

Paper

**Interpreting the development and growth of Convict Criminology in  
South America**

By Jeffrey Ian Ross, Ph.D.  
Professor  
School of Criminal Justice  
University of Baltimore  
1420 North Charles Street  
Baltimore, MD, 21201  
[jross@ubalt.edu](mailto:jross@ubalt.edu)

and

Sacha Darke, Ph.D.  
Senior Lecturer  
Senior Lecturer in Criminology  
School of Social Sciences  
University of Westminster  
32-38 Wells Street  
London W1T 3UW  
Email: [s.darke@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:s.darke@westminster.ac.uk)

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abstract

The Convict Criminology (CC) network has expanded beyond its American and Canadian roots to the United Kingdom and Europe. Although increasing documentation of CC's activities and scholarship built upon CC has been produced in these countries and region, less well known are efforts beyond these locations. This article reviews attempts to build a network of scholars who are interested in the growth of Convict Criminology in South America. It may also serve as a discussion paper for a possible conference to be held in São Paulo, Brazil, Santiago de Chile, or Quito, Ecuador in the near future. The balance of the article reviews some of the dynamics for the conference.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Convict Criminology (CC) has come a long way since its roots in the United States with the organizational efforts of the Convict Criminology network (Ross, Jones, Newbold, Lenza, etc.),<sup>1</sup> the publication of *Convict Criminology* (Ross and Richards, 2003), and the growth of the British Convict Criminology Group (Aresti, Darke & Earle, 2012; Aresti and Darke, 2016).

As adherents and promoters of CC have mentioned elsewhere (Ross, Darke, Aresti, Earle, and Newbold, 2014), the emergence of CC is not simply restricted to these two countries, but has seen efforts in and from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and other European countries. Less understood and well known are parallel or similar efforts that have occurred in South American countries.

This article attempts to trace these developments, and the efforts in South American countries to develop a CC community of sorts in this region. Most of this work has been done by Sacha Darke in Brazil and Jeffrey Ian Ross in Chile and Ecuador. Through their efforts they have developed contacts, primarily in a serendipitous fashion. The authors hope that this article will serve as an important stepping stone for the continued organizing of a network of scholars in South America, and demonstrate to others how difficult it is to accomplish this task.

## II. WHY IS ORGANIZING A SOUTH AMERICAN CONVICT CRIMINOLOGY NETWORK IMPORTANT

A handful of reasons would lead one to believe that Latin/South America<sup>2</sup> would be a natural location for the expansion of CC thought and organizing activities.

First, South America has some of the highest prisoner populations and it appears to be getting worse. This is documented in a number of venues including The World Prison Population List, a project of the International Centre for Prison Studies, which “tracks incarceration around the world. Its most recent report finds that out of the world’s 10 million prisoners, 1.3 million belong to Latin America—a rate of 229 inmates per 100,000 people, far higher than the world average of 144. And over the past two decades, the Latin America’s incarceration rates have ballooned by 120 percent as the drug wars have intensified” (Zinny and Gorgal, 2014). All South American countries incarcerate more people than they did at the turn of the Century (Darke and Karam, 2016). By all accounts, the use and reliance on the penal sanction, rather than contemporary forms of community corrections used in advanced industrialized democracies, has become an important aspect of criminal justice processing and sentencing in many South American countries. The Latin American region has arguably replaced the United States as the main driver of global punitivism. It is slowly but surely emerging as “the new mass carceral zone” (Darke and Garces, 2017).

Second, there has been an increasing amount of scholarship on correctional facilities and penal conditions in Latin America, not just by criminologists from this region (e.g., Antillano, 2017; Biondi, 2010; Garces and Navarrete, 2017; Olmo, 1999), but from scholars outside of it too (e.g., ;Cerbini, 2017; Dardel, 2013; Darke, 2018; Ross and Barraza Uribe, 2018; Wacquant, 2003; 2004; 2008).

Third, one of the origins of CC in both North America and in the United Kingdom has been through the Critical Criminology organizations and networks in

these countries. And there is a growing critical criminological ethos amongst criminologists in South America (Codino, 2011; Iturralde, 2012; Schulte-Bockholt, 2011).

Fourth, South America has a rich contemporary history of writers who have been imprisoned at one time or another, and some upon release, during calmer times or in exile, wrote about their prison experience, and/or attempted to reform the prisons in their country and elsewhere (Whitfield, 2018). This includes poets (e.g., Pablo Neruda, Reinaldo Arenas, etc.), scholars, writers (e.g., Graciliano Ramos, Paulo Freire, etc.), and journalists (e.g., Jacobo Timerman, etc.).<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that most of these individuals were incarcerated during cold-war dictatorships that occurred through military coups in this region. Their imprisonment were a way to stifle free speech and silence dissent.

Finally, we also recognize that a number of individuals from English speaking countries who have been incarcerated in Latin American jails and prisons (often because of drug related charges) (e.g., Rusty Young, *Marching Powder*, and Pietre Tritton, 'An insider's view of prison reform in Ecuador', *Prison Service Journal*, 229), have written memoirs. These accounts can be useful for others trying to understand current or past carceral conditions in Latin America/South America.

### III. CHALLENGES IN ORGANIZING A CORE CONVICT CRIMINOLOGY NETWORK IN SOUTH AMERICA

Attempting to organize any new community of scholars is fraught with challenges. These are exacerbated when there is considerable geographical distance between the originators and the target area/audience. This is certainly the case with Ross and

Darke who respectively live and work in the United States and United Kingdom. There is considerable investment of resources (mainly time and money) to travel on a semi regular basis to South America. When research funding is in short supply, trips to South America are predictably done on an infrequent basis. In the longer term, this will become less of a concern. Once a South American CC is up and running, our input will reduce as the movement attracts wider attention and membership. As an insider perspective (Ross and Richards, 2003), it is essential that CC research and activities are determined by local scholars and educated activists, moreover local scholars and activists that have been incarcerated or work collaboratively with others that have such prison experience (Aresti and Darke 2016). We are also critically conscious of the irony that a critical criminology group in the Southern world should be established by scholars from North America and Western Europe, albeit scholars with close research and personal ties to this particular region. We certainly do not envisage a South American CC shaped by Northern values and scientific knowledge. (For postcolonial and comparative criminological analysis of the continuing dominance of Northern, occidental social scientific theories on the global south, see *inter alia*, Cain, 2000; Carrington et al., 2018; Cohen, 1988).

One of the challenges in organizing a new body of scholarship may be language difficulties. Whereas the scientific world is predominantly English speaking, citizens of countries in South America either speak Spanish or Portuguese as their primary language. That being said, if language barriers were so insurmountable, this did not prevent the Convict Criminology idea from rapidly gain adherents in Europe where

there are individuals in France, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Italy interested in the CC movement and scholarship.

Another obstacle is the manner in which the scholarly field of criminology/criminal justice is organized in South America. These two academic interests are not as prominent as they are in Anglo-American democracies and Europe. Faculty who are interested in this subject often teach in law schools where salaries are not that high and they often have to have a private practice to pay for living expenses. Also, the area of criminal justice is far more developed than criminology, so scholars tend to focus more on the legal developments of the criminal justice system, rather than system practices. Few universities in South America have departments that focus specifically on criminology or criminal justice.

#### IV. A HISTORY OF EFFORTS TO ORGANIZE A NETWORK OF SCHOLARS FROM SOUTH AMERICA FOCUSING ON CONVICT CRIMINOLOGY

In 2013 Ross visited Santiago and made contact with a number of criminologists and visited a handful of correctional facilities. In January 2014 Ross travelled to Quito, Ecuador and not only met with senior officials in the Ministry of Corrections but he also visited two correctional facilities. A similar trip was made again September 2014 to Santiago, where Ross spoke to researchers in the field of criminology, criminal justice and prison studies. Ross returned to Santiago in November 2016, where he expanded his network and explored the possibility of a conference on “Convict Criminology in South America” hosted by University of Andrés Bello. At each visit to Santiago, Ross gave lectures to students, scholars, and practitioners and is working

with Santiago based collaborators on a series of papers connected to Chilean prisons and the criminal justice system.

Darke has been researching prisons in Brazil since 2010. He has visited over forty correctional facilities across 10 states in the country, and has completed two ethnographic studies, one of which in a community prison administered by a former prisoner-led voluntary sector organization and according to prison rules written and enforced by current and former prisoners. A number of former prisoners that have returned to work in in prison have also gone on to complete social science degrees.

During his research trips to Brazil, Darke has also made contact with other university educated, former prisoners involved in voluntary sector prison reform groups and/or prison education and rehabilitation programmes. In September 2016 Darke and Aresti were invited to deliver a keynote presentation on CC at University of São Paulo, where Darke is Visiting Lecturer. During their stay at the university, they also participated in a higher education criminology course of studies at a local prison that was inspired by a similar programme they run at prisons in and around London (Darke and Aresti, 2016; Aresti and Darke, this volume). University of São Paulo has also expressed potential interest in hosting our proposed conference.

More recently Darke has applied for European Union ERASMUS funding with CC activists from Italy to work with the UBAXXII program of the University of Buenos Aires. UBAXXII has offered in situ undergraduate degrees and extension activities in Argentine prisons since 1985. There are currently 700 students. Many of these are in the disciplines of Law and Social Science.

## V. THE CONFERENCE

Starting in the fall of 2016 the writers of this paper tried to organize a daylong conference on Convict Criminology with a partner/sister department/university in one of the cities where they have done fieldwork. The idea would be to convene approximately 12 scholars, from a representative number of South American countries. This meeting would be open to the respective university community and public. A discussion paper would be distributed in advance to the speakers and three panels could follow this during the day. Funding for travel, accommodation, meals, and possible translators, would need to be secured from the host university, a government-funding agency, and/or a relevant foundation. There may also be some desire to assemble the papers into an edited book, if the university, granting agency, and/or foundation provide sufficient funding.

Despite a call for papers that was widely disseminated through appropriate channels, and our South American counterparts who were excited to assist us, there was not sufficient response. The conference did not get off the ground for a number of reasons. Why? There may not be enough scholars and activists in South America who know about the Convict Criminology network and this would prove daunting. Clearly the fact that we were not on the ground (in the country where we want to hold the conference) probably had a lot to do with our inability to assemble a critical mass. Even Ross and Richards recognized that in order to get things going it required a considerable amount of phone calls, e-mails, and letters to sustain the initial interest. There also may not be enough people behind bars who are pursuing a bachelors or higher degree or who are released from correctional facilities who pursue higher education. After all, the primary concern to put food on the table and pay the rent

looms large for excons, regardless of the country where they were incarcerated. More importantly, a university education, especially one that involves a masters or doctorate in criminology/criminal justice might seem like a luxury for some scholars who are excons, particularly in South America where salaries among the professoriate are notoriously low. They are more likely to chose a specialization that would enable them to make more money.

## VI. CONCLUSION

We hold out the possibility that a conference that brings together scholars and aspiring academics focusing on convict criminology in South America could take place in the near future. Organizing one of these events is usually resource intensive. In order to stimulate this event and discussion this paper might stimulates this kind of activity. Organizing these kinds of efforts especially, because CC is so new in the South American context, appears to be a real challenge. Once there is a conference on Convict Criminology, paper that are presented and possibly assembled into a a coherent edited book, we hope that it will serve as a lighting rod for similar scholarship in this area, not only in South America but in other unrepresented regions like Africa, Asia and Southeast Asia.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See multiple citations to these scholars work in the references including, but not limited to Jones, Ross, Richards & Murphy (2009); Newbold & Ross (2010); Newbold, Ross & Murphy (2010); Ross, Richards, Newbold, Jones, Lenza, Murphy, Hogan, & Curry (2011).

<sup>2</sup> The authors use the terms Latin America and South America interchangeably but understand that there is a distinct difference between the two.

<sup>3</sup> Many of these individuals have passed away. A more contemporary list can be compiled by looking at Amnesty International prisoners of conscience lists. See, for example, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/americas/sub-regions/south-america/>