

# In Memory of John Irwin\*

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John Irwin (1929-2010) passed away January 3, 2010. He was 80 years old. John was a Professor Emeritus at San Francisco State University (SFSU). He received his Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California, Berkeley in 1968, and then taught Sociology and Criminology at SFSU for 27 years.

John was an ex-convict critical criminologist. In prison he discovered that convicts were mostly ordinary human beings. This insight, not entirely appreciated by many academics that study crime and criminals, guided all of his academic and political activities. In *The Warehouse Prison* Irwin wrote (2005: ix),

My prison experiences-five years at Soledad, a medium-security California prison, after several years of living the life of a thief and drug addict-as well as my post-prison years not only determined my academic career path but also shaped my sociological perspective in definite and profound ways.

In *The Rogue* (unfinished memoir) he wrote about his own experience in prison as a convict in the 1950's:

First of all I had to deal with the world of convicts. This was different than entering high school or moving to a new town or neighborhood, even different than going to jail. In fact it is different than any other world. It contains a distinct and distorted sample of the general population. More than anything else, more than an asylum for criminals, it is a receptacle for society's most bothersome misfits.

In many ways John's approach and insight was predicated on his own real life experience. This is clearly demonstrated in his activist and academic work.

His prison books were written through a convict's eyes. He traced developments from the 1950's until today. The main themes were to explore developments in convict

culture, prisoner typologies, convict perspectives on how they are treated, conditions of confinement, convict social agency, political manipulation of the public's fear of crime to expand the reach of the criminal justice system, and the unintentional creation of a felon underclass in the USA. His highly respected research on prisons included six books: *The Felon* (1970), *Prisons in Turmoil* (1980), *The Jail* (1985), and *It's About Time* (1994/2001), with James Austin, *The Warehouse Prison* (2005), and *Lifer* (2009). He was also one of the major co-authors for the American Friends Service Committee's influential report *Struggle for Justice* (1971), (See Richards, 2009).

John also contributed to many community programs over the years that helped felons, including Project Rebound at SFSU, and as an organizer and leader of the Prisoners' Union in California. He received the August Vollmer award from the American Society of Criminology, and served on the Board of Directors for the JFA Institute and the Sentencing Project. John dedicated his life's work to helping men and women getting out of prison. He especially had a soft heart for heroin addicts, the most likely to return to prison. This included renting apartments, signing leases, and paying the rent for complete strangers. He did this quietly, and asked for no recognition. Most of the recipients of his assistance did not even know his name, or appreciate his background or professional reputation.

John was a former prisoner who never hid his past. He was a founding member of the Convict Criminology Group; former prisoners now graduate students or professors (see Richards and Ross, 2001; Ross and Richards, 2003; Richards et al., 2008; Jones et al., 2009). John participated in nearly every Convict Criminology session at ASC conferences from 1997 to 2008. He came to ASC meetings to see the cons and to help

the group grow and prosper. We found his wise counsel and sincere friendship to be invaluable. John was proud to be a "convict criminologist" and advocate for social justice. See the Convict Criminology Memorial at the following web site: <http://www.convictcriminology.org/memorial.html>

At Convict Criminology panels, John's scholarly reputation helped to draw a large audience, as his published work spans three decades, his criticism of state penology is legendary, and he has mentored and advised numerous authors that attempted to understand this distant world where men and women live in cages.

Every year, at conferences and events, before and after Convict Criminology sessions, John met with new ex-convict graduate students struggling to complete their degrees, and concerned about their futures. John helped them to prepare for their "coming out," where they introduced themselves to the audience by relating their criminal activity, convictions, and prison time, to their research. He would take them aside, engage them in conversation, and give each one personal attention. He was very straight forward, and asked a lot of personal questions (i.e., So, are you a dope addict, a thief, or a bank robber?) as he tested their transparency, and their courage to retain their own identity, despite the stigma they suffered, and the temptation to conceal their past.

Irwin understood that most felons prefer not to talk about their crimes, convictions, and time in prison, especially in a public forum. The problem is the charade may become an elaborate subterfuge; the ex-convict slides into respectability, and then becomes a prisoner again of the secrets they keep. Their professional lie becomes a performance that inhibits their work and limits their ability to write about the subject they are determined to bury. How do you teach and write about prison without telling your

audience what you learned inside? A core tenant of Convict Criminology” is that a former prisoner who wants to be a professor must not conceal their criminal past.

We will all miss John, especially his courage to “tell it like it is.” He taught us to hold our heads up, and share what we know about life behind bars. He has influenced an entire new generation of prison scholars. The struggle continues.

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