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Prison and University:

A Tale of Two Institutions?

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Abstract

For many years prisons have had a reputation as universities of crime providing novice criminals with opportunities to learn from more experienced criminals. Over the last 20 years, as prison populations have grown there has been a simultaneous expansion of university places and of courses specialising in studying crime. Academic criminology has experienced rapid growth with some suggesting that there are more students studying criminology now than sociology. There have never been more criminology courses on offer, or institutions offering them. Amidst this growth, there are indications that there are significant numbers of criminologists with more personal experiences of both crime and prison, combining experience of the Academy and its poorer relation at the opposite end of the social structure. What accompanies the transition from crime and prison to criminology and university? The instrumental relationships between prisons and criminology are notorious, long-standing and controversial, but rarely examined at the personal level. In this paper the author reflects on such an experience of prison, conducting research, studying and teaching criminology. The intention is to foster a reflexive exploration of relations, both institutional and structural as well as personal, between prison and university.

Key Words: Prison, convict criminology, reflexivity, university

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity... (A Tale of Two Cities, Charles Dickens)

Caveats and cautions

The ideas in this paper are conjectural and personal. I am prompted to outline them because of recent experiences of conducting an ethnographic study of men's social relations in prison. These have confronted me with a number of dilemmas of an epistemological and personal nature that I thought could be worth sharing and developing within the British Society of Criminology, hoping, that at some level, that it is what it is for. The paper

presented here was part of a panel convened by the author under the title 'Putting Prison in its Place' that sought to bring together a variety of reports of prison research to situate ethnographic approaches in a reflexive perspective.

I want to attempt two things in this paper. The first is to signal what I feel may be an underexplored aspect of relations between two institutions, prison and university, that have otherwise been widely seen as contributing to, respectively, the denial of social mobility and its promotion. The second is to open a space to consider the significance of personal experience of crime and prison for its academic study. This second aspect draws narrowly and inevitably from my own experiences but seeks to make links with the development of 'convict criminology' in the US academic community.

Tales of growth – the rich get university, the poor get prison?

The growth of penal populations is, as ever, a great source of animation within criminology. The 2011 BSC conference in Newcastle hosted the most pre-eminent and eloquent theorist of this growth in the shape of Loïc Wacquant who graced a conference plenary with the briefest of summaries of his complex and controversial account of this phenomenal expansion (Wacquant, 2008; 2009a; 2009b). Prison's role in the management of crime, to loosely paraphrase Wacquant, is to certify the poor and marginal in a kind of social 'lock-down'. To be convicted of a crime, and more, to go to prison, is to be awarded a negative credential that, more or less, guarantees you stay at or close to the bottom of the social structure. For those in the UK, in the days of the Criminal Records Bureau, this certification follows you around relentlessly, casting shadows wherever you step (Earle and Wakefield, 2012). Universities offer the opposite, a positive credential, a degree certificate that lights the road to higher salaries, safer jobs and more satisfying work – the professions - even the middle class!

Wacquant's penal thesis is that American neoliberal hegemony is leading to the development of novel and alarming reconfigurations of capitalist statecraft. Listening to Wacquant, and reading his analysis, it can seem that in the penal dimensions of neo-liberalism he recognises a kind of reverse imperialism. It is an imperialism in which the state is no longer simply extending its sovereignty beyond its borders to secure its interests, but has turned back in on itself now to confront and pacify its internal threats. In the process it revisits and reasserts the masculine and martial priorities that accompanied the emergence of European nation states in the 16th century. As a result, the benign Keynesian hybrid that dominated the second half of the twentieth century (in the 'West' at least) is ditched in favour of another, more muscular and aggressive state, armoured as much against its own populations as against external others. It recalls Polanyi's

(1944) crustacean state through its emphasis on hardening its defences against threat.

Although there was unfortunately little opportunity for conference delegates to interrogate this thesis with its author, Wacquant's work has prompted vigorous critique and commentary within British, and other Anglophone criminological communities (O'Malley, 2000; Zedner, 2002; Lacey, 2010; Newburn, 2010; Brown, 2011; Pratt, 2011). This is not the place to extend that commentary or critique (see Squires and Lea, 2011), except to note that Wacquant's identification of the transfer of neoliberal penal re-structuring from the USA to the UK, contested as it may be, shares a number of uncomfortably analogous features with trends in the current radical re-structuring of higher education in England and Wales, not least its identification of market mechanisms and commercial incentives as the principal, inevitable and natural driving force of change.

As David Brown (2011:130) observes - notwithstanding his own and wider critiques of Wacquant's overbearing theoretical ambition - what has been accomplished is the 'naming of neoliberalism as a subject or actor in criminological and political debates over penalty'. Brown (*ibid*, 131) notes with surprise that the subtitle to Wacquant's (2009a) *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* "is the first time... that neoliberalism has made it into a criminology book title". Criminologists, he suggests, are sometimes more adept in the analysis of general manifestations and permutations of neoliberalism than they are conversant with the particulars of its political economy. For Brown the theoretical potential lies in greater appreciation of the mechanics of neoliberalism as a political project, a project subject to widespread contestation and resistance. Neoliberalism is more readily recognisable as an active project than the more fatalistic, 'bloodless', accounts of an inevitable transition to 'late modernity' characterised by much of 'governmentality' literature (e.g. with varying degrees of emphasis, Young, 1999; Garland, 2001).

Wacquant is likewise congratulated by many for bringing in the state (again) as an active partner that manages and deploys a variety of institutions to advance neoliberal objectives. Although the prison and wider penal complex is the principal target of Wacquant's analysis he argues persuasively about a wider and more general reconfiguration of state resources and priorities. Higher education is far from being exempt from this process.

I wonder, but do not find much to read about, the relationship between universities and prisons in sorting and securing populations, largely but not exclusively through class, in which 'communities of fate' are increasingly processed and reproduced by penal mechanisms and 'communities of choice' by educational ones. Neoliberalism, as Hirst (1994) argues, addresses 'communities of choice' with urgent appeals to immerse themselves in the business of choosing what is best for them, and that unfettered markets are best providers of this opportunity. For members of the modern middle class command of such choices, in everything from education to coffee, has become the hallmark of their status, endowing

them with the prestige of the discerning but ever omnivorous consumer. With a university degree they are only more likely to be the successful 'entrepreneurs of themselves' while the penal system is exhorted to ever greater efforts in rehabilitating those who are less successful in 'optimising themselves' to the shiftily versatile equilibriums of neoliberalism.

Quantitative easing: from Robbins to Browne

The neoliberal re-structuring of higher education is currently entering a remarkable phase in which central government funding for the undergraduate study of the arts and humanities has been unilaterally withdrawn, preserving government sponsorship only of STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths). Although still in the early process of implementation the consequences are clear. They will sharpen and accelerate the effects of the preceding marketization of the sector, initiated by the Conservative government in 1993, sustained by New Labour into the twenty first century, and passed into the enthusiastic hands of the Coalition government via the Browne Report (2010). They effectively kill off the higher education settlement that took root in the 1960s following publication of the Robbins Report (1963) which committed large public funds to the expansion of higher education. That the execution is administered by a party who went to the electorate promising to reverse government policy on charging student fees only adds to the sense of tragedy and farce.

It is undoubtedly the case that higher education provision in the UK has expanded dramatically since the 1990s, and specifically under New Labour, with one of New Labour's early Education Ministers, Estelle Morris, promising to ensure that universities do not remain the exclusive 'birthright' of the middle classes. The evidence, however, points pretty conclusively in the opposite direction. The expansion of higher education has "disproportionately benefitted children from relatively rich families.... [and] widened participation gaps between rich and poor children" (Blanden and Machin, 2004: 231). As Kogan and Hanney (2000) argue the rise in participation that has occurred has been driven by many factors and complex interactions, but a significant aspect has been 'demand led' as students respond to changes in the UK economy and shift toward service industry-friendly qualifications. The phenomenal growth in the availability of criminology courses in both new and old Universities over the last fifteen years, with over 100 colleges now offering undergraduate courses in criminology, is perhaps symptomatic of this process.

