Convict and critical criminology: some challenges emerged during a mentoring experience

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Abstract

This paper examines critical issues that arose during an innovative educational initiative directed at inmate students, offering both a reflective analysis of prison living conditions and the acquisition of methodological tools useful for prison research. With a particular focus on the potential and challenges of developing prison-based projects within the framework of Convict Criminology, the author employs an auto-ethnographic narrative to illuminate the theoretical and methodological difficulties encountered by participants. Specifically, this work problematizes the internalization of the prison's institutional culture as it hinders the development of the cultural and political awareness necessary to analyse prison through a critical perspective.

Key words

Organised crime; special prison regimes; mafia; gangs; desistance

Resumen

Este artículo examina las cuestiones críticas que surgieron durante una innovadora iniciativa educativa dirigida a estudiantes reclusos, ofreciendo tanto un análisis reflexivo de las condiciones de vida en prisión como la adquisición de herramientas metodológicas útiles para la investigación penitenciaria. Centrándose especialmente en el potencial y los retos de desarrollar proyectos basados en la prisión dentro del marco de la Criminología del Convicto, el autor emplea una narrativa autoetnográfica para arrojar luz sobre las dificultades teóricas y metodológicas encontradas por los participantes. En concreto, este trabajo problematiza la interiorización de la cultura institucional de la prisión, ya que obstaculiza el desarrollo de la conciencia cultural y política necesaria para analizar la prisión desde una perspectiva crítica.

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2   Palabras clave

Crimen organizado; regímenes penitenciarios especiales; mafia; bandas; desistimiento

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1. Introduction

Auto-ethnography is a qualitative research approach where the researcher uses personal experience through description and analysis to comprehend the surrounding cultural experience (Holman Jones 2000, Ellis 2004). This method challenges traditional approaches of research and representation of others (Spry 2001), especially in contexts where there is a need to resist a colonialist ethnographic approach that, by authoritatively inserting itself into a culture, exploits its members aseptically for the sole purpose of publishing articles and deriving personal benefits (Conquergood 1991, Riedmann 1993, Ellis 2007). Consequently, auto-ethnography emerges as a positive response to the need to produce meaningful, accessible, evocative research that raises readers' awareness of political issues (Ellis and Bochner 2000).

More recently, the auto-ethnographic approach has also been adopted in Italy in prison research by inmate-students to analyse their personal experience and the biographical journey related to social contest, family story, criminal activity and incarceration (Barnao *et al.* 2022). The prison context has always interested sociologists, who have consistently reported difficulties in access and movement within it (Ferreccio and Vianello 2014). These obstacles led to the emergence of a network of researchers known as Convict Criminology (Ross and Richards 2003), which promotes the involvement and autonomy of people with detention experience in prison research. This movement, aimed at fostering scientific dialogue between academics and those directly involved in prison life, welcomes contributions from individuals who, during or after detention, are pursuing or have obtained a PhD. The founders of this approach view research from within prisons as an intellectual and epistemological challenge to traditional criminological studies that often consider inmates merely as objects of their analyses (Ross and Richards 2003). This approach challenges the hierarchies of credibility that inform studies on deviance (Becker 1967) and has deconstructive potential regarding the institutional discourse on prisons (Aresti and Darke 2018).

The New School of Convict Criminology has been repeatedly referenced by academics promoting qualitative sociological research in prisons in Italy (Degenhardt and Vianello 2010, Vianello 2011, 2013, Vianello and Kalica 2013, Sbraccia and Vianello 2016). The first CC experience dates back to authors detention period, during which he was involved in co-producing research on prison-labour (Kalica 2014). After serving his sentence, the author joined the doctoral school of Social Sciences at the University of Padua and, based on his detention experience, produced a series of articles aimed at promoting the convict approach within the Italian context (Kalica 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018). In 2018, a collective work was published, considered the first Italian publication explicitly based on Convict Criminology (Kalica and Santorso 2018). The author completed the doctoral program at the University of Padua with a thesis on the detention conditions of individuals subjected to long term confinement. This work fully aligns with the convict approach: Kalica, in fact, returns to the prison where he experienced his own detention, this time as a researcher, to interview about thirty inmates sentenced to life imprisonment who have just been released from the long-term isolation regime to high security unit. His thesis was published (Kalica 2019), becoming the first monograph produced by a person who began their academic journey in prison.

