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'Bridging the Gap':

Giving Public Voice to Prisoners and Former Prisoners through Research Activism

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At the one day conference that gave rise to this article¹ we heard a number of interesting papers around the broad theme of the relationships between 'the prison and the public' — from how the prison system fails and misleads in terms of the diversity of prisoner experiences, the false dichotomies in media representations between the 'criminal' and the 'law abiding' and the 'normal' and the 'deviant', the roles played by former prisoner mentors in affecting change, the potential for creative prisoner art and writing to challenge public misconceptions of prisons and prisoners, as well as the means by which public support can be harnessed for prison reform.² In this article we come from a slightly different angle and perspective in terms of exploring how we can 'bridge the gap' between what counts and is accepted as public knowledge about prisoners (which is mediated and highly selective) and their actual lived experiences. We introduce some of the work- in- progress by British Convict Criminology (BCC) in producing knowledge that privileges the standpoint and situated experiences of prisoners and former prisoners. The view taken here is that the field of criminology plays an important part in perpetuating dominant, mediated discourses through systematically preventing research that questions the status quo. We begin by sketching out some of the problems and challenges in developing insider perspectives in today's academic and political climate. This is done through drawing on Sibley³ and the notion of 'dangerous knowledge', and the problems we, in the academy, face in terms of the constraints of working in neo-liberal universities with their increasing stress on research ethics and risk assessment, and diktats on what counts as acceptable knowledge. We offer a thumbnail

sketch of some the ways in which BCC aims to give voice to prisoners and former prisoners in order to shift the public debate on crime, criminality and punishment, and we set out where it is at the moment in terms of the various projects and initiatives it is in the process of launching, encouraging and developing. In the final section the role statutory and non-statutory services play in constraining the 'prisoner voice' is explored.

Thirteen years ago in his book *Geographies of Exclusion*, the urban geographer David Sibley wrote not only of the forms of social and spatial exclusion (in his work, those faced by women and black writers), but also of how particular forms of knowledge are kept from the academic establishment and society in general. This is important to us for, as he wrote, knowledge is undoubtedly:

... conditioned by power relations which determine the boundaries of 'knowledge' and exclude dangerous and threatening ideas and authors. It follows that any prescriptions for a better integrated and more egalitarian society must also include proposals for change in the way academic knowledge is produced.⁴

Whilst this has recently served as a rallying cry for more culturally attuned criminologists in terms of their methodological attack on the drift towards 'crime science' and positivism in general, it is also highly relevant to the Convict Criminology movement as it highlights how the rigid and seemingly impermeable boundaries between so-called 'experts' and 'criminals' are being drawn, re-drawn and maintained. There is growing danger that the dominance of administrative forms of criminology not only sets the agenda, but also helps to perpetuate what Thomas Mathiesen⁵ calls the 'prison fiasco', and a situation whereby the 'crime control industry'⁶ is exerting a hegemonic influence on

1. Prison and the Public, Edge Hill University, 27 March 2013.

2. A number of these papers were subsequently published in two special editions of the Prison Service Journal, volumes 210 (2013) and 214 (2014).

3. Sibley, D. (1995) *Geographies of Exclusion; Society and Difference in the West*, London: Routledge.

4. Christie, N. (2000) *Crime Control as Industry: Towards Gulags, Western Style?*, London: Routledge.

5. Mathiesen, T. (1990) *Prison On Trial: A Critical Assessment*, Winchester: Waterside.

6. Christie, N. (2000) *Crime Control as Industry: Towards Gulags, Western Style?*, London: Routledge.

academic criminological research. It could be argued that this situation has worsened still in the past few years with the gradual erosion of government funding in higher education. We now find ourselves in a position where academic departments are coming under very real pressures to develop external sources of research funding. But what sort of criminological research is currently being funded? A brief perusal of the main criminological journals will show that whilst some solid radical work is still being conducted in some quarters, there is a deepening drift towards what Jock Young calls a 'voodoo criminology'⁷ — that is a criminology which is highly technical and statistical, and one which effectively silences certain forms of knowledge and knowledge claims whilst prioritising and exalting others.

Similarly, in a recent brief paper sketching out what he perceives as the challenges to critical criminological research in an age of 'market positivism' and 'exclusionary research protocols', Pete Squires⁸ warns that universities themselves are developing a 'research prevention culture' that is putting ethical, risk assessment and methodological stumbling blocks in the way of critical research. In support of this argument, Squires focuses on the increasing emphasis in social science departments on producing 'policy-led evidence chasing' studies. This, he explains, has major implications not only for

the types of question that the criminologist can ask (privileging hypothesis-testing, 'impact benefit' over grounded research), but also their choice of methods (privileging quantitative over qualitative methodologies and positivistic forms of data collection and analysis), and, what is of particular concern to some of us at BCC, their access to participants (privileging practitioner over offender voices). Here he wryly notes that university research ethics committees judge research with offenders and 'ex-offenders' as being inherently more problematic than research with other subjects — they are, after all, the reasoning goes, more prone to

dishonesty (unlike, for instance, police officers and politicians who, as we know, always tell the truth!), as the recent expenses scandals amongst British politicians and revelations of police cover ups in the Hillsborough tragedy illustrate. Squires gives a number of illustrations of how this latter insistence on institutionally relevant, micro-level analysis has already impacted on the possibilities for critical, exploratory research in the UK; from the Ministry of Justice encouraging applications for research assessing the effectiveness of operational policy, to local magistrates refusing to be interviewed by

university researchers due to their not being allowed to get involved in research by 'external agencies', and to government funding of university research being increasingly based primarily on notions of 'impactology'. To this, Mitch Librett and Dina Perrone warn,⁹ must be added the further challenge posed by the increasingly bureaucratic nature of university research committees, and in particular, the overwhelming emphasis that is being put on protecting their institutions from litigation. Such risk aversion, rightly or wrongly, including a growing insistence that research is covered by indemnity insurance, will no doubt disproportionately impact on qualitative prisons research, and indeed any research involving prisoners or former prisoners.

To summarise our argument so far: the various governmental and institutional push and pull factors surrounding the

production of academic knowledge are leading to a 'market led criminology' which, as Reece Walters puts it, '[c]ontinues to colonise research agendas with critical voices demarcated to an increasingly marginalised periphery.'¹⁰ Such things can, as Squires notes, only serve to reinforce conventional stereotypes and perceptions of the 'dangerous others' of tabloid hysteria. It is against such a backdrop, in recognition that the voices of prisoners and former prisoners are becoming increasingly muted if not silenced altogether, in academic as well as public debates on crime, criminality and punishment, that *Convict Criminology* is

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7. Young, J. (2004), 'Voodoo criminology and the numbers game', in Ferrell, J. et al. (eds.) *Cultural Criminology Unleashed*, London: Glasshouse.

8. Squires, P. (2013) 'Research prevention and the zombie university', *Criminal Justice Matters*, 91: 4-5.

9. Librett, M. and Perrone, D. (2010) 'Apples and oranges: Ethnography and the IRB', *Qualitative Research*, 10: 729-747.

10. Walters, R. (2003) *Deviant Knowledge*, Cullompton: Willan.

committed to generating an authentic criminology from below — a criminology that is based on ‘participative action research’ and in which prisoners are engaged not only as research participants, but as co-producers of academic knowledge working in collaboration with university scholars, and as researchers conducting ethnographies *in situ*.

Convict Criminology

Convict Criminology was originally established in the United States in 1997 by former prisoner and former corrections worker, turned academics, Steven C. Richards and Jeffrey Ian Ross. Steven C. Richards and Michael Lenza explain that the movement ‘was born of the frustration ex-convict professors and graduate students felt when reading the academic literature on prisons, [most of which] reflected the ideas of prison administrators, while largely ignoring what convicts knew about the day-to-day realities of imprisonment.’¹¹ In the most recent article outlining the Convict Criminology position, Jeffrey Ian Ross likewise emphasises the absence of insider perspectives on prisons in American (and we would argue, British) criminology. Ross describes the Convict Criminology movement as, ‘a collection of PhD-trained former prisoners, prison workers, and others who share a belief that in order to be a fully rounded discipline, mainstream criminology needs to be informed by input from those with personal experience of life in correctional institutions’.¹²

From this starting point two essential features of Convict Criminology emerge. First, Convict Criminology aims to produce academic research and commentary on prisons that is not just informed, but which is also

underpinned and securely moored by prison experiences.¹³ As Jason Warr emphasises in the British context, academic criminologists are far from immune to the social ignorance that pervades public discourses on penalty.¹⁴ Both in Britain and the United States, the vast majority of our academic knowledge and commentary on prisons remains predicated by second-hand accounts, in which prisoners and staff remain no more than research participants, and the privileged academic claims the right to formulate an appropriate research design to measure and interpret their experiences, and the validity of their views. The point is that even the most dedicated prison ethnographer cannot fully appreciate what it is like to be incarcerated, or the social

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problems (personal and societal neglect, violence, substance abuse, stigma and so on) typically faced by prisoners and former prisoners unless they have experienced prison themselves. In Britain as in America, prisoners and former prisoners invariably complain that they recognise little of the way in which their lives are depicted in much of the established prisons literature. To bridge this chasm between researcher and research participant, Convict Criminology promotes a broad range of insider methodologies, including auto-ethnography,¹⁵ peer research,¹⁶ and collaborative research in which prisoners and former prisoners are co-producers of knowledge,¹⁷ or with academics

taking a back seat and utilising their knowledge of research methodologies to facilitate prisoner ethnographies.¹⁸ And whilst the intention here is not to discredit or invalidate the valuable contribution other academics have made to our understandings of prisoner realities, given the limited involvement of prisoners in prison research, the benefits of the convict criminology approach to research are undoubtedly plentiful.

11. Richards, S. C. and Lenza, M. (2012) ‘The first dime and nickel of Convict Criminology’, *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, 2(1&2): 3-14, p. 3.
12. Ross, J. I., Darke, S., Aresti, A., Newbold, G. and Earle, R. (2014) ‘Developing convict criminology beyond North America’, *International Criminal Justice Review*, 24(2), 121-33, p.121.
13. Aresti, A. (2014) ‘A convict perspective’, *Prison Service Journal*, 211: 19-25.
14. Warr, J. (2012) ‘Afterword’, in Crewe, B. and Bennett, J. (eds.) *The Prisoner*, London: Routledge.
15. e.g. Newbold, G., Ross, J. I., Jones, R. S., Richards, S. C., and Lenza, M. (2014) ‘Prison research from the inside: The role of convict autoethnography’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(4): 454-463.
16. e.g. Aresti, A. (2012) ‘Developing a convict criminology group in the UK’, *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, 21(1): 148-165.
17. e.g. Taylor, J. M. and Tewksbury, R. (1995) ‘From the inside out to the outside in: Team research in the correctional setting’, *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 11(2): 119-136; cf. Fine, M. (2006) ‘Intimate details: Participatory action research in prison’, *Action Research*, 4(3): 253-269.
18. e.g. Piché, J., Gaucher, B. and Walby, K. (2014) ‘Facilitating prisoner ethnography: An alternative approach to doing prison research differently’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(4): 449-460.

Second, Convict Criminology is essentially a grass-roots, research activist movement, whose purpose is to give voice to prisoners and former prisoners in public as well as academic debates on penalty. Aligned with critical criminology/victimology,¹⁹ Convict Criminology aims both to publically expose the failings of prison and, to borrow from Deborah Drake and Neena Samota's recent critique of grass-roots mobilisation in other areas of criminology,²⁰ to build genuine collective capacity for radical penal reform. To a large extent, this involves forming alliances between criminologists and voluntary sector penal reform groups, and engaging with criminal justice policy makers, the difficulties and dangers of which we return to below. Of utmost importance is the aspiration that prison research involves criminologists working directly with prisoners, former prisoners and local practitioners. Similar to the experiences of radical sociologists who have engaged with social workers,²¹ one of the major difficulties faced by criminologists who take a research activist perspective is convincing people that the theorising of largely, though not exclusively, middle class academics is relevant to their day to day experiences. Again, the Convict Criminology perspective emphasises that such collaboration must be on equal terms, and that solutions to the problems faced by prisoners, former prisoners and local practitioners are collectively devised. As a result of its 15 years experience of insider-outsider collaboration in the United States, for instance, Convict Criminology recently identified 12 priorities for reducing the size and scope of the prison system, and improving the chances of successful prisoner re-entry into mainstream society:

- ☐ restrict the use of prison to serious, dangerous offenders;
- ☐ increase restorative justice programmes;
- ☐ end the 'war on drugs';

- ☐ demilitarise the criminal justice system;
- ☐ end the practice of combining prison with community sentences;
- ☐ restore voting rights to felons and prisoners;
- ☐ close old and obsolete prisons;
- ☐ restore higher education to prisons;
- ☐ properly prepare prisoners for release;
- ☐ improve medical services;
- ☐ provide community resource centres;
- ☐ and invest in residential treatment centres.²²

For the purposes of this article, what is important about these policy recommendations is not so much their content, but as the authors put it, that they, 'are based on what we have learned from our own personal experiences and from the many interviews we have conducted with prisoners and parolees'.²³

Through its combining of insider and critical research action perspectives on penalty, it is our contention that Convict Criminology is well equipped to challenge public misconceptions on prisons and prisoners. Further, by insisting on the need to privilege the knowledge and standpoint of those with first-hand experience of prison, convict criminologists find themselves in a strong position to resist institutional pressure to produce quantitative, hypothesis-testing (voodoo, positivistic) research. In recognition of the role that grounded, insider perspectives might play in the development of

critical penology in the UK, BCC was formally launched in January 2012. Its active membership (defined by having self-identified as members due to their research or graduate studies being informed by the convict criminology perspective and/or their involvement in mentoring prisoners in higher education) now includes over 25 serving prisoners studying in higher education, and in excess of 30 lecturers, graduate or post-graduate students, most of who have prison experience.²⁴ At the outset, its founders and steering group members,

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19. Ross, J. I. and Richards, S. C. (eds.) (2003) *Convict Criminology*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning; Ross et al. (2014), see n.12.
20. Drake, D. and Samota, N. (2014) 'Building collective capacity for criminal justice policy change', paper presented at the British Society of Criminology annual conference, Liverpool, 10-12 July.
21. See e.g. Cohen, S. (1975) 'It's all right for you to talk: Political and sociological manifestos for social work action', in Bailey, R. and Brake, M. (eds.) *Radical Social Work*, London: Edward Arnold; Pearson, G. (1975) *The Deviant Imagination: Psychiatry, Social Work, and Social Change*, London: Macmillan.
22. Richards, S. C., Ross, J. I., Newbold, G., Lenza, M., Jones, R. S., Murphy, D. S. and Grigsby, R. S. (2012) 'Convict Criminology, prisoner reentry and public policy recommendations', *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, 21(1): 16-34.
23. Ibid. (p.17).
24. For an overview of the background to British Convict Criminology, see Aresti, A. (2012), see n. 16, and Ross et al. (2014), see n.12.

academic criminologists Andy Aresti, Sacha Darke and Rod Earle, two of whom are former prisoners, identified six key objectives for the group:

- ❑ provide support to prisoners and ex-prisoners in establishing themselves as academics in criminology and its cognate disciplines;
- ❑ Develop critical perspectives on prisons and research with prisoners and former prisoners;
- ❑ utilise our collective knowledge, experiences and expertise to influence policy change through our academic work and connections to advocacy/campaign groups;
- ❑ develop the membership and profile of the group through organising seminars, guest lectures and conferences;
- ❑ develop strong links with non-statutory sector organisations in the field, that is penal reform advocacy and campaign groups;
- ❑ share experiences and develop ideas that draw from the convergence of academic study of prison and experience of it as a prisoner.²⁵

In its first three years BCC has directed most attention towards the first, fourth and last of these objectives. Besides organising panels at the annual conferences of the British Society of Criminology in Portsmouth (2012), Wolverhampton (2013), Liverpool (2014) and Plymouth (2015), BCC has presented at the

Institute of Criminology, Cambridge University, Padua University, HMP Grendon, two annual conferences of the European Group for the Study of Deviance and Social Control, Oslo University, and the Norwegian Association for Penal Reform, in addition to the one-day conference at Edge Hill University on which this article is based. Among the lecturers, Ph.D. students and advocacy group members that have joined Aresti, Darke, Earle and Manlow at these conferences and seminars, six are former prisoners. Two others have several years' experience of teaching higher education to prisoners. As previously noted, Jeffrey Ian Ross, who joined BCC at the conferences in Portsmouth and

Wolverhampton, has also worked in corrections. These efforts have been important means both of building BCC's profile among university and voluntary sector institutions, and supporting former prisoners through their higher education. In 2013 BCC had its first major breakthrough in this regard, when one of the former prisoners affiliated to the group secured a full-time lectureship in Criminology. As previously mentioned, BCC is also looking towards developing the future capacity of the Convict Criminology perspective in the UK by mentoring prisoners studying in higher education. It is currently providing academic mentoring to a dozen undergraduate students in prison.

As for the group's longer-term ambitions to develop critical, insider perspectives on prisons and to impact on prisons policy, BCC members have already published four peer-reviewed articles exploring the group's aims and/or providing autoethnographic accounts of the relevance of the authors' prison experience to their research or interpretations of the failure of prisons.²⁶ Three more papers are forthcoming in an edited collection on prison ethnography. As a result of the academic mentoring scheme, BCC has also recently helped facilitate two single authored publications by serving prisoners.²⁷ In December 2014 BCC was invited to facilitate and report on focus group discussions among former prisoners at a workshop in Belfast, sponsored by the Northern Ireland

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Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders and Queen's University Belfast. A number of individual BCC members are also involved in activism through their links with penal reform groups. These efforts will undoubtedly gain momentum as BCC expands, and prisoners and former prisoners affiliated to the group progress through their postgraduate studies.

Whose voice is it anyway? Prisoners: a silenced (mis)represented voice

Whilst academic criminology is clearly guilty of contributing to the various (mis)representations of

25. Aresti, A., Darke, S. and Earle, R. (2012) *Convict Criminology in Britain? Background, Proposal and Invitation* (http://www.convictcriminology.org/pdf/CONVICTCRIMINOLOGY_UK.pdf)

26. Aresti (2012), see n.16; Aresti (2014), see n.13; Earle, R. (2014) 'Insider and out: Reflections on a prison experience and research experience', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(4): 429-438; Ross et al. (2014), see n.12.

27. Alexander, M. (in press) 'Innocence projects: A way forward', *Inside Time*; Leick, J. (2014) 'Finding my way through Grayling's maze: A prisoner's struggle to get a book', *Inside Time*, July: 34.

prisoners, former prisoners and the lived realities of prison life, we also need to broaden our focus and consider the clear absence of prisoner voices in wider public discourse. Considering the substantive and highly influential role that both statutory and non-statutory services in the criminal justice field play in constructing prisoner realities and wider public discourses, it is critical to explore how these realities are represented. Arguably, the lack of prisoner voice in both statutory and non-statutory service agencies renders the knowledge and representations produced by these organisations highly questionable. Whilst this is contentious, especially when referring to the voluntary sector, it could be argued that much of the knowledge produced by and through these organisations is standpoint specific, and thus (despite the often very good intentions of many) it becomes filtered and refracted through a privileged lens and is thus articulated through organisational understandings and experiences, rather than those of the prisoners.

Notably, both statutory (and to a lesser extent non-statutory) agencies make little use of prisoners when generating knowledge, but more importantly, as with academia, few, if any, former prisoners have senior level roles in these organisations. It could thus be argued that the type of knowledge produced is determined by those who are in a position of power, and as argued comes from a particular organisational perspective or standpoint which are deeply embedded within distinct relationships of power.

Here we question the legitimacy of those in positions of power and the knowledge which they produce by critically examining the ideological, conceptual and practical frameworks within which they work. To highlight the issue that rather than provide a platform for the prisoners' voice, they too contribute to the silencing of this voice we draw on both academic and anecdotal evidence.

The process of 'silencing' (Mathiesen, 2004)²⁸ operates on a number of complex interlocking levels; both within and across organisations who work within

the criminal justice system, but also in particular through the dominant discourses which are utilised and reinforced by the statutory services and the so called 'experts in the field' who work alongside them. The experts here include the practitioners, researchers and other professionals working within the current neo-liberalist ideological framework which prioritises managerialism and individual responsibility. Expertise can however also be conceptualised in a broader sense, to include non-statutory organisations (and their members) working in the criminal justice system. As Nikolas Rose articulates, a new form of expertise has recently developed, whereby professional groups have based their claim to social authority upon their capacity to understand the psychological aspects of a person and to act upon them, or to advise others what to do.²⁹ Whilst his critique is primarily focused on psychology as a discipline, he argues that these 'experts' or professional groups include those working in the criminal justice system, (social workers, clinicians, educational workers and therapists) describing them as 'engineers of the human soul'. Not only do they produce new languages and expert systems and discourses for construing, understanding and evaluating ourselves, they have contributed to creating our realities. Nowhere else is this more evident than in 'prisoner' realities, where dominant discourses and sources of knowledge can not only shape the public's perceptions of the prisoner, but also the lived experiences of the prisoner.

Taking the negative labels (ex-offender or ex-prisoner) assigned to former prisoners as a starting point, we can see how the prisoner's voice is not only suppressed through the use of such terms, but also how they can negatively impact on the prisoner's lived experiences and realities. The negative impacts of the labelling process and 'ex-offender' stigmatisation has been well-documented, demonstrating that this cohort is systematically devalued and excluded from a vast range of social domains and relationships.³⁰ Yet interestingly these labels remain a prominent feature in everyday

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28. Mathiesen, T. (2004) *Silently Silenced: Essays on the Creation of Acquiescence in Modern Society*, Winchester: Waterside.

29. Rose, N. (1999) *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, London: Free Association.

30. Aresti, A., Eatough, V. and Brooks-Gordon, B. (2010) 'Doing time after time: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of reformed ex-prisoners experiences of self-change, identity and career opportunities', *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 16(3): 169-190; Pager, D. and Quillian, L. (2005) 'Walking the talk? What employers say versus what they do?', *American Sociological Review*, 70: 355-380; Uggen, C. (2000) 'Work is a turning point in the life course of criminals: A duration model of age, employment and recidivism', *American Sociological Review*, 65: 529-546.

discourses of rehabilitation, resettlement and more generally when referring to this cohort in particular contexts. Sixteen years on from leaving prison, one of the authors (AA) is still an 'ex-offender', an ex-prisoner or an ex-con. Such labels still have negative implications, not only impacting on many facets of life, but also as a means of the suppression of voice. Consequently, in some social contexts the label defines the person, which can often have a negative and transformational impact on their sense of self.

In effect, these labels serve to distinguish the 'normal' from the 'other'; the criminal or deviant from the law-abiding or morally upstanding citizen, the normal from the pathological, constructing an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy and producing myths about the 'bogeyman', a stigma widespread in current discourses on prisoners, former prisoners and 'ex-offenders'.³¹ As Flowers and colleagues have noted in their work on gay men and HIV, such scare stories or tales that demonise the individual can serve a social purpose, averting the story teller's eyes from their own stigmatising activities and immorality.³² There clearly operates a hierarchy of stigmatisation here which is dependent on the power to define and, perhaps more importantly, the power to evade. Such discourses are culturally embedded and are clearly influenced by broader social structures and institutions; this is specifically evident in the case of the prisoner, the government, statutory and non-statutory services in the CJS and the media. Drawing parallels with the work of Flowers and Langdrige on the social construction of deviance and pathology in gay men, we can see how narratives of difference are constructed to distance, label or demonise and question the morality of prisoners.³³ Interestingly, alternative narratives that focus on the positive characteristics of the prisoner are typically ignored, absent in everyday 'talk' about prisons, prisoners and rehabilitation, or desistance. Here the recent managerialist emphasis is on 'risk

management' and control, further alienating the already stigmatised prisoner, and mirroring wider cultural concerns with security, risk management and surveillance.³⁴ In short, it is evident that criminal justice has shifted from focusing on the risk factors of an individual to a collective focus; predictions on reoffending are now group focused.³⁵ This reduces diverse and heterogeneous experiences into overly simplistic, catch-all categories. This shift has a variety of implications for the lived realities of 'prisoners' and serves to suppress their voice, by limiting their ability to produce alternative knowledge and understandings of their lived realities.

A prime example of this is in the labour market and the limited career opportunities available to ex-convicts, especially within the criminal justice field and related areas. Such arenas would clearly provide an ideal platform for the generation of alternative discourses and novel and innovative areas of knowledge production which privilege prisoner experiences. Yet such opportunities are effectively blocked and are exempt from the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act (ROA) (1974), even in its recently revised form under the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. Closer inspection of this revised legislation reveals that very little has changed in terms of the ROA Exceptions Order (1975). In

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addition to sensitive areas (such as working with children or other vulnerable groups, high level financial positions and the healthcare profession) professional positions of trust are exempt, excluding the prisoner from a career in the legal profession, law enforcement, the criminal justice system (prisons, probation etc.), and clinical positions such as forensic or clinical psychologists; all of which would provide a rich and fertile ground for the generation of alternative knowledge and discourses on crime, criminal justice issues and prisoner realities.

To our knowledge, few if any former prisoners are employed by the National Offender Management Service

31. Maruna, S. (2001) *Making good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild their Lives*, Washington DC: American Psychological Association; Ross, J. I. (2003) '(Mis)representing prisons: The role of our cultural industries', In J. I. Ross and Richards, S. C. (eds.) *Convict Criminology*, Belmont, California: Wadsworth.
32. Flowers, P., Duncan, B. and Frankis, J. (2000) 'Community, responsibility and culpability: HIV risk-management amongst Scottish gay men', *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 10(4): 285-300.
33. Flowers, P. and Langdrige, D. (2007) 'Offending the other: Deconstructing narratives of deviance and pathology', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 46(3), 679-690.
34. Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernism*, London: Sage.
35. Mathiesen, T. (1983) 'The future of control systems: The case of Norway', in Garland, D. and Young, P. (eds.) *The Power to Punish*, London: Heinemann; O'Malley, P. (2001) 'Risk, crime and prudentialism revisited', in Stenson, K. and Sullivan, R. (eds.) *Crime, Risk and Justice: The Politics of Crime Control in Liberal Democracies*, Cullompton: Willan.

(NOMS), the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) or any other related statutory or professional service (psychologists, probation, social workers etc.) working with prisoners. Whilst this absence is dictated and governed by current legislation, to us this appears totally counterintuitive, as undoubtedly an ex-convict with the right academic or vocational qualifications would not only provide a deeper insight into the lived realities of prisoners, but also, based on their experiences and understandings, could effectively utilise this knowledge to contribute to developing more effective practices, policy and services in the field. Clearly, when considering the current state of the prison system (overcrowding, under-resourcing, staffing anxieties and general discontent) and its poor record in rehabilitative success, alternative approaches and strategies are paramount. Yet as noted, such valuable resources are not utilised, which begs the obvious question as to why this is the case.

Whilst the statutory services are bound and constrained by legislation in terms of employing former prisoners, they generate an illusion that they value what the ex-con has to say, implying that they will utilise their voices to develop their understandings of prisoner realities, and as a means of influencing practices and policy. To what extent they achieve this is highly questionable. Having been part of a delegation of ex-convicts that on a few occasions have been invited by NOMS and the MOJ to articulate their experiences, primarily on employment discrimination or the usefulness of the ROA (1974) it is evident that the fit between the 'dangerous knowledge' provided by the prisoner voice, and organisational or operational priorities is a poor one.

An example of this would be to briefly recount a recent meeting which took place at the MOJ. The focus of this particular meeting was to explore the negative attitudes of most employers to employing ex-offenders and, to this end, ex-offenders' experiences of direct and indirect discrimination were canvassed. In short, the key problematic was how to affect changes in employers' attitudes. The questions that were posed on why NOMS and the MOJ did not employ ex-prisoners and precisely how many ex-offenders did the MOJ employ were met with a very uncomfortable and lengthy silence. Surely, as was argued at the time, someone with inside

experience who had been released from prison and who had gone on to be awarded a doctorate which investigated desistance from crime would be an asset to the MOJ, especially considering the current policy focus on desistance in prisoner rehabilitation and resettlement. Yet intuitively, if the MOJ want to change employers' attitudes to employing ex-convicts, the most effective way to do so would be to set a precedent; it would send a very clear message that 'we value and trust these people, therefore so should you'. The very absence of prisoners working for the MOJ or NOMS speaks volumes.

Whilst this is perhaps only anecdotal evidence, it highlights an important issue. Specifically, the absence

of prisoner voices in statutory services renders the knowledge and representations produced by these organisations as questionable. In particular, we can question the authenticity and accuracy of this knowledge because, as noted above, it is standpoint specific and is filtered through one's own experiences and understandings, or preconceptions. Given that we are interpretative beings, and that we assign meaning to our experiences, we can utilise Heidegger's argument here that an interpretation is never a pre-suppositionless apprehending of something presented to us. Thus our prior experiences, assumptions and preconceptions provide a lens for our

understanding of social phenomena. These understandings are influenced by our wider cultural and social frames of reference and ideological positions. Therefore, we always impose our own subjectivity on a given event or account experienced by another, and hence there is always the danger of rendering its meaning in a radically different way.³⁶

To hold the view that we can objectively understand social phenomena, and that our subjective or personal experience does not impinge on these understandings, is to say the least extremely naive. Considering that statutory services are working within a specific administrative and managerial framework, such ideological frames of reference serve only to hinder alternative modes of understandings in terms of prisoner realities. Hence the emphasis on developing critical perspectives on prisons, where prisoners and former prisoners utilise their collective knowledge,

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36. Heidegger, M. (1931/1962) *Being and Time* [Trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson], Oxford: Blackwell.

experiences (many of which are shared due to the environmental conditions and structural constraints experienced) and expertise to not only inform, but co-produce the knowledge produced on 'prisoner' realities.

Prisoner Realities and the Production of 'Dangerous' Knowledge

The question that needs consideration here is to what extent current research on prisons, prisoners and ex-convicts accurately captures this cohort's lived experiences. This is particularly important, as in many respects such research is used not only to inform our understandings and knowledge but, perhaps more importantly, it is also drawn on to inform and influence policy and practice. Until recently, little use of prisoners or ex-convicts was made when conducting research in this arena. However, more research teams are making use of peer researchers in their investigations, and in effect providing a platform or voice for prisoners to some extent. Whilst these efforts should be recognised and applauded, we still need to acknowledge some of the problematic issues underlying these 'collaborative' research approaches, especially when considering the relationship between power and knowledge production as discussed above.

Peer researchers are a valuable resource that can facilitate the research process in a variety of ways. Critically, peer researchers are viewed as being the 'experts' within their field of experience, and this can benefit the research focus via their experiential, conceptual and practical contributions.³⁷ Being employed as a consultant for voluntary sector organisations who conduct research on resettlement issues in prisons and on post-prison life has undoubtedly contributed much to elevating the volume of the prisoner voice. Experience has however raised questions about the extent to which such research can truly capture the very essence of prisoner realities and lived experiences. This argument is made in part due to the accepted practice that conventional (non-con) academics retain the power to steer the whole process

whilst others merely row. There are many fine non-con academics who have a great deal of empathy and who aim to counter the usual de-humanisation and de-personalisation of much extant prisons research but it could be argued that many still experience prisoner realities through their privileged and concave lenses. This has implications for the way the research is designed, conducted, interpreted and reported, and therefore the type of knowledge which is ultimately exalted.³⁸ This issue was addressed in more detail in a recent conference paper.³⁹ Suffice it to say, the position adopted here is that there is a clear need for prisoner research that is led by ex-con academics, or, at the very least, collaborative research where ex-con academics jointly lead on the projects.

Arguably, there are only a few ex-con researchers with the experience or the credentials to lead on such projects, although as noted previously, potential candidates are presently on the increase. For the few who do meet the criteria, there are persistent obstacles and barriers in place that block meaningful access and limit the opportunities to conduct such research in prison. Certainly personal experience has time and again demonstrated that gaining access to prisons is a complex bureaucratic process, unless one is with a research team working under the guise and patronage of a well-respected NGO, or by

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invitation from a prison governor or someone working in prison (to do a talk, present at or attend an event). In all of these instances, visits have been infrequent — that is no more than three visits to the same prison within a given year. In terms of a security risk, these infrequent visits are not problematic. In stark contrast, to gain access to a prison on a more frequent basis, say for longitudinal research, like any other non-directly employed member of staff or 'visitor', access is dependent on a risk assessment, specifically, an enhanced security vetting process. Unsurprisingly, one of the authors (AA) has been unsuccessful on two occasions. This of course has implications for a current research project that the authors are working on, specifically in terms of who was going to act as the academic lead. This is illustrative of how the prisoner voice can be silenced.

37. Fletcher, D. R. and Batty, E. (2012) *Offender Peer Interventions: What do we know?*, Sheffield Hallam University.

38. Flowers and Langdridge (2007), see n.32.

39. Aresti, A. and Darke, S. (2013) *Shifting the Research Hierarchies: Articulated Experiences of Studying Degrees Inside*, paper presented at British Society of Criminology annual conference, 3-5 July 2013.

Voluntary Sector Exceptionalism?

Whilst statutory organisations working in the criminal justice field have been exclusive in terms of prisoner or ex-con employability, the voluntary sector has often seen the value of utilising prisoners or ex-cons in their work. Yet whilst many utilise prisoners and former prisoners (e.g. SOVA, St. Giles Trust,) valuing their experience, many of these voluntary sector organisations or NGOs could also be subject to some of the same criticisms as their statutory service counterparts. As Hilton and colleagues note, NGOs have played a key role in the professionalization and privatization of politics, emerging as the 'new' experts and legitimate authorities on a range of issues (especially within the CJS). These 'highly professionalized' NGOs led by the technocratic elite have according to these authors, become the 'ultimate beneficiaries of this new form of politics'.⁴⁰ This too has substantial implications for knowledge production on 'prisoner' realities and shaping the public's understandings and conceptualisations of prisoners. Yet who are the 'technocratic elite'?

A quick internet search of some of the most well-known NGOs working in the criminal justice system reveals that few former prisoners hold senior positions in these organisations, although of course there is the odd exception such as User Voice, and until recently UNLOCK. Moreover, few if any of the CEOs of such organisations match the demographic of the typical prisoner. This is problematic as it raises the same kinds of questions and issues discussed throughout this paper in terms of whose voices are heard and through which cognitive and organisational frameworks these are interpreted. Specifically, this knowledge is filtered through the CEO's, (and by default the organisation's) own value system, norms, morals and beliefs about the world. This influences not only how prisoners are represented and conceptualised, but the aims and focus

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of the organisation, as well as influencing the types of projects, research and services provided. In effect, this 'privileged' world view is woven into the fabric of the organisation's structure and decision making processes. And yet this world view is arguably embedded in wider social, cultural and ideological frames of reference. Hilton et al., point out that NGOs '*have become embedded in the modern state*' for a variety of reasons; these include the state funding of their activities, the increasingly blurred boundaries of expertise, the need for a politics of pragmatism, that captures and maintains public support and that of the state and/or statutory services working in the CJS. This issue is even more prominent in the present climate and landscape

pertaining to the changing role of NGOs in the CJS, specifically their greater involvement, especially in terms of service provision, or advocates of service provision.⁴¹ Consequently, this has generated some not particularly creative tensions, with NGOs having to negotiate their positions in terms of their autonomy, integrity critical voice etc.⁴²

Perhaps the concept of ethnocentrism is useful here, in terms that there is perhaps a tendency to use our own cultural or ethnic group's norms and values to define what is 'natural' or 'correct' for everyone else's lived realities.⁴³ Whilst this term is specifically used to critique how human sciences in general have been dominated by western cultural understandings, and how this knowledge is used as a frame of reference through which to understand and view non-western cultures, it is, we would argue, also applicable here. It is no secret that prisoners are predominantly from disadvantaged, working class backgrounds and that ethnic minorities are also disproportionately represented in this cohort. Indeed, the empirical trends here are compelling. Yet, like many professional institutions (academia, politics, the CJS etc.), those working at a senior level in the criminal justice organisations, typically, come from 'privileged' backgrounds. This disproportionality at both

40. Hilton, M. (2014) *The Politics of Expertise: How NGO's Shaped Modern Britain*, available at www.historyandpolicy.org/historians-books/books/the-politics-of-expertise-how-ngos-shaped-modern-britain [accessed 16/07/14].

41. Ministry of Justice (2008) *Third Sector Strategy: Improving Policies and Securing Better Public Services through Effective Partnerships 2008 – 2011*, London: Ministry of Justice.

42. Meek, R., Gojkovic, D. and Mills, A. (2010) *The Role of the Third Sector in Work with Offenders: The Perceptions of Criminal Justice and Third Sector Stakeholders*, Third Sector Research Centre, Working Paper 34, available at www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/tsrc/documents/tsrc/working-papers/working-paper-34.pdf [accessed 16/07/2014].

43. Triandis, H. C. (1990) 'Theoretical concepts that are applicable to the analysis of ethnocentrism', in Brislin, W. R. (ed.) *Applied Cross-Cultural Psychology*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

ends of the spectrum, coupled with the absence of prisoner voices can only serve to maintain the existing status quo and broaden power relations, where these 'privileged' cultural and ethnic frames of understanding are utilised to generate knowledge on prisoner realities. This is particularly important when considering that the state and 'experts' are linked within a network of authority.⁴⁴

Even if we put this issue aside, and for argument's sake concede that these NGOs can in fact generate 'accurate' knowledge on prisoner realities, how this knowledge is represented is still open to higher level decision making processes, for example, and as noted previously, funders, commissioners and those who govern or are affiliated with the voluntary sector organisations that is the trustees and/or influential patrons. Many of the trustee boards of these voluntary sector organisations consist of individuals coming from 'privileged' backgrounds and are, as argued throughout this paper, from a particular standpoint. In many instances, such trustees have come from professional or legal backgrounds and some have worked in the field of criminal justice. Yet on closer inspection of these trustee boards it is clear that the voice of prisoners or ex-convicts is typically absent or at the very least not adequately represented, with only a few of these boards including an ex-convict. This of course also has implications for the governance, direction and focus of the organisation.

Drawing on the experiences (AA) of being a trustee for a voluntary sector organisation, two things were clear. First, there was a clear demarcation of perspectives between the equally represented ex-convict/non-convict trustee board. Specifically, the ex-convicts shared similar views on a range of issues, whilst their non-convict counterparts held contrary views. In many respects, this was a great source of tension, although on a positive note, a healthy mixture of ex-convict and non-convict trustees provided fertile ground for the governance, direction and focus of the charity, and importantly in terms of knowledge production of prisoner realities. In this respect, prisoner voices were privileged. However, as noted, prisoners' voices are not typically represented on such boards, and whilst there may be a number of reasons for this, one of the main problems, faced by ex-convict trustees, relates to the structural barriers put in place by governing institutions; that is the charity commissions. To be a trustee, at this particular voluntary sector organisation, the ex-convict candidates were required

to go through a thorough risk assessment process to determine whether they were suitable for the position. Ironically, not all of the ex-convicts succeeded! A voluntary sector organisation working to improve prisoners' and ex-convicts' lives, by tackling the stigmatisation and discrimination experienced by this cohort, has to not only risk assess their ex-convict trustee candidates, but consequently discriminate, by having to reject some of these candidates.

Bridging the Gap

In this paper we have explored the potential of the convict criminology movement in helping to 'bridge the gap' between the public and the prison. Although convict criminology is still in its early stages of development in the UK, it is beginning to have a real presence. Our particular focus here has been the production of knowledge about prisons, prisoners and how their lived realities are constructed and maintained. We have explored some of the key matrices of power to highlight how the 'dangerous knowledge' and voices of marginalised groups are effectively and systematically muted and silenced, both in academic research and in the work of statutory and non-statutory organisations in the criminal justice field. To be clear, we are not arguing that prison research should only be conducted by prisoners or former prisoners, nor that the statutory or voluntary sector should be run by, or predominantly represented by, former prisoners or ex-convicts. This exclusivity would clearly generate a myriad of other problematic issues. However, a more balanced representation which provides diverse and multi-faceted perspectives would cultivate more fertile ground for knowledge production on the lived 'realities' of prisoners and a better informed policy debate. Here we can also utilise the diverse skills and understandings of people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds; an idea that is gaining prominence in other areas, where disadvantage and oppression is rife. The prisoner's voice is an essential one for exposing bad practice, helping to set standards of decency and acceptability within prison walls and through resettlement processes, and for countering the de-humanisation, depersonalisation and stigmatisation of both prisoners and their families. Theirs are voices which have been silenced for too long. To facilitate lasting and effective penal reform and change they demand to be authentically heard.

44. Fine, G. A. and Xu, B. (2011) 'Honest brokers: The politics of expertise in the 'who lost china?' debate, *Social Problems*, 58(4): 593-614.