The influence of the US in the restructuring of higher education is considerable and just as controversial as the penal borrowings that alarm Wacquant. Although the second stages of UK reform and expansion of higher education by New Labour were undoubtedly influenced by the Australian Labour Party's experience of government between 1983 and 1996, and specifically its introduction of student loan financing (Johnson and Tonkis, 2002), Hotson (2011) identifies the more recent acceleration of

market influence in the sector being due to the influence of the high ranking of certain US institutions in global measures of university performance. The comparisons drawn with the US experience of higher education by leading proponents of reform are disingenuous, inaccurate and inappropriate according to Hotson, leading him to conclude that “[t]he data which appear, at first glance, to demonstrate the great strength of the US university system are revealed, on even the most rudimentary analysis, to demonstrate nothing of the kind”. His analysis lays bare the ideological impetus behind the Coalition government’s acceleration of neoliberal market priorities, leading him to suggest there will be no identifiable benefits to students, potential students or academics. Economic costs will rise and academic standards will fall, Hotson predicts, if the US model endorsed in the Browne Report is adopted. Collini (2011) goes on to examine how one of the most radical and far reaching reorientations of higher education is being conducted in the total absence of any democratic mandate and any defining rationale other than a confused and largely incoherent convergence with the basic tenets of neoliberalism.

Straws in the wind or footsteps in the sand?

Asking what kind of criminology is likely to prosper in this unprecedented environment seems like a reasonable proposition. How is the market for criminological knowledge to be transformed by the re-positioning of funding behind student demand for ‘industry friendly qualifications’ rather than government sponsorship? Perhaps it will then be more likely to fulfil Foucault’s mordant description of the criminology that flourished in the early Robbins phase after the establishment of the Institute of Criminology at the University of Cambridge in 1961:

Have you ever read any criminological texts? They are staggering. And I say this out of astonishment, not aggressiveness, because I fail to comprehend how the discourse of criminology has been able to go on at this level. One has the impression that it is of such utility, is needed so urgently and rendered so vital for the working of the system, that it does not even seek a theoretical justification for itself, or even simply a coherent framework. It is entirely utilitarian (Foucault, 1980: 47).

As Cohen (1981), Rock (1994; 2007) and Garland (1994) are at pains to point out, there is no simple or easily reducible linear history to the emergence of criminology in Britain. Garland’s (*ibid*) original formulation of the synthesising influence of the twin governmental and Lombrosian projects remains compelling. It situates the formal establishment of British criminology in the post-war Keynesian compact that neo-liberalism targets most intensely; specifically its apotheosis in the 1960s. Rock (2007) describes the way in which criminology’s “young turks”, the ‘fortunate generation’ who were so “striving, expansive and

quarrelsome”, subsequently found themselves in the sunlit uplands of the rapidly expanded academy, a journey I return to later in the paper.

The second phase of expansive institutional development in the 1990s witnessed a process in which the sister disciplines “of psychology, law, social policy and above all, sociology were heavily colonised” (*ibid*, 7). It now seems likely that there are more undergraduates studying criminology than sociology, and an A-level in criminology is under development by AQA (Crimspace, 2011). Criminology prides itself in Britain on being a rendezvous discipline but if criminology departments and awards prosper while others wither it may come to be seen as more of a cuckoo in the nest than a collaborative partner. It is beginning to look more like a rendezvous at the O.K. Corral than a search for truth in the gardens of academe.

As neoliberal priorities and the emerging impacts of re-structuring have become more apparent, questions about the changing role of Universities have been posed. In the light of subsequent events the alarmist tone of Robinson and Tormey’s (2003) ‘Gleichschaltung’ critique now seems a little less wayward. It is Phil Cohen (2004), prompted perhaps by the same straws in the wind, who indicates the scale of the challenge. “What are universities for?” he asks, if not as places to think. The crisis of the neoliberal university, as Cohen puts it, involves an urgent struggle against a return to the crude class ascendancy of the past in which the ‘top’ universities educate the future governing elite and “the less well-endowed institutions...train up the routine ‘knowledge workers’ by means of a thoroughly vocationalised curriculum”. In view of the Coalition’s plans for higher education the erstwhile ‘reasonable ambivalence’ (Robinson and Tormey, 2003) that characterised many left liberal responses to New Labour has given way to a kind of paralysed horror. The dimly discerned social democratic lights at the end of the tunnel (“Education, Education, Education”) have turned out to be those of the oncoming neoliberal train.

The dangers of a vocationalised curriculum for criminology are manifold, taking it firmly in the direction of its narrowest, most instrumental and utilitarian tendencies. Notwithstanding Garland’s widening revisions of Foucault, revisiting and refreshing that territory remains central to criminology’s critical potentials. Pasquino (1991) may have misconstrued the birth of criminology ensuing from the marriage of the university and the prison, but his account of the Positive school of Italian Criminology remains richly evocative of the present conjunction of economic crisis, national manoeuvring and ideological upheaval (see Valier, 2002). For these reasons, I briefly outline the relevance of his account by extending his deployment of a literary classic as a way of developing a more open, reflexive criminology, before going on to explore further aspects of such a criminology through a biographical lens, revisiting the experiences of criminology’s ‘fortunate generation’.

A man of certain qualities: Criminology makes a difference

So regulations had now become a substitute for the interest the world had once shown in him, and Moosbrugger thought: 'You've got a long rope around your neck and can't see who's pulling it.' (Musil, 1979: 283)

Robert Musil's novel of the declining Austro-Hungarian monarchy and empire provides Pasquino (1991) with a literary account of criminology's role in the struggle for order, then and now. Moosbrugger is the hapless 'criminal' who simultaneously represents the collectively seething masses and the individuated 'devious other' that Pasquino recognises as '*homo criminalis*' of the Italian *Scuola Positiva*. Moosbrugger fascinates and repels the novel's central character, Ulrich, the eponymous 'man without qualities', as he narrates the transitions of European modernity with eloquent distraction. No other work of fiction, to my mind, quite so acutely fixes and dramatizes the ironies and paradoxes of criminology that Young (2011) insists should be the source of its inspiration. In Moosbrugger there is criminology's eternal nominal object and *raison d'être*, the criminal; *homo criminalis*, as Pasquino dubs him. But Moosbrugger cannot be so reduced in the novel and, as the remark above indicates, he is given to insightful reveries on his actions and predicaments that serve to illuminate his incommensurability with both the calculating rationality of law, *homo penalis*, and the emerging *homo economicus* of the neoliberal order: in prison (and out) he admits to finding "people hard to endure" (Musil, 1979: 110) and finds dignity only in the abstract dance of his thoughts. Throughout the three volumes of this unfinished epic his presence lingers as an episodic and essential counterpoint to the novel's presiding themes: the search for an ethical compass in a collapsing order and a yearning for the sublime. In tumultuous times Moosbrugger's elemental presence appears to represent the hopes and fears of the modern imagination, its dreaming and fitful nightmares. He has a voice, a mind and a body, and none of them are docile.

As Pasquino (*ibid*, 245) notes of Musil's novel, it provides critical insights into criminology's "general regime of knowledge", its "special savoir", at a particular historical and cultural conjuncture. It also exposes criminology's facility for reducing people to type and its rather lifeless way of talking/writing about "crime and criminals". Musil's deployment of Moosbrugger's unruly sentiments and predicaments seems to capture and make vivid criminology's perennial blend of philanthropy and misanthropy. It is a synthesis given most concrete form in the institution of prison.

It is a novel with profound resonance for criminologists, as Pasquino demonstrates, but also for anyone studying contemporary conditions of social and political life in a country coming to terms with the collapse of its imperial ambitions (Gilroy, 2004). Nairn (2000), for example, draws extensively on Musil's novel to illuminate his analysis of the post-imperial

tensions that gather, increasingly urgently, around the cultural, constitutional and political configuration of the United Kingdom. Notwithstanding the efforts of such anti-criminologists as Ruggiero (2003), Musil's trilogy is unlikely to find its way onto criminology reading lists, overloaded as they are with "policy oriented criminal justice repair kits sitting spine to spine with a few token theoretical tomes" (Hobbs, 2002: 215), but as a guide to the conditions that gave "birth to [the] special knowledge" we call criminology and for insights into our political culture, it remains uniquely rewarding.

