

Ex-Conism

A Liberation, Anti-Opressive Movement and Language for Ex-Offenders

Our Voice: Who will speak on our behalf if we do not take up the battle to fight for our rights and freedoms? Surely we cannot allow the John Howard Society, Elizabeth Fry Society, Children's Aid Society, March of Dimes, Canadian or Ontario Association of Social Workers, Lawyers Association, Civil Libertarians, Human Rights, Corrections Canada and others to speak for us because their voices represent their own interests, and not those of the offender and ex-offender. These agencies and countless others like them like to set themselves up as the voice and solid bastion of the oppressed when they speak to the media about issues of poverty, crime, punishment and discrimination but few of their members have ever experienced it because these agencies do not hire ex-offenders. They will not work with us because they do not want to be infected with our purported illness, psychopathology and disease. They resent, fear and cordially despise us. Their advocacