to university after leaving the prison system than men and therefore don't acquire the academic credentials that may lead them to identify as convict criminologists. In the UK, the Prison Reform Trust (2017) suggests that for many women who go to prison, the realities of rebuilding a family torn apart by a custodial sentence often takes priority over their own development. Even in the twenty first

century this is not necessarily the case for men who are less likely to shoulder the daily responsibilities of child raising and may thus find themselves more available for a university education. In the UK, women in convict criminology are just beginning to expose and examine these issues (Bozkurt *et al.* 2021).

The way women experience crime, criminalization, victimization and prison is also very different to the way they are experienced by men (Masson *et al.* 2021). Just one, small but indicative example: in the UK women are much more likely to be serving short sentences for less serious and less violent crimes than men. More than 70 per cent of women entering prison in 2016 in the UK were sentenced to six months or less (Prison Reform Trust 2017). Accordingly, there are not many women who spend long enough in prison to engage meaningfully (if at all) with prison-based education programmes offered to them, hence their educational development is much less likely to start there than it is for male prisoners. However, the reason Darley thinks many women might choose not to identify as a convict criminologist is the particular stigma that having a conviction can bring for a woman. She herself sincerely believed she would face judgement and stigmatization as a woman who has served time in prison by stepping up to receive her convict criminology badge. These feelings are theorized within feminist criminology as the price women pay for being ‘twice damned’ as doubly deviant, transgressing against

both the law of the land and the conventions of femininity in a white, hetero-normative, patriarchal society. The ‘good old boys club’ that tore her away from her role as a mother and wife and punished her excessively harshly, led to her feeling she was a failure both to her family and to society. Like many women, she spent years hiding that part of her identity from even those closest to her and it was difficult to get over those hurdles and finally ‘own her past and her mistakes’. The presence of convict criminology makes that task more possible. This is not to say that men in convict criminology do not also face and feel stigmatization, but that these feelings are as powerfully differentiated by gender as they are by class and race (Tyler 2019). Convict criminology is uniquely well placed to attend to these differences if it does not deny them.

As Miller *et al.* (1986), Owen (1998), and Gonnerman (2005) argue, men and women respond differently to prison. Research has shown that many women who have served custodial prison sentences have had more experience of trauma and inequality in larger numbers than in the general population (Karatzias *et al.* 2018) and, often, in different forms from men. After leaving prison, women are also subjected to particular forms of stigmatization, judgement and many barriers whilst trying to get their lives back on track (Schnittker and Bacak 2013). This can often lead to women feeling hopeless and resistant to change. (Maruna *et al.* 2004; Gálnder 2019). If convict criminology is to be relevant to women in the UK, it needs to consider the implications of these experiences more thoroughly and more widely.

Buck *et al.* (2021) suggest the individual, emotional and structural implications of activating any lived experience in a public forum or platform require careful consideration. It is essential for the development of our knowledge of women’s experiences of the criminal justice system that we consider how the academy might more meaningfully and supportively engage with those with lived experience. Involvement in the academy when you hold a criminal conviction can include many shame-inducing moments, with all their accompanying distress and destabilization. Darley’s own experiences of disclosure and exposure of her convictions within academia are varied. She says she’s received shrugs, hugs, sympathy and applause and on one memorably telling occasion, was totally ignored. Given what we know about adverse childhood experiences and traumatic situations that women have often experienced prior to going to prison, coupled with societal conditioning that has taught women to keep their heads down and put up with their lot in life, it’s maybe not surprising that women don’t want to build a career around something

that may involve them reliving their criminal justice system experiences over and over again. However, acting on this lived experience through criminological practice can shine a much-needed light on more of the gendered nuances of the way the criminal justice system operates on women.

Brene Brown (2006: 45) talks eloquently about the role shame plays in women's lives, and importantly about how it is internalized and experienced. She defines shame as 'an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging'. She contrasts shame with guilt, which she defines as a feeling that results from behaving in a flawed or bad way rather than someone being flawed or bad themselves. Shame, like so many things, is constructed socially. It is generated from social and cultural expectations that are reinforced by individuals and groups and often consolidated by media representations of 'criminal women'. For women, shame is felt more acutely when it concerns appearance, body image, sexuality, family, motherhood, parenting, professional identity and work, mental and physical health, ageing, religion, speaking out, and surviving trauma. So, not many things that women are affected by in going to prison then!

Imogen Tyler (2019) makes vital connections between individual shame and stigma and the way that stigma serves our political and societal machines. Tyler reminds us that stigmatization arises in contexts that are shaped by unequal relations of power, and that penal systems and wider criminal justice systems are functional to those relationships. Tyler's work (2013; 2019) shows how stigmatization is increasingly employed as a device to procure consent for punitive policies directed at those living at the bottom of the class structure. It is not simply a by-product of neoliberal ideologies and policies, not an unfortunate form of collateral damage, but integral to securing the affective architecture of neo-liberal governance. In short, stigma is a tool that guides people's emotional investments in 'self-improvement' by generating and endorsing forms of contempt for those whose investments appear insufficient or unworthy. These feelings of stigma and being stigmatized are particularly keenly felt by women who find themselves on the wrong side of the prison fence. And there must be a place for these women in convict criminology. The potential of a feminist convict criminology that can create this space for women has been demonstrated in the USA and has begun to make itself felt in the UK (Bozkurt *et al.* 2021; Ortiz *et al.* 2022; Darley and Earle 2022).

Take Off in the UK: Taking Prisoners to Criminology and Students to Prisoners

The politics and cultural resonance of crime and punishment in the UK have their own dynamics that differ considerably from those in the USA. The scale of the US carceral complex dwarfs that of the UK, and indeed every country on earth. The prison population in the USA is nearly 30 times larger than that of England and Wales. Prisons and prisoners in the UK occupy a different place in the public imagination shaped by our specific history, struggles for reform, and varying political institutions. Although the racial differentials in the UK prison system match and at times exceed that of the US system (Phillips 2012), the different scale and particular colonial histories of the two states mean comparisons must be drawn with care. In this section we plot the distinctive ways in which convict criminology has emerged in England as it seeks to build a profile in different prisons and universities and among prisoners and ex-prisoners. This work started in 2011 when the first convict criminology panel was convened at the annual conference of the British Society of Criminology (Earle 2011; Aresti 2012). This led to a number of developments including a symposium of criminologists, students and prison activists meeting in London in 2017. In 2018, the *British Journal of Criminology* published an account of interviews conducted with many of those present about their perspectives on convict criminology in the UK (Earle 2018).

The development of convict criminology in the UK has been led by criminologists with experience of imprisonment and supportive non-imprisoned academics (i.e. ‘noncons’) who have forged partnerships within their respective universities that reach into prisons. For convict criminologists, higher education programmes linked to prisons are particularly significant because their transformative potential is well established in theories of desistance (Honeywell 2021; Darke and Aresti 2016) and corresponds to their own experiences. Several UK-based convict criminologists have themselves emerged from such programmes and are now involved in developing more. These are often built around criminology modules. At the University of Westminster in London, for example, a mentoring scheme was launched in 2013 to support men and women in prison studying social science (Darke *et al.* 2020). Westminster based convict criminologists have developed higher education courses at HMPs Pentonville, Grendon, and Coldingley. A distinctive feature of these courses has been to connect ‘inside learners’ (prison students), with ‘outside learners’ (university students) at a similar level of study. The Making Links programme at HMP Pentonville is coordinated with José Aguiar, an award-winning educational consultant attached to the prison. Making Links introduces the ‘inside students’ to the discipline of criminology with a specific focus on prison and post-prison experience.

Many of the ‘inside learners’ in UK prisons are already studying degrees with The Open University (see Earle and Mehigan 2020). The Open University has provided higher education to people in prison since 1971. A dedicated Open University team operates a complex delivery and support system called Students in Secure Environments (SiSE) in recognition of the small number of students in secure settings subject to mental health rather than criminal sanction (MacFarlane and Pike 2020). Students in prison can choose courses from an Open University prospectus but there is, as yet, no dedicated convict criminology option.

In 2015 Dr Bill Davies of Leeds Beckett University secured the support of his department to develop a Learning Together programme that would take third year Leeds Beckett criminology undergraduates to study with prisoners in a high security prison, HMP Full Sutton. The programme was able to mobilize around conventional students’ interest in prison and prisoners, and prisoners’ long-standing frustration at not being able to access face-to-face higher education courses.

Supported by Drs Armstrong and Ludlow from the Learning Together team at Cambridge University (see, Ludlow, Armstrong and Bartels 2019), the programme started in January 2017, with crucial input from members of the prison management team. An underpinning tenet of the Leeds Beckett/HMP Full Sutton Learning Together programme was parity of access and achievement. It was education for all or education for none. The fundamental principle guiding the project is that all students accessing the course, from the prison or the university, would be eligible for equal university credits upon successful completion of the module (20 Level 6 CATs) and that there would be no consideration of the type of conviction of a prisoner during the application process.

In 2019, the delivery of the criminology education programme at HMP Full Sutton secured the support of the Ministry of Justice through an open tender system. That an ex-prisoner turned criminologist has won government contracts to deliver education in HMPPS is a significant milestone for convict criminology. Dr Davies insists that although his contribution has been significant, it couldn’t have happened without supportive non-convicted colleagues at Leeds Beckett and elsewhere. These forms of support and solidarity are a key feature of convict criminology. Pushing against the constraints imposed by prison systems and universities is a characteristic of convict criminology. With colleagues at Leeds Beckett, Davies has expanded the range of study options and developed plans for a prison-to-college pathway. This will allow students to register to study at Leeds Beckett while on temporary release from the custodial element of their sentence. Other initiatives in the prison have also grown from the simple

ambition of a convict criminologist to give something back to the prisoner community he emerged from (Davies 2018). Leeds Beckett university donated fifteen computers to HMP Full Sutton to use within the educational provisions; over 300 books have been donated to the Libraries at HMP Full Sutton and HMP New Hall, and each of the prison libraries now has an academic section. In 2023 Davies ensured an imprisoned Leeds

Beckett PhD student successfully completed their viva, possibly the first PhD thesis to be developed and defended in an English high security prison.

Peer support remains another important element of the way Convict Criminology has developed in the UK. This derives from a basic understanding of peer support as being the embodiment of values of mutual reciprocity, shared problem solving, empathy and experiential exchange (Buck 2022). This typically involves an assumption about the possibility of sharing experience taken from the similarities in prison sentences, yet it is also a far more complex proposition. This complexity starts from the contention of what or who a peer is: what and who constitutes a peer is subjective and might include close friends, associates, other people in a shared environment or task. However, as Shiner (1999; 557) indicates ‘the question remains what makes somebody like us?’. It leads into tricky issues of essentialism, identity and culture. People construct and mould identities in relation to an array of characteristics which can emanate from a range of sources. Shiner (1999) suggests these can include the roles social actors take on, group categories they feel attachment to, and experiences that they have. In the prison environment, or for someone with lived experience of prison, a peer could be identified through being someone who belongs to the same group category of the mentee—a prisoner or ex-prisoner who has the experiences of imprisonment (Schreeche-Powell 2019). This implies a real possibility that some of the experiences and challenges that the mentee will be experiencing are familiar to the mentor from their own personal experience.

Peer Mentoring in prisons is developing momentum and influence (Buck 2022). It involves the establishment of a relationship between two individuals with some aspects of lateral symmetry. A mentor may operate as a role model or experiential authority figure who has successfully navigated the path the mentee will soon take. Knowledge of some of the difficulties in recognizing the path or negotiating the obstacles allows the mentor to support the progress of the mentee. In the prison environment this relationship is often related to narrow instrumental goals surrounding effective resettlement, social inclusion and desistance. However, mentoring may also improve mental health outcomes and the wellbeing of the participants (Buck 2022).

The final part of this section offers a case study illustration of what convict criminology can look like.

Case study: From prison cell to prison research and the making of a convict criminologist

Dr David Honeywell is a co-investigator on a large-scale prison suicide prevention study. The aim of the study is to create a talking therapy tailor-made for prisoners with suicidal thoughts and behaviours. David Honeywell was recruited initially as a full-time ‘service user’ researcher on the project. During the study’s early stages he was tasked with leading ‘service user involvement’ in the project. Public and patient involvement has become increasingly mainstream and expected in health service research and service development. For this study, the research team wanted David Honeywell’s input because he could offer lived experience of suicidal ideation and behaviours during various periods of imprisonment and the necessary academic credentials to develop research designs and methodologies. Almost uniquely, David Honeywell could offer to draw from his own experiences of being in prison with mental health issues as a young man as

well as his academic and research training. Unlike many people conducting academic research he knows what it is like to be left in prison struggling with mental health issues and without access to support or interventions. He hopes the study will help generate services that correspond more appropriately and sensitively with the needs of people in prison because of his input.

Although David Honeywell's prison experiences are now in the distant past, his memories and insights are available to inform his teaching and research. He finds it easier to revisit memories of prison from inside the seminar room and lecture theatre than in the prisons where these memories were made because being in a prison always leaves a hidden emotional and psychological impact. Since becoming a university lecturer, David Honeywell has taken groups of students into the same prison where he was himself a prisoner. Doing so involves a mix of emotions ranging from anxiety to pride but he finds the more sustained research immersion in prison environments more challenging.

David Honeywell's contribution to the suicide prevention study has been more restricted than he would have liked because although all the prison officials and academics backed his involvement, other institutional obstacles could not be overcome. David Honeywell says that *'funding bodies who insist on service user involvement in research studies urgently need to work with the criminal justice system and government to help create a smoother passage for prison researchers with lived experience to gain access into prisons.'*

David Honeywell's struggles to bring his experience of imprisonment into the production of criminological knowledge are intensely personal. In the last part of the chapter, we explore the dilemmas, implications and potentials of his, and others', efforts to make their experience count for something in criminology.

Experts by Experience: Lived Experience and Convict Criminology

The promise of convict criminology is to offer the wider discipline something vital it needs and is lacking. As one prisoner put it 'prisoners, although they understand what is wrong with the system better than any criminologist, judge, cop or outsider, have the credibility of elves' (St. John 1999). All the authors of this chapter have felt the grip of the state tighten its hold on them in ways those who have not been imprisoned can only imagine. It can be crushing, it can be caring, and includes the vastness that lies between, but it is usually more of the former than the latter. As hard as it is to get to know this experience, it is pretty much impossible to forget. The afterlife of a prison sentence casts a very long shadow. You will be continually reminded how long and how dark when you are required to complete application forms for various social institutions from banks to universities or need to travel from one nation to another. Your future is never entirely your own because a part of your past is owned by the state (Tietjen and Kavish 2021). You are reminded of how a prison sentence renders you as property of the state.

The more critical currents in criminology try to avoid the consideration of crime and criminals as essential, fixed categories. They are recognized as social constructions we are all complicit in maintaining rather than inevitable, unchanging categories of experience or personhood (Aliverti *et al.* 2021). There is thus a self-created paradox for convict criminology in embracing critical criminology's problematization of crime and the criminal as viable categories of analysis. It means embodying a contradiction that appears to accept and naturalize those classifications—crimes, criminals—by adopting the convict status in the name convict criminology, while also embracing the proposition that crime has no essential or ontological reality.

The Russian philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, used to insist that the mark of failure as a poet, and thus also as a human being, was to accept someone else's description of oneself. The convict

criminology group in the USA invented the name in the 1990s with all its labelling connotations, contradictions, and alliterative convenience. More recently, it has embraced a critical disaggregation by exploring a diverse terminology that refers explicitly to the politics of being convicted or otherwise enmeshed in criminal justice. These include ‘formerly incarcerated’, ‘system impacted’ and ‘system involved’ (Ortiz *et al.* 2022) as well as ‘people with convictions’ (Buck *et al.* 2021).

More positively, the convenient couplet of ‘convict criminology’ also has a useful subversive resonance that challenges the assumed dichotomy that some people study crime (criminologists) while other people are convicted of it (criminals). The convict criminologist is self-evidently a bit of both. The image and idea of a person with criminal convictions who is also a criminologist disrupts the prevailing image of the convict as a disparaged, pathological object. It implicitly connects a coercive institution of confinement at the base of the social hierarchy (prison) with another institution at its apex designed to open and extend human potentials (the university). The convict is the exemplar of exclusion and low social value, an abject pariah marked out for contempt; ‘the professor’, by contrast, is an exemplar of social value, inclusion and institutional belonging (at least in theory, if not always in practice). As such, when these two worlds coincide in the identity of the convict criminologist, the effect is troubling—or refreshing. Convict criminology is thus implicitly a critique of mainstream criminology from the standpoint of a theory of experience.

As convict criminologists, our relationship to criminology is complicated because it is personal and direct. The feminist assertion in the 1960s and 1970s that ‘the personal is political’ propelled the women’s movement into connecting the daily realities of women’s lives with social structures, political power, and historical process. Similarly, in the 1990s, critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic 2012) emerged from Black people’s experiences of law in US criminal courts, noting the difference between what the law promised in theory and what it delivered in practice. In a comparable fashion, for convict criminology, the criminology is personal because it involves finding our criminology not just in books and research but in our own experiences of criminal justice. Lived experience of crimes and punishments does not replace theoretical abstraction and conventional research, but conditions and supplements both.

That everyone in prison ‘does their own time’ is part of the received wisdom of prisoners but Bernard Stiegler (2008) points to some wider and potentially profound implications of this experience. He was not a convict criminologist but a French philosopher who served five years in prison (for bank robberies, 1978–1983) during which time he encountered an unexpected philosophical education that propelled his subsequent career to the heights of the French academy (Earle 2021). Stiegler mentions the ‘après-coup’—a French term from Freudian psychoanalysis that refers to something an individual experiences at a certain time but makes sense of only later. Just as a hard blow to the head may produce the delayed effects of concussion, so ‘after the blow’ (après-coup) of imprisonment, there can be a reckoning with it beyond the familiar pains of penal concussion. It is an experience that leaves traces that may be gathered together to be made sense of, after the event, after a necessary period of time.

Stiegler explains the connections he found between his life, his work and his prison cell like this:

I thus discovered what one calls in philosophy the *phenomenological epokhe*—the suspension of the world, of the thesis of the world, that is, of the spontaneous belief in the existence

of the world, which constitutes in Husserl's language the natural attitude –what I previously called ordinary life. I discovered this philosophical theory and practice by chance and by accident, long before studying it in the works of Husserl: I deduced it from the situation . . . [imprisonment].

Stiegler's removal from the natural world of 'ordinary life' by his imprisonment brought aspects of it into view that would otherwise remain invisible, taken for granted. For the convict criminologists the 'après-coup' is the process of integrating and analysing the experience of imprisonment along the axis of criminology, perhaps some years after release. The singularity of this personal experience may be relatively finite and particular to the individual but, as Walter Benjamin (2015:198) argues 'a remembered event is infinite because it is a key to everything that happened before and after it'. The specific particulars of the penal experience—loss of liberty, enforced co-habitation, regime imposition, forceful and sometimes despotic authority accompanied by the pervasive threat of violence—make the experience powerfully significant to anyone living in a liberal democracy where the ideology of the 'free individual' choosing how to live every detail of their life reigns supreme.

Lived Experience and Critical Encounters

The recent growth of interest in lived experience of imprisonment in criminology, penal policy formation, and activism derives from a broader and growing sociological concern for what social exclusion actually 'feels like'. Jewkes (2012:14), for example, argues that the lived experience of incarceration has been 'flattened by the overarching dominance and disproportionate power of quantitative methods' and that 'bald statistics conceal complex lives and important stories'. Writing with a group of imprisoned women in the USA, significantly, Bosworth *et al.* (2005:259) put their collective finger on the issue: 'Criminologists tend to present their analysis of the prison in the form of inhuman data. As a result, prison studies have become cold, calculated, surgical . . . Why? So no one will care. Keep it statistical, inhuman, no compassion'.

While recent criminology in the UK has been more invested in sensitive and insightful prison ethnographies, Booth and Harriot (2020:199), two women with experience of incarceration, policy activism, and academic qualification, throw down a gauntlet to criminologists: 'Where are the authored pieces of research by those that have lived it; indeed where are the co-authored pieces with you?' They recount their variable experiences of contributing to research as subjects and of being treated with varying degrees of neglect by powerful institutions (universities) that gain from their contribution but give little back:

Our interaction with academia as individuals within the system, has, in the first instance, been about pure and power-laden 'expert' extraction of knowledge. You ask us, we tell you; our identity and role as mere lived experience of the topic under review, our lives reduced to snippets of anonymous quotes used to build a premise, a position (p. 207).

Harriot and Booth advocate for more inclusion of people with lived experience of criminal justice interventions to be included as active partners in research. This appeal for more, and more egalitarian, co-production, they suggest, will help to generate better research questions and new methodologies. In pursuit of these methodologies Harriot and Buck have embraced and developed wider co-productions (*Buck et al.*, 2021) by adopting a reflective storytelling approach that draws critically from other policy fields where 'experiential and academic knowledge; lived experience as well as research findings. . . reconnect policy to the world in which it operates and to the reader' (Beresford *et al.*, 2016: 3). Allan Weaver's account of his desistance co-authored with Beth Weaver, remains an unusual and exceptionally powerful example of synthesizing lived experience and criminological knowledge (Weaver and Weaver 2013). By bringing a singular autobiography into correspondence with wider empirical research and critical theory, the authors

develop an example of co-production that can engage ordinary practitioners, service managers, policy-makers and academics (see also Brierly 2019).

A recent initiative in the UK, the Centre for Knowledge Equity, seeks to ‘reboot the DNA of leadership’ (Sandhu 2017) by insisting on the vitality of lived experience leadership in organizations seeking change. Sandhu’s manifesto for the wider recognition of lived experience calls for a redistribution of ‘knowledge equity’ that recognizes more explicitly the way actual experience of oppression and exclusion are so rarely co-terminous with academic knowledge of oppression and exclusion. Drawing inspiration from social movements around race, gender, social class, mental health and disability, Sandhu’s claims resonate powerfully with developments in Southern criminology (Carrington *et al.* 2019) that assert that the ‘classical roots’ of criminology anchor and confine its scholars to power structures that skew their vision and narrow their methods.

As a critical criminology, convict criminology can draw strength from the history of such movements, particularly the decarcerative struggles in mental health against the use of asylums to define and segregate certain people from the general population. The strength of this movement in the 1970s in Italy and the UK is particularly instructive. Franco Basaglia’s achievements in building an alliance of inmates, practitioners and radical anti-psychiatrists that effectively transformed the mental health system in northern Italy by closing down its notorious asylums and establishing non-carcer alternatives, demonstrates what can be achieved (Foot 2015). It is an approach that mobilizes around slogans like ‘nothing about us, without us’ and ‘those closest to the problem are closest to the solution’ (see Maruna 2017). In the USA the ‘Leading with Conviction’ group goes so far as to assert that ‘the movement to end mass incarceration will not get across the finishing line’ unless it is ‘led by formerly incarcerated people’ (Martin 2017).

One drawback of relying on such inspiration to establish the case for convict criminology is that convict criminologists are not seeking to be accepted ‘as criminals’, or for their supposed ‘criminality’ to be better appreciated for ‘what it really is’. No convict criminologist (as far as we are aware) takes pride in their conviction or is oppressed by the absence of such recognition. They may contest or accept its legitimacy but the basis of convict criminology is not identitarian in that there is no attempt (or motivation) to embrace and champion ‘being a criminal’ in the way that mental health and disability movements, gay liberation, black liberation or women’s liberation movements have claimed their identity as a mobilizing feature of their project (see Táíwò 2022).

Radical mental health activists in Canada and elsewhere have started to develop critiques of the trend, as they identify it, for management consultants to colonize the discourse of the lived experience movement for the short-term gain of particular individuals and against the prospects of long-term transformation (Beresford 2020; Byrne and Wykes 2020). Varonka (2016) warns of the risks of essentializing lived experience without heeding the lessons developed by critical theorists on the dangers of strategic essentialism. Drawing from post-colonial theory and a close reading of Joan Scott’s

(1991) canonical feminist essay ‘The Evidence of Experience’, Varonka outlines the drawbacks that accompany the careless deployment of lived experience. Speaking without irony from the lived experience of lived experience work she declares ‘I have learned through trial and error both the benefits and the drawbacks of deploying lived experience as a universalising subject-position to authorise my knowledge’. The risks of reifying notions of difference rather than considering how and why differences are produced are often neglected in favour of what appear to be short term and narrow gains. As she points out, the epistemological and ontological arguments about the crisis of representation that accompany such strategies have animated and divided social movements and postcolonial scholars for over fifty years. Convict criminology

can attend to, and engage with, these arguments to develop a more robust case for its distinctive contribution to the discipline. It cannot neglect them or pay lip service to them and thrive as a critical movement.

The sociological challenge to assemble concrete accounts of how we live, how we labour and how our social practice shapes society is both the bread and butter of social inquiry and a relatively mundane existential constant of life as a social scientist. It refers to ‘the profundity of the lived’ (Sartre 1957:165), the extraordinary richness of human capacities to live with the messiness of being in the world and the vitality of our attempts to impose order on it and make sense of it. The recent turn in criminology toward sensory experience and aesthetics (Herrity *et al.* 2021) is significant but complex, and while convict criminology might embrace and reflect the trend, it should also be subject to critical scrutiny. Without addressing the long-standing and important issues about the epistemological significance of experience, convict criminology risks proceeding more by insinuation than sound argument. A contribution to this critical scrutiny and argument is outlined here.

Risks of Living and the Dangers of Lived-Experience

Contemporary interest in lived experience can easily be presented as a simple innovation, something ‘new’ ‘urgent’ or ‘fresh’ but it also has a darker side. It might, for example, reflect a kind of fatalistic exhaustion (or exasperation) with evidence-based, positivistic social science and specifically the persistent failures of penal reform to curb the growth of imprisonment or mitigate its harms. It is an interest that coincides neatly with a politically promoted (and motivated) scepticism toward ‘experts and evidence’ and all they might be assumed to represent in terms of a contempt for ‘ordinary peoples’ commonsense values. As such, the renewed interest in the value of lived experience may actually represent a profound pessimism that is easily exploited by calculating political opportunists, as much as it does a new dawn of critical inclusion. On the one hand, convict criminology might be embraced as a significant riposte to the dominance of the risk factor paradigm in criminal justice and its mechanistic intellectualism that tends to represent people’s lives as aggregates of data. On the other hand, it might be recognized as another of the anxious symptoms of modernity’s crisis of confidence.

Lived experience is often considered to be a form of unarticulated, inviolable practical consciousness which is implicitly authentic. As Phillips (2000:313) argues, the more authenticity is championed, the more it risks becoming ‘an unconscious parody of honesty. It coerces us into believing that there is a way of being that takes the difficulty out of truth-telling’. Experience is complicated. As the cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1977:132) points out ‘[p]ractical consciousness is almost always different from official consciousness . . . for it is what is actually being lived rather than what it is thought is being lived’. For Williams, ‘experience’ encompassed a pre-linguistic field which included all the factors shaping a social reality, including unarticulated emotions and feelings beyond rational calculation. Existing at the ‘edge of semantic availability’ (Williams telling phrase) some experience may only be understood in feelings that remain unspoken.

Williams was specifically concerned by the various ways working-class experience featured in, or was excluded from, contemporary cultures of writing and representation. The complex realities of working-class life were denied visibility, or were reduced to caricature in conventional social science almost as much as they were in literary fiction. His work around popular culture’s ‘structures of feeling’ was designed to redress this misapprehension of working-class experience. For Williams, literature, in the form of the novel in particular, is the test of a language’s adequacy to experience, demonstrating the means by which someone has the capacity to reflect on social and personal experience and make it accessible, communicable and shareable. He describes structures of feeling as ‘not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought;

practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity' (Williams 1977:132). Williams' formulations of 'structures of feeling' represent both a potential theoretical tool and an intellectual tradition that can help convict criminology to make better sense of what is beyond the reach of conventional penal theory. Specifically, the sense that prisons are not properly understood and that convict criminologists' access to 'lived experience' can help account for the gap between what they are imagined to be and what they actually are.

Reactionaries of Experience and Conservative Thinking

However, any tendency toward thinking of experience as raw and authentic, completely free of the artifice and endless, empty innuendos of social construction, must be handled with caution. It is an argument that has rumbled through social science, and beyond, for much of the last 100 years. To ignore those arguments would be academically and intellectually negligent. There can, for example, be something politically conservative in the focus on lived experience that should be anathema to critical and progressive criminologists. For the conservative philosopher, Roger Scruton, the political rationale of conservatism is focused on the way the world is much more than the way it should or could be. Conservatism is always concerned with, and speaks most fluently to, 'the surface of things' (Scruton 1984:45). Conservatism, as a political project, invests mostly in the status quo and the way people live in the present rather than taking much interest in any underlying realities or mysterious forces propelling change. Perhaps that is why the British Conservative Party has successfully dominated UK politics for over 200 years. British Conservatism likes to avoid the taint of ideology and presents itself as simply the natural party of government driven by pragmatism, tradition, and 'common sense'.

Conservative scepticism toward 'grand theory' or 'meta-narratives' is also recognizable in an intellectual movement familiar to many critical criminologists: postmodernism. As with some variants of postmodernism, Conservatism also has an abiding faith in bodily sensation as the principal vehicle of truth (Ireland 1995). As the Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton (1995) explains, 'since I know where my left foot is a

particular moment without needing to use a compass, the body offers a mode of cognition more intimate and internal than a now much scorned enlightenment rationality'. For Conservatism, the simple truths of the body, of the senses, can be less disputed than the endlessly revised evidence of science, the convolutions of historical materialism, or the apparent relativism of post-modernism. Keep it simple. Keep it real. Lived experience is an accessible truth with no need for theory. An expert-by-experience needs no further qualification.

The overwhelming force of contemporary capitalism's insistence that 'there is no alternative', that there is no escape from its relentless, increasingly timeless, logic of market individualism, 'results in the development of a nostalgia for different forms of immediacy that expresses itself in the longing for authentic experiences and for the concrete life' (Nilges 2020:128). In the UK, particularly England, this feeds, and feeds on, a potent nostalgic post-

colonial melancholia that is forever looking backward with unresolvable longing for a past that might replace the growing absence of a future (Gilroy 2004). Without a horizon to move toward and a history it cannot recreate, political and cultural life in the UK, particularly England, is dangerously stuck in the past.

As Southern theory and its variants within criminology expose the experiential contradictions at the core of neoliberal racial capitalism (Connell 2007; Carrington *et al.* 2019), convict criminology will need to attend to a wider literature and vision of the human subject and sociality. It might be noted, for example, that Achille Mbembe (2019) and Franz Fanon (1967), theorizing from beyond Europe's narrowing enclosures and colonial optics, insist on the viscerality of experience, of the vital exposure of one being to another that colonial violence has fatally fixed to a necropolitics of endemic war, latent hostility, and the persistent individuation of divisive racial logics. Convict criminology has much to gain from attending to post-colonial

theory and is well-placed to contribute to contemporary demands in universities to decolonize the curriculum, open their doors wider and reimagine their future (Earle and Mehigan 2020). As Mbembe insists, it was Fanon's direct engagement with therapeutic practice and the racism reproduced in conventional psychiatry that made him an exemplar of the kind of activist scholar the world needs and many convict criminologists aspire to be: 'Fanon attended closely to people's experience of surfaces and depths, of lights and reflections, and of shadows' (Mbembe 2019:7).

Given the relevance of lived experience to the rationale of convict criminology, there is much to be gained from revisiting the critical literature around lived experience that propelled the growth of cultural studies in the 1980s. Stuart Hall (2021a 2021b), for example, was dismissive of the 'experiential paradigm', famously clashing with the historian E.P Thomson and others associated with the New Left, such as Raymond Williams, over the issue. Hall's scepticism is based on a concern that any faith in the untheorized agency of people in under-specified historical conjunctures was likely to have only short-lived benefits. A focus on feelings and experience could become little more than a self-authenticating tautology. For Hall, it was not so much the feelings themselves that mattered but the way they were produced and interacted with particular political referents and contexts. By radically under-estimating the complexity of social struggles, not least around questions of race and racism, Hall argued that some of Williams and Thompson's Marxist analysis offered false hope and hopeless guarantees of triumph. By way of historical example, Hall recalls the way the Narodniks (from the Russian 'narod' for 'people') of pre-revolutionary Russia preferred to place their faith in the apparently organic instincts of the Russian peasantry rather than the increasingly 'scientific' revolutionary programme of the Bolsheviks. Notwithstanding the alignment of most (but not all) peasants with the Tsarist regime and their affection for dynastic succession over socialist revolution, Narodniks were convinced that the voice of the peasants was

inherently progressive because their lived experience of agriculture and nature was thought to be closer to a universal human essence. As such, for Narodniks, the role of socialists and revolutionaries was simply to amplify it or give it a platform. Convict criminologists may adopt this role in relation to prisoners, but they can, and must, go further.

Notwithstanding his criticisms, Hall's meticulous political arguments are themselves, however, almost always couched in terms that value, articulate, and reflect feelings, emotions, and affect (Haider 2021). Their enduring power and extraordinary intellectual range remain painfully relevant to criminology and social science more generally, even though they draw from the beginning of the twentieth century to theorize the politics of its closing phases under Thatcher's neo-liberal influence. His arguments then, about the role of social scientists as well as socialists, fell largely on deaf ears. His analysis of how people have come to understand the costs of their profound separation from the lived, everyday experience of working people under capitalism resonate as powerfully with the politics of the second decade of the twenty-first century as they do with the prospects of convict criminology. The renewed convergence of interest in lived experience, populist politics, and conservative hegemony should alert convict criminologists to the need for critical circumspection. Any tendencies toward an uncritical vitalism that simply foregrounds experience at the expense of critical theory should be discouraged.

Conclusion: Are You Experienced?

Convict criminology responds to a basic challenge posed by Harcourt (2001) on what it might take to reshape the degraded image of the prisoner in the public imagination. By its very existence it subverts the abject status of the convict/prisoner as an object of suspicion circulating darkly in the social depths and elevates it to one of the most venerated of social

institutions. It declares ‘convicts can become professors’, ‘convicts can teach’, ‘convicts can be public intellectuals, authors, researchers, students’. This subversion is valuable and inspiring but there are recurring tensions in convict criminology between the ontological and the epistemological—the extent to which it is a struggle for self-realization, to become a criminologist against the odds, and a struggle to use these particular experiences as resources to make new knowledge about prison and crime. Convict criminologists must be wary of the reductionist convenience that their social position corresponds in a mechanical and inherent way to their epistemological position. As generations of diverse Black experience has warned it is usually a mistake to simply collapse the social position of a person into the epistemic position (Grosfoguel 2021).

Stuart Hall offers guidance that there are no guarantees in experience but there are almost infinite possibilities. Here, in an interview conducted shortly before his death, he refers tellingly to his experiences of both racialization and academic celebrity that resonate helpfully with some of the predicaments of convict criminology:

But this experience of, as it were, experiencing oneself as both subject and object, of encountering oneself from the outside, as another—an *other*— . . . is uncanny. It is like being exposed to a serialised set of embarrassments. And I want just to draw from that experience a first thought about thought. I think theory – thinking, theorising – is rather like that, in the sense that one confronts the absolute unknowingness, the opacity, the density, of reality of the subject one is trying to understand” (cited in Haider 2021).

Hall’s words recall Tannenbaum’s prescient concern for the effects of being made ‘conscious and self-conscious’ of a criminal identity. He

warns, however, that ‘the world is fundamentally resistant to thought, I think it is resistant to “theory”. I do not think it likes to be thought . . . It is not something that simply flows naturally from inside oneself’. This difficulty and its relationship to convict criminology is neatly captured by a former prisoner, Oscar Wilde (1891/1990:1018): ‘It is much more easy to have sympathy with suffering than it is to have sympathy with thought’. As convict criminology moves through its third decade, that work of thinking harder about what it is and developing theoretical insights cannot be neglected but the hard labour Hall refers to is now more widely shared and beginning to flow. Scholars in the USA have inspired work to commence in the UK and there is evidence of heavy lifting in other parts of Europe and South America. Things are picking up. Convict criminology is growing. Like a pharmakon, it is both a sign of the troubling well springs that feed it (prison expansion) and the inspiring resistance prisons produce to their guilty vision of humanity.

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