The epistemological difficulties that inhere in the representation of crime and criminals for criminologists, and particularly those researching prison who have been in prison themselves, is what I turn to now. These sometimes personal observations are offered in the spirit of C. Wright Mills (1959: 226) injunction to consider "both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations" in connecting private troubles to public issues.

Prison optics, criminological rhetorics

One of the first criminology conferences I attended was the BSC at the University of Portsmouth in 2004 and in one of the sessions Francis Pakes was giving an excellent paper about comparative criminal justice (Pakes, 2006). Discussing the new prison building programme in the Netherlands he put up a slide of the accommodation in one of the prisons and a ripple of amused recognition went round the auditorium because the rooms he showed bore such a close resemblance to the student rooms that conference delegates had just been allocated.

I think that was the first moment I felt there might be a need for me to think a bit more carefully about the relationship between prisons and universities, and the way the two interact in my own biography and relationship to contemporary British criminology. Pakes' pictures of rooms with en suite shower and toilet did remind me of the room where I had just left my bags, but not of the cell I shared in HMP Norwich in 1982, with its metal bunks, piss bucket and slopping out routines. In the early 1980s with 43,000 prisoners in a system intended to accommodate 38,000 overcrowding was a serious issue, as it is today. I shared a cell with one, and sometimes two other prisoners. We had no in-cell sanitation. When three men are locked, from 7pm, in a cell designed for a single person, the inevitable result is an unwelcome journey the following morning to the wing's latrine to empty the piss bucket.

Conducting research in HMP Maidstone and HMYOI Rochester between 2006 and 2008 (Earle and Phillips, 2009; Phillips and Earle, 2010; Earle, 2011; Earle 2012, forthcoming; Phillips, forthcoming) I discovered that, post-Woolf, the men there have both toilets and televisions in their cells. Some have playstations. There are telephones on each wing, and a vibrant economy in illicit, and thus unmonitored, mobile phones. The men are mostly in single cells. They are entitled to wear their own clothes,

though most adopt, for convenience or out of necessity, those provided for them by the prison. A well-behaved and well-resourced prisoner is entitled to buy a duvet, several feather pillows. They can study and may receive training in computer technology, brick laying, or basic literacy. During the course of the research the Prison Officers Association, not usually noted for its sense of humour, issued a national statement expressing its concern that the reason more prisoners weren't escaping from custody was that life's too good for them inside. A novel angle on maintaining penal security but just a little surreal! So much had changed since I was in prison 25 years previously, albeit for only three months. But during the course of the research I was reminded of much that was also intensely familiar, and how so much about prison life seemed to depend on which side of the cell door you stood.

One prisoner asked me how I would like to be locked in a toilet for up to 23 hours a day, or eat all my meals there, next to the lavatory bowl. Another asked me how I could possibly understand his predicament if I had not been in prison myself, forcing me to tentatively disclose I had. Why did prisoners still talk of the glaring senselessness of prison, just as I and my cellmates had done during my time inside? Why, still, the overriding sense of its grinding monotony, institutional inefficiency and implicit, frequently explicit, brutality? Why did some men make light of their incarceration, and others not? How did they make their lives viable in prison under these exceptional conditions of constraint, regimentation and deprivation? And some could not.

I developed a strong rapport with an older (mid-50s) man, wracked by the uncertainty of his indeterminate sentence. I enjoyed hours of discussion with this man, who I'll call Greg, and hoped he might agree to more extensive life history interviews to allow me to develop my PhD thesis on prison masculinities. Greg persistently declined my overtures for a recorded interview. "*Cui Bono, Rod? Cui Bono?*" he repeatedly asked. Who benefits indeed? He deeply resented the terms of his incarceration and the particularly degraded conditions at HMP Maidstone. He liked me, I think, but he hated the idea of being a prison research object and I failed to convince him that my research interests served any greater purpose than helping to secure my academic career prospects.

A more specific biographical dilemma surfaced when I met 'Warren' a 30 year old young man I'd last seen 15 years previously in the London borough of Lambeth. I'd worked extensively with him in an education project in Kennington when he was 15 years old, excluded from school and getting into trouble with the law. I remembered good times and though some of these we shared, his life and his mind had been shattered in the intervening 15 years. "It's been a bumpy ride for me" he said of his struggle with drugs and relationships. I could see two biographies here, two very different trajectories; mine, back into the university life I had fallen out of, and onward into children and family life; and his, into the prison and isolation I had hoped he would avoid. Communities of choice and communities of fate.

My encounter with 'Warren' coincided with the publication of a special edition of *Theoretical Criminology* (2007 Vol. 11 No.4) dedicated to revisiting that classic of Chicago ethnography, Clifford Shaw's *Jack Roller* (1930). The journal's rich and detailed discussion of this work, built as it is around the tangled biographical threads of a young man and an academic, takes up questions of representation and theorising of people's lives in criminology. Gadd and Jefferson (2007), for example, examine the almost pathological tendency to elide accounts of characters like Stanley with a 'social type' – the delinquent young male. Contributors note how rarely criminological theorising draws deeply from the 'thick data' of such studies of a single case (Maruna and Matravers, 2007) and defer to conventional empirical priorities of scale. Gelsthorpe (2007) stresses the co-production of biographies in the telling of such tales as Stanley's in the *Jack Roller* by Clifford Shaw, and the significance of appreciating the multiple stories that make up a criminological narrative, many of which remain backstage and obscured. Including and developing a reflexive perspective leads away from conventionally scientific criminological priorities toward the cultural and the linguistic 'turns' that preoccupy the arts and humanities, the areas of scholarship the government now declines to sponsor at undergraduate level. It challenges criminology and criminologist alike (Phillips and Earle 2008).

Another prompt toward considering relationships between university and prison came when I was teaching a third level crime course with the Open University. One of my best students disclosed rather awkwardly, in a tutorial session, that he was relatively recently released from prison. I could feel how difficult it was for him, but didn't immediately share my own history. We talked afterward about it and I invited him to join me, some years later, at a conference to launch *The Handbook on Prisons* (Jewkes, 2007) at the Open University where he was asked to join the contributions of ex-prisoners, such as the representative from Unlock, Bobby Cummins. Sharing the long drive back to our respective homes in the South East he expressed his frustration at not being able to contribute as effectively as he would have liked to the conference. He had so much he wanted he say, so much pent up intellectual energy, that he felt his contribution had become garbled and merely anecdotal. It was not, but he felt he had not done himself or his ideas justice. His remarks revealed to me the way I had under-estimated how difficult it can be to make the transition from tutorial discussion to conference paper, let alone from prison wing to academic hall.

The fortunate generation take stock

I am sure many of us 'reading' or teaching criminology have similar experiences of working with students who have something of a criminal record, and the idea of encountering crime and 'criminals' while doing criminological research is hardly earth shattering. It is not unusual to bump into another criminologist who has moved from, say, probation, the police

or the prison service, into criminology, or who moves to and fro between. Not so an ex-prisoner. It is still less common to find theoretical reflection on what Rock and Holdaway (1998) call the subterranean features of this experience of criminology, the presence of biography and affective hinterlands. Their attempt to 'demystify' theory and connect it to their life stories and criminological practice, reveals the ways in which for the 'fortunate generation' of criminologists who embarked on their careers in the wake of the Robbins Report (Frances Heidensohn, Robert Reiner, David Downes, and Clifford Shearing, among others in this collection), the work of theorising was far from abstract or impersonal and a long way from an interest in 'industry friendly qualification'. Rock and Holdaway remark (1998: 11) on the extent to which these authors' accounts expose the way that "theorizing came to represent the evolving resolution of issues central to the self, how early were those issues implanted in the criminologist's mind, and how bound up with his or her identity and life-project". "Facts" they remind us, citing Lafferty (1932), "are bits of biography".

Rock and Holdaway's collection can be seen as a response to Bennett's (1981) concern for the 'rhetoric of criminology'. Bennett connects the traditions of oral history with the early biographical emphasis on the person in the proto-criminology of the 19th century works of Mayhew (among others), a focus that was subsequently picked up by the Chicago School. In these Bennett sees a rhetorical potential "to overcome public indifference and communicate to a variety of audiences the human traits of offenders, the individual's social world" and thus "the need for community programmes to prevent delinquency" and expose "the futility of imprisonment" (*ibid*, flysheet notes).

Bennett's hopeful speculations that such a reflexive project might produce something other than the "'stick figure' of the over-socialised individual or rational actor" (Maruna and Matravers, 2007: 429) remain largely unfulfilled, even though they precede the explosive growth of academic criminology by some twenty years. The almost total absence in British criminology of prisoner's accounts or analysis of prison is only the more remarkable and impoverishing. Bennett (1981: 248) reaffirms C. Wright Mills' (1959) warnings of the oversights that might arise in the disconnections we fashion to present our work as distinct from ourselves:

Although these criminologists see themselves as scientists working in the micro-analytical tradition, they apparently assume that developing a personal relationship with a delinquent and transmitting urgent messages to an audience are more important than analysing the many small causes that influence the acquisition and publication of those messages – more important than giving an auto-biographical account of themselves...

Stowaways on the Atlantic crossing: Convict criminology?

The influence of the symbolic interactionism of the Chicago School reaches deep into British criminology (Rock, 2002), as is reflected in that special issue of *Theoretical Criminology*, and Rock and Holdaway's anthology. Frank Tannenbaum (1938), one of its precursors and someone often credited with catalysing the labelling perspective in the 1930s for Howard Becker to refine in the 1960s, served a year-long prison sentence. He was one of the first radical academics to openly identify himself as an ex-convict (Jones et al., 2009); but it was not until John Irwin published *The Felon* (1970), *Prisons in Turmoil* (1980) and *The Jail* (1985) that the potential benefits of a distinctive, prisoner/ex-prisoner perspective began to be recognised in the US. Irwin had served five years for armed robbery in the 1950s before studying with David Matza and Erving Goffman to complete his PhD. As Jones et al. (2009) note, he remained guarded about the significance of his prison experiences in these texts. The subsequent explosive growth in the US penal population during the 1980s and 1990s, at least in part fuelled by the 'war on drugs', pulled in increasing numbers of white middle class prisoners and by the 1990s "there were a significant number of ex-convict graduate students and professors using their prior experience in the criminal justice system to study jails and prisons" (*ibid*, 154). It was their increasing frustration with "the failure of criminologists to recognise the dehumanising conditions of the criminal justice system and the lives of those defined as criminal" (Ross and Richards, 2003: xvii-xxii) that led to the establishment of an organised grouping calling themselves 'Convict Criminologists'. Notwithstanding the smaller, less diverse and more liberal characteristics of both British criminology and the criminal justice system, these sentiments strike a chord for me.

The Convict Criminology group is an informal collectivity of serving and released convicts that claim they are "able to do what many previous researchers could not: merge their past with their present and provide a provocative approach to the study of their field" (Jones et al., 2009: 153). In doing so they hope they may undermine "the misunderstanding [that] leads to a distorted view of prisons and prisoners based on the judgemental ideas of the sheltered middle-class academic hired by or serving government taskmasters" (*ibid*, 158). They are often in a position to comment, with the authority of direct experience, on the variable conditions that apply across the enormously extensive US penal system, indicating the frequently hidden internal diversity among the constituent elements of the apparently monolithic whole.

There are complex epistemological and methodological issues surrounding the claim to insider status that are only sharpened by the poignancy of the term in its prison context. Convict criminologists in the US are not claiming analytical exclusivity, promoting a specious authenticity or insisting on a dogmatic research credentialism, but they are exposing missing parts of the picture and demanding more honesty, transparency and accountability about its generation. Much of this story is implicitly

about class and the troubled relations between the two institutions that characterise its polarities. It is also, to an extent, about scale, and the unique characteristics of the explosive growth of the US prison population. The convict criminology group recognise the irony of this contributing to their viability.

Wacquant (2002) identifies the contraction of ethnographic studies of US prisons as a tragedy, but, as in many other dimensions, the research scene in the UK is very different. The rude health of the prison research community in the UK, which has produced both methodological innovations and works of outstanding quality, provides opportunities that may compensate for an absence of scale. An example is Crewe and Bennett's (2012) collection, *The Prisoner*, a creative attempt to populate the void of scholarly accounts by prisoners on prison:

Little of what we know about prison comes from the mouths of prisoners, and very few academic accounts of prison life manage to convey some of its most profound and important features: its daily pressures and frustrations, the culture of the wings and landings, and the relationships which shape the everyday experience of being imprisoned. (Bennett and Crewe, 2012: ii)

An Afterword is provided by someone who has made/is making the journey from prison to PhD, and can testify that the autobiographical accounts of such 'celebrity' cons as "Jeffrey Archer, Charles Bronson or Norman Parker, whose accounts of prison life dominate this field, are not representative" (Warr, 2012). Warr notes that the alarmingly widespread 'cultural ignorance' of what prison life is like, is not confined to "those who have friends, family members and loved ones behind bars" but is shared by "many academics who are actively engaged with the literature on prisons and imprisonment" (*ibid*, 143). His brief and moving account of the way "prison affects every aspect of your being" and his suggestion that "very few students or academics with whom I have contact have any understanding of what truly occurs behind bars" indicates the urgent need for more insider perspectives in British criminology.

I share Warr's sense of the deep psychic impact that prison has on 'the soul' that escapes academic scrutiny, and also the way Maruna and Matravers (2007: 429) suggest vital insights into order and disorder, crime and justice, are provided by works of fiction, not least because of its capacity and intentions to 'move the reader' and address their affective world rather than present 'evidence' or data.

Positive convictions

Since completing the ESRC funded study of Identity, Ethnicity and Social Relations in prison I have begun to encounter academics who have 'graduated' from both university and prison to pursue the kinds of careers described by the convict criminology group. Some began (and/or completed) their journey with the Open University, an institution launched

in 1971 as an extension of the sentiments expressed in the Robbins report that Higher Education might be a public good that fosters ‘the democratic intellect’. The Browne report and Coalition government policy mean that even OU fees will treble or quadruple. How many people in prison will have the funds to pay them? How many leaving prison will be in a position to take up the offer of a debt in excess of £30,000 in return for an opportunity to continue their education?

The fragile and precarious paths broken by students making the journey from prison to university are likely to become harder to find and more difficult to follow. The period of expansion, as characterised by the Prisons Research Centre at the Institute of Criminology in Cambridge, has widened the field of research and encouraged more sensitive participation but, although the increased traffic from the campus to the convict has embraced staff and prison managers, including prisoners has proved far more elusive. It is pretty much one way traffic as far as prisoners are concerned.

Those making the journey from prison convict to university campus may be entitled to more recognition, support and consideration from an academic community whose discipline has thrived on popular myths about them, their personal mishaps and misdeeds, if only because such people may offer a vital corrective to some of its most myopic, persistent and blinkered correctional tendencies. If, as Freud suggested, dreams provide the psychoanalyst with a ‘royal road’ to the subconscious, then direct experience of HM prisons, here in the UK, offers a path into the heart of the criminological imagination. It is a path less taken by conventional academics, for reasonably sensible reasons, but it does not mean it is not there for us to explore with those who have.

Postscript:

A British Convict Criminology group is being established and can be contacted at: bcc4bcc@hotmail.co.uk; or r.earle@open.ac.uk. The US Convict Criminology Group kindly provide a ‘page’ for the British group on their website: www.convictcriminology.org/bcc.htm

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