This paper examines critical issues that surfaced during an innovative educational initiative aimed at inmate students, offering both a reflective analysis of prison living conditions and the acquisition of methodological tools useful for penitentiary research. With a particular focus on the potential and challenges of developing prison-based projects within the framework of Convict Criminology, the author employs auto-ethnographic narrative to underscore the epistemological potential of this class, while simultaneously highlighting the theoretical and methodological challenges faced teaching inmate students that want to conduct research using CC approach. These challenges are attributed to the processes of *prisonization* (Clemmer 1958) and *institutionalization* (Goffman 1978). Specifically, the study reveals how the internalization of the prison's institutional culture hinders the development of the cultural and political awareness necessary to adopt a critical perspective in the analysis of power structures, social inequalities, normative definitions of crime, and the very prison reality under investigation (Ross and Vianello 2020).

2. Convict Criminology and Prison Ethnography

Convict Criminology has consistently adopted the ethnographic approach to explore the prison environment. As highlighted by its pioneers (Ross and Richards 2003), through verbal and written testimonies, convict authors offer an insider perspective on the contemporary prison system while emphasizing its deconstructive possibilities against the official discourse on correction. During my detention period and later as a volunteer, I adopted the same methodological approach. Throughout my research: I sought to use my "privileged" position inside the prison and my personal experiences to do ethnography.

The ethnographic method suggested by Convict Criminology turned out to be very motivating due to the continuous overlap of roles defined by the research context: my position as a researcher led me to immerse myself in the daily life of imprisonment as an external figure while still maintaining a sense of belonging to the context. I constantly tried to narrate this reality using an internal perspective, convinced that only by understanding the uniqueness and complexity of stories could the gap between the external society and the "world" of prison be bridged. When Giddens (1984, p. 285) emphasizes the importance of knowing the tacit or explicit knowledge of the main actors to adequately describe social activities, he indicates the need to focus on the experiences and differences of individuals precisely to avoid the tendency to homogenize a community often considered closed and distant.

My "privileged" position was also solidified by my work at the prison journal of Padua prison (*Ristretti Orizzonti*). My constant interest in collecting and narrating episodes of prison life, often featuring protagonists I knew personally, led me to practice an "unusual" method, which included meetings with other inmates in the editorial office, recordings, or direct transcriptions while they told me their stories. This approach allowed me to involve inmates outside of so-called educational area, such as courtyard, game room, or gym. When I interviewed people in my same unit, I preferred to do it during social moments like sharing a meal in the cell. Consequently, when I had to collect data for my research, I followed the same methodological approach. If there were differences between conducting interviews, these concerned the purpose of the work: while the stories I usually collected for the magazine were oriented towards journalistic

writing, my ethnographic interviews aimed at a deeper look to gather what Malinowski (1922/2011) defined as "the imponderables of daily life". While before I collected voices to tell personal stories, I began to collect stories to shape a holistic description of prison culture.

3. Returning to the Field

> This afternoon, after two hours of meeting in the Ristretti Orizzonti editorial office, the jingling of keys reminded us that it was time to return to the section. As everyone stood up, I looked around, overwhelmed by melancholy at the thought that this afternoon I would take a farewell look at the editorial office. (...) I leave the room. The iron door bangs loudly behind my back, but it fails to close my melancholy inside. A doubt assails me. Will I ever be able to talk, to write again, without setting foot in the editorial office? I have always argued that no writer or journalist would be able to tell the prison story well without having lived it. Now, however, I begin to suspect that perhaps soon I will lose contact with prison life and will no longer be able to tell it. (Ristretti Orizzonti, 2012)

It makes me smile now reading this text that I wrote twelve years ago trying to describe the emotions felt during the last day of detention and the return to freedom after a long period in prison (Kalica 2011). Even then, as now, I wondered how it was possible to write about prison without directly experiencing it. Perhaps I imagined a different future for me, a completely reinvented life in my country after severing all ties with Padua. No one could have imagined that, just a couple of months later, I would return to work in the editorial office with a regular contract and a residence permit.

The path from the prison entrance to the editorial office required crossing eleven gates. This inevitably put me in contact with the officers in charge of the checks, some of whom would ironically point out how attached I was to the prison, joking about the fact that I couldn't detach myself from that place. Other officers, whom I remembered with a friendly attitude during my detention, suddenly changed their behaviour upon my return: some turned their heads the other way, while others became rough and rude.

To comprehend the reactions my presence elicits among prison guards, it is essential to frame the discussion within the sociology of prison, with particular attention to the role-playing between staff (guards and operators) and inmates, as discussed in academic literature. The relationship between these two groups is characterized by a complex and often conflictual power dynamic rooted in relations of domination and subordination. It is inherently hierarchical, with guards exerting constant control over inmates, regulating every aspect of their daily lives.

During my incarceration, the control exercised by guards manifested in a series of regulatory actions: they decided when to open my cell door, when I could access the library, and how much time I could spend in the study room. Cell searches revealed another layer of control: often, they would confiscate what they deemed an excessive number of books or pencils, or delete multimedia files from my computer, claiming they were irrelevant to my studies. These actions were always justified by institutional regulations and security concerns – such as the fire hazard posed by too many books or the possibility that multimedia materials could fuel illicit trading within the prison.

However, these measures were not merely regulatory but also expressions of an asymmetric power dynamic, continually reaffirming the subordination of the inmate and the authority of the guard. Every interaction between inmates and guards involved a constant reaffirmation of this hierarchy. Even seemingly neutral moments, such as a guard congratulating me on a good university exam result, were followed by comments that reasserted their dominant role: "See, prison has been good for you! We're even making you study."

This ongoing need to assert power contributes to the construction of a macho identity among guards, as observed by Manning and Van Maanen (1978). This identity is the product of socialization into the values specific to their group, such as respect, loyalty, strength, silence, and, in some cases, revenge (Van Maanen 1972, 1978). This subculture mirrors, in terms of rules and codes, the inmate subculture theorized by Clemmer (1940) and Sykes (1958), as both cultures aim to promote internal cohesion. However, a significant difference emerges between the two: while guards constantly emphasize the distance between "us" and "them," demanding respect from inmates, the inmates express this distance more implicitly, through whispered comments and subtle attitudes, even while formally showing respect to the guards. Both subcultures, therefore, impose a reciprocal distance: guards who socialize with inmates are mocked by their colleagues, and the same occurs among inmates.

In daily reality, however, this rule is not strictly enforced. After several years in prison, some guards my age began to adopt more cordial attitudes toward me. During routine interactions, for example, while escorting me through the corridors, they would ask small talk questions like "How are you? How's your studying going? What exam are you preparing for?" Although these exchanges were brief and superficial, they held significant meaning in the prison context: a dialogue, even one lasting only a few seconds, communicated a lower level of hostility and shortened the social distance between guard and inmate. Conversely, prolonged silences, monosyllabic responses, or unnecessary orders served as mechanisms to reassert the distance imposed by the guards' behavioral code.

My return to prison as a tutor and later as a teacher caused a significant shift in the relationships previously established during my incarceration. My former fellow inmates generally expressed surprise and happiness at seeing me in a new role; however, in some cases, I encountered indifference and perhaps a hint of envy. For the guards, my new role seemed to create discomfort: many were unprepared to manage a relationship in which traditional power dynamics no longer dictated the roles. Only a few guards responded with cordiality, greeting me with a smile. The majority, visibly unsettled, preferred to avoid greeting me altogether. Even now, twelve years later, only a few have resumed acknowledging my presence.

In my notebook from that period, I found a note: "Everyone asks me how it feels to return in prison. I reply that I have yet to metabolize it, but in reality, I feel no effect entering in here; rather, I feel a certain joy every time I leave the prison." This serenity can certainly be explained by a relationship between me and the prison that was never interrupted. Thus, every gate, wall, and window, every noise and smell of that place, is still part of me.

During my detention period, I constantly dedicated time to study and activism, particularly related to the prison newspaper. Therefore, once free and settled in Padua, it was natural for me to continue the academic path. I enrolled in the PhD School in Sociological Sciences, continuing to do research within the prison. After publishing my thesis, I began to reflect on how I could help other inmates conduct research and publish their works. This desire remained in suspense until 2023, when we finally managed to launch a Qualitative Research Methodology course for inmates enrolled in the university.

The University of Padua and the Padua prison have been collaborating for several years to offer inmates the opportunity to access university education. This collaboration has led to a significant increase in the number of enrolled students. Given this growth of students, we proposed to the university to hold a class aiming the creation of a research group composed of inmates. The project was approved, allowing me to finally fulfil a long-held dream.

As first step was organized a meeting with the inmate university students presenting our project. The proposal generated great interest and gathered a considerable number of participants. The prison administration also welcomed the initiative, providing us with a classroom to use once a week for six months but authorizing the participation of only twelve inmates.

4. Presenting the methodology of qualitative research class

The presentation of the class was an emotional moment, similar to those experienced twelve years ago when I returned to the editorial office as a free man. Realizing one's dreams is a rare event, and often one finds oneself unprepared for it. When I crossed the threshold of the classroom, I found the desks and chairs still empty and began arranging them in anticipation of the participants' arrival. A few minutes later, the twelve people authorized to attend the course arrived. Some I already knew, others not. I shook hands with each of them, not only to respect an important ritual but also to maintain an equal relationship. I am aware of my particular role and consider it crucial not to behave like a teacher, volunteer, or outsider.

I introduced myself by sharing my prison experience and academic journey, emphasizing that this course falls within the theoretical and methodological framework opened by the New School of Convict Criminology, particularly its mentoring approach where a researcher with detention experience makes their academic expertise available to other inmates to introduce and train them in scientific research (Darke and Aresti 2016, Ross 2024). I asked them to do the same. Most came from the student's unit, while others were from the middle security and safe unit. The group was diverse in terms of geography origin and ethnicity, with four foreigners and only two Padua residents among the Italians. The disciplinary areas represented were also diverse, with students in Political Science, Law, Sociology, Anthropology, Computer Science, and Food Science.

After the introductions, I briefly explained the project and immediately stated our objective: to provide prison students with the theoretical and practical tools necessary to write a research project and, possibly, carry it out. Initially, the silence suggested that perhaps we had set the expectations too high, but soon some of them began listing themes and issues they wanted to write about.

5. Some theoretical problems

The first part of the course consisted of a theoretical module. So I presented some classical authors like Foucault (1976) and Goffman (1961) considered fundamental in the sociology prison, who also played a crucial role in my academic studies. I believe that a researcher studying the prison system must adopt a critical approach and use concepts developed from Garland, Carlen, Christie, Baratta and other critical criminology authors as to analyse and deconstruct what can be observed inside prison. In this sense, deconstructing social phenomena in a prison context means questioning the power structures and social inequalities that have traditionally been considered unquestionable.

The analysis of the proposed texts stimulated lively debates, which evoked a sense of nostalgia as they reminded me of past discussions during social interactions. This reflection prompted me to recall my own writings on the subject during my time of incarceration, further deepening my sense of introspection and amusement.

> It is often assumed that prisoners, due to their marginalized status, would generally hold progressive political preferences, feeling oppressed and critical of a society that denies them their rights and forces them to live in undignified conditions. It would seem logical for them to desire a government particularly attentive to the problems of those at the lowest levels of the social hierarchy. Theoretically, such a government would be a concern for those who advocate for the interests of the more privileged. This is especially true given that conservative governments tend to reduce resources allocated to services such as prisons, exacerbating social exclusion. Surprisingly, despite the previous government cutting 52 percent of financial resources dedicated to the prison system, thereby worsening living conditions within prisons, and despite laws like the Bossi-Fini, ex-Cirielli, and Fini-Giovanardi significantly increasing the prison population, many inmates believe they would fare better under a right-wing government.
>
> Many even express pride in supporting right-wing parties such as National Alliance and North League. A number of prisoners nostalgically invoke the figure of Mussolini, and it is not uncommon to witness individuals walking through prison corridors giving the Roman salute. In my view, this political alignment is often less a matter of ideological conviction and more a reflection of a 'stadium mentality' wherein inmates, compelled to choose a side, make their political affiliation like 'soccer club supporters' standing for the right-wing. Why this seemingly paradoxical choice? (Kalica 2006)

The discussions that emerged during the reading of some led us to discuss some critical concepts, such as that of the "total institution" and the dynamics of power within it. To analyze the power dynamics within the penal system, it is crucial to recognize how this system perpetuates existing social and economic inequalities. A critical examination reveals that the penal system is primarily designed to maintain the status quo, often neglecting the root causes of crime, which are frequently tied to marginalization and social disparities. This critical perspective can face resistance in environments marked by processes of imprisonment and institutionalization, where inmates are often seen as instruments of adaptation and survival in a hostile setting.

The students actively participated in the discussions, offering their personal experiences to validate or critique the theoretical reflections presented. Various forms of resistance were observed among participants, stemming from the significant diversity within the

group. I attempted to mentally position each individual within their community, considering their roles based on the type of offense or shared values, as well as their degree of imprisonment. These factors contribute to a shared value system that the critical approach aimed to dismantle. For some of them, institutional power in prison is necessary and essential to control especially the most problematic inmates, such as immigrants and drug addicts. As one of them told me during the very first conversation:

> Just think that there are sections full of Arabs who have nothing (…). These come every day to ask you for cigarettes, coffee, sugar. If you don't give them something, they become overbearing. But if I argue with them, I lose my benefits. So I indulge them to avoid problems. (Field note)

I used this input to expand the discussion of power on the theme of Discipline and Punish, recalling Foucault when he discusses how modern society uses disciplinary power not only to protect the rich from the poor but to control categories of people through subtle means such as surveillance, normalization, and regulation. Understanding the mechanisms of control is essential to understand the purpose of control which overlaps with the purpose of prison, that is, to ensure that inmates internalize control and disciplinary norms to regulate their own behavior, becoming docile bodies: easily controlled, trained, and used inside the free market.

But even these concepts initially faced difficulties in being understood as one of them answered:

> What discipline through work? They know that if someone has never worked in their life, they won't come to prison and become disciplined at work. Sure, you learn to be careful because you're always under surveillance when you move, but if you find a way to bypass the system, you do it. (Field note)

The phenomenon of intergroup prejudice and its resulting discrimination can be explained from a sociological perspective through the combined analysis of economic, cultural, and psychological factors. One of the most widely accepted explanations is the *backlash effect th*eory (Rudman and Fairchild 2004), which suggests that socially and economically disadvantaged groups react to the perception of cultural or economic changes that they view as a threat. These changes are perceived as endangering their status, even when it is already precarious. From my observations in prison, the prevailing culture among inmates remains patriarchal, imbued with macho and often racist stereotypes. Within prison, equality, social justice, and gender parity are still predominantly viewed as issues associated solely with the political left.

In general, inmates do not feel represented by the institutions they associate with left-wing parties, and they often perceive populist leaders as authentic voices that speak directly to their fears and frustrations. Political conservatism is frequently linked to the defence of values tied to religion, family, and social hierarchy, which seem under threat from ongoing changes. As a result, many inmates believe that cultural change and progressive values not only fail to improve their situation, but that adopting such an approach in a violent environment could undermine their social relationships, make them appear weak, and expose them to retaliation from other inmates.

Economic precariousness and job insecurity also play a crucial role in shaping inmates' perceptions of immigrants. According to relative deprivation theory (Gurr 1970), even the most economically disadvantaged classes can feel left behind by political and

economic elites, gravitating toward conservative or populist parties that promise to protect jobs, defend national resources, and restore traditional social order. Similarly, realistic conflict theory (Sherif and Sherif 1953) tells us that when group interests are in conflict, rivalry and hostility are more likely to emerge. In situations of resource scarcity, the perception of threat drives even marginalized groups to advocate for simplistic solutions, such as closing borders, mass deportations, or increasing penalties for crimes committed by foreigners.

The media plays a significant role in shaping the political opinions of inmates. Television is often their only window to the outside world. Prolonged exposure to a single source of information, often characterized by polarizing discourse, facilitates the spread of simplistic messages and conservative rhetoric.

It was clear that the theoretical concepts we provided were being tested against their lived experiences in prison, highlighting the complex relationship between theory and practice. But this objection allowed us to introduce the concept of resistance, which proved to be very useful. We identified a list of everyday actions that subvert prison rules but are still carried out daily by inmates to improve their quality of life. This experience led the class to a better understanding of them belonging to a subordinate community, despite their fitting to a small privileged group compared to the other inmates: regardless of their social, economic, and cultural status, inmates are always inclined to resist oppressive power dynamics, and each form of resistance reflects the subordinate condition and the constraints of the prison environment. This is an important step for the inmates in order to adopt a critical perspective in reading the surrounding environment and the effects produced on inmates.

6. Some sociological problems

The second part of the course was dedicated to examining some sociological research conducted within the prison system. The goal was to collectively examine the knowledge generated by prison research. The articles addressed a variety of topics, chosen to show how every aspect of prison life could be a subject of study. Concurrently, we reflected on how the phenomena were described and analysed by the authors, evaluating their ability to link them to pre-existing concepts and theories. This module proved significant as it sparked criticism and reflection from most participants, who identified gaps in the data collected by the authors. The data, mainly gathered through interviews with inmates, were integrated or contradicted by the participants to either consolidate or challenge the authors' theses. Indeed, the researcher operates within the prison under a sort of "probation," which forces them to relate to the prison staff, essential for continuing their research activity. Often, it is the staff who propose the inmates to be interviewed, justifying the choice by their presumed ability to express themselves clearly, though this can limit the diversity of stories collected.

Once again, discussing total institutions with people that are daily subjected to complete and continuous control by the institution proved to be quite complex. The discussion on these topics sparked lively interventions, mostly attributable to institutionalised perspectives. However, we hoped that reading some researches that analyse how the institution influences the behaviour and identity of convicts, highlighting power dynamics, social hierarchies, disciplinary practices, and the strategies of resistance and

adaptation developed by individuals within such contexts, would offer our participants new keys to understanding their own social environment and the dynamics that animated their relationships. Moreover, introducing the sociological perspective on prison and sharing some of the most recent research in this field allowed us to analyse the social and racial inequalities that often emerge, reproduced and reinforced within the penitentiary system. Analysing power dynamics in prison is crucial to understanding even how this system perpetuates the social and economic inequalities present in society. A critical analysis of the penal system involves highlighting how it, primarily oriented toward maintaining the status quo, avoids addressing the deep-rooted causes of crime, often linked to marginalization and social inequalities. Again, these kinds of considerations encounter resistance inside an environment characterized by processes of imprisonment and institutionalization, which involve all inmates as tools of adaptation and survival in a perceived hostile environment. As theoretical part of the class, we noted various forms of resistance, which also stemmed from the great diversity among the participants. Mentally, I tried to place each of them within their units, imagining them in roles assumed based on the type of crime or shared values, also considering their position in the timeline of incarceration. These variables contribute to forming that universe of shared values that the critical approach we proposed aimed to dismantle.

Few participants resisted the proposed sociological concepts until the end, while the more became more selective in their engagement. Notably, those with a background in the humanities were generally more receptive to the critical concepts introduced. In an environment that prioritizes individual responsibility and free choice, it is particularly challenging to introduce critical reasoning that examines offenses through social and political lenses. This shift in perspective requires time and effort, much like my own journey of learning to change my viewpoint and liberate myself from the mental frameworks developed during my incarceration. Engaging with these complexities is essential for fostering a deeper understanding of the penal system and its broader implications for society.

7. Some methodological problems

These discussions were crucial in view of the third module of the course, during which we discussed the methodological issue in social research. The methodological module was designed as an opportunity to provide in-depth training on the entire repertoire offered by qualitative research methods. Since scholars inspired by the Convict Criminology approach have, since its beginning, emphasized ethnography and auto-ethnography as central methodological frameworks (Terry 2003, Ross *et al.* 2014) while incorporating a multitude of methods in their research (Ross and Copes 2022), we decided to allocate significant attention to studying the ethnographic method, including auto-ethnography.

For instance, we conducted interview exercises: initially, we simulated interactions between students and colleagues coming from outside to help students become familiar with the method. Subsequently, students were asked to select a topic, develop an interview guide, and conduct real interviews among themselves. We also invited experts from outside to take in-depth presentations on the techniques used for data collection during focus-groups. Following this, we conducted simulated focus groups, allowing

students to realise focus-groups where they could lead the discussions, observe and take detailed notes.

After a general introduction to quantitative and qualitative methods in social sciences, we focused on ethnography as the preferred research method in Convict Criminology. We improvised interview simulations, during which all participants alternated as interviewers and interviewees.

Although the exercise was appreciated, it raised doubts and concerns. One of the primary challenges faced by convict criminology research, as highlighted by Ross (2024), is the difficulty in obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from prison administrations, which often exhibit a general reluctance to authorize such research. Some students questioned even the "legitimacy" of the research itself, as it might entail disciplinary sanctions. The debate focused then on some hypotheses about requesting authorization from the prison administration before conducting interviews. Such understandable concerns highlighted how pervasive the institution's conditioning is on the inmates' freedom of action, who find themselves having to ask permission for activities they would normally carry out autonomously.

Furthermore, the discussion brought to light the diversity within the group. Imagining an ethnographic study within their own section evoked various emotions among the participants. These were difficulties of a psychological, character, and social nature. The idea of interviewing fellow inmates to write an article raised questions about the quality of relationships formed among prisoners. In fact, some complained about their inability to ask others to be interviewed due to their shyness. Others rejected the idea of interviewing peers for reasons of confidentiality, referring to the ethical code among inmates that suggests being cautious in personal relationships and in violating others' privacy.

Still others attributed their difficulty in finding willing interviewees to another important concept, namely the widespread distrust in prison. They summarized that they had not integrated into the community of their section and were sure that no one would agree to talk and open up to them. The issue of distrust can be addressed alongside the question of credibility and trust - decisive elements in creating relationships among people, often linked to the legal history and life paths that each individual brings with them when entering prison.

Prison sociology has often focused on the issue of prison careers (Vacheret and Lemire 2007), which are directly related to the status assumed by each inmate within their own prison community (Chantraine 2004). Within each prison wing, the community tends to organize itself through the acquisition of defined roles in a more or less hierarchical structure based on relationships of physical, economic, and cultural power. For example, Schrag (1961) identified several major categories of inmates concerning the crime committed: at the top of the internal social hierarchy are inmates convicted of serious crimes with extensive prison experience; then there is a group of inmates convicted of more sophisticated crimes, particularly skilled in manipulation; another group consists of impulsive and unpredictable inmates with a long history of juvenile delinquency, reluctant to engage in rehabilitative programs and oriented towards the use of force, with few resources and unable to adapt to the context; finally, there is a group of inmates with no prior experience for whom the crime was accidental, motivated to participate in

treatment and reserved towards other inmates. An important aspect in the process of internalizing roles and assuming status is the meaning that the inmate gives to their prison experience.

There are those who experience it as an inevitable passage and those who see it as a catastrophe; some view it as a refuge from an unsustainable existence, while others consider it a risk of the profession. The inmate code theorized by Clemmer (1940) is useful for understanding the internal regulation within the inmate population. The inmate code is the primary tool for integration into the prison community. Sykes (1958) sees it as a defensive response to institutional oppression and an opportunity to develop a status within the system, creating a new frame of reference to interpret one's situation and the surrounding world.

In a condition of lost autonomy, as described by Goffman (1978), tightening ranks and mutually assisting each other to face adversities becomes the most rational option to reduce risks. Adherence to values such as loyalty to peers, self-control, and opposition to the institution often defines the quality of relationships among inmates, particularly the level of trust and consideration. While these discussions painted a reality in which inmates appear so little cohesive that some argued that the inmate code, which sought to create bonds of trust and loyalty, was now just a distant memory, identifying the widespread feeling of suspicion as the cause of the failure of that code favouring institution, which can thus act with greater ease in its oppression.

The issue of distrust was dismissed only by a few inmates with long term prison experience or particular relational skills acquired in their previous criminal careers. One of them commented:

> You must understand that people here want some guaranties that they can freely express their thoughts without facing consequences, whereas I would have no problem interviewing people because they know me and know I would never disclose their statements. (Field note)

At the end of the methodological module, participants were asked to develop a research project as the final course assignment. Contrary to expectations, everyone presented a structured and well-argued research project. The cross-cutting peculiarity of all the proposed projects was the choice of auto-ethnography as proposed method for their research. The idea of writing an academic article using their own personal experience particularly excited specially those who had expressed doubts and concerns regarding the scene of them interviewing other inmates: auto-ethnographic method seems to be a good strategy, especially for those inmates who experience the idea of conducting interviews or focus groups as a cause of embarrassment.

This trend forced us to focus further on the analysis and understanding of this methodological tool. In fact, prison auto-ethnography frequently encounters complications, as conducting it without systematic data collection risks reducing it to mere anecdotal "war stories" (Ross 2024). Engaging with this method requires to reflect on the crucial role theory plays in guiding prison research and auto-ethnography, in particular, attains scientific validity only when researchers are able to critically analyse power dynamics and cultural structures within correctional facilities through the lens of personal experiences. Only this way, auto-ethnography can enable scholars to better understand the phenomena generated within and by the prison system.

8. Conclusions

The study of prison life requires an in-depth engagement with the internal dynamics of incarceration in order to conduct meaningful sociological research. However, the challenges scholars encounter in gaining access to prisons often contribute to the invisibility of incarcerated individuals within social science research. The ability to render certain aspects visible, while obscuring others, is central to legitimizing the researcher's presence. The approach proposed by Convict Criminology is particularly effective for generating valid knowledge, as it occupies a privileged position within the prison, allowing researchers to draw upon first-hand experiences. Nonetheless, the surveillance and control mechanisms imposed by the institution continuously shape the lives of inmates, with the omnipresent gaze of authority enforcing order. Under these circumstances, not all prisoners possess the capacity or inclination to critically engage with or deconstruct the discourses that underlie current practices. Furthermore, not everyone has the ability or social capital to find fellow inmates willing to participate in interviews.

This study underscores the importance of fostering critical thinking within the prison environment in order to advance Convict Criminology. It also highlights the potential of auto-ethnography in prison studies, as it allows researchers to integrate their personal experiences with observed phenomena, thereby circumventing the anxiety often associated with traditional interview methods.

This paper discusses a mentoring experience in a social research methodology course held at Padua prison, aimed at promoting the convict approach among inmates enrolled in university programs. The course led the author to reflect on several critical challenges that arose during the program. The first challenge relates to the resistance encountered in applying a theoretical framework that seeks to implement the same critical approach used by scholars to analyse and deconstruct the social phenomena relevant to prison sociology. While numerous international research projects conducted by inmates and former inmates within the Convict Criminology network are inspired by the epistemological foundations of critical criminology (Vianello 2013, 2018, 2019, 2021; Kalica 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018; Darke and Aresti 2016, Aresti and Darke 2018), it has become increasingly clear that introducing a perspective in prison that challenges power structures and social inequalities linked to the definitions and treatment of crime is a formidable task.

This experience prompted reflections on the complex interplay between economic conditions, social perceptions, and media influence on prisoners' political attitudes, particularly in relation to immigration. The support exhibited by prisoners for conservative political positions can be understood as a multifaceted response to uncertainties, frustrations, and cultural shifts perceived as threats to their identity and security. These dynamics are further exacerbated by disillusionment with traditional institutions and the adoption of populist rhetoric within prison, which provides simplistic explanations for complex structural issues. Moreover, institutional culture within penitentiaries often encourages inmates to distance themselves from their criminal pasts and harmful behaviours, framing this as a re-educational endeavour, though the underlying objectives may differ. Resisting this narrative and fostering critical reflections on incarceration and its social causes presents a significant challenge

for inmates who aspire to conduct sociological research in prison settings. Only by engaging in this process can convict ethnographers critically analyse the complexities of the social space they inhabit, while also considering the positions occupied by various actors and the power dynamics at play. This approach can thus be understood as a critical ethnography of the inmate experience. Consequently, it is imperative to provide convicts with the theoretical tools necessary for conducting research within prisons, drawing inspiration from the epistemological frameworks of critical criminology. Any analysis aimed at deconstructing social phenomena must adopt a critical stance, and doing so in the prison context requires challenging power structures and social inequalities that have historically been viewed as untouchable. A critical approach to studying the penal system not only deepens the understanding of its internal dynamics but also lays the foundation for addressing broader social injustices and inequalities.

Another significant challenge that emerged during the course was the methodological difficulty posed by ethnographic research, particularly the apprehensions surrounding interviewing fellow inmates. Many participants expressed concerns about the potential legal implications of such activities, as well as discomfort arising from the fragile relationships that often exist among inmates in a highly contentious environment. This environment, shaped by structural elements, can foster solidarity but also breed mistrust and exclusion.

In the context of Padua prison, such mistrust complicates relationships, particularly given the diverse inmate population and the relatively less restrictive regime compared to the national average, which generally allows for better access to benefits. Despite these challenges, participants remained committed and produced well-structured research projects that proposed auto-ethnography as a viable method. The experience reaffirmed the importance of auto-ethnographic methods not only for the potential of personal narratives to provide a window into the prison experience but also as a uniquely viable approach in particularly challenging contexts where other types of qualitative research prove infeasible. Auto-ethnography has become the preferred methodological approach among our students. By merging autobiographical narratives with broader contextual descriptions of significant events, this method empowers incarcerated students to connect personal experiences with critical reflections on the prison environment (Saitta 2022). The use of prison diaries as field notes enhances this process, making autobiographical accounts more accessible to a wider audience while enriching the analysis by incorporating diverse perspectives (Kalica and Santorso 2018).

Three individuals have already written articles using the auto-ethnographic method, recounting aspects of the phenomena observed during their detention, and one student is currently in the process of completing their work. This positive outcome has convinced the author to offer the course again next year to a new class of convict students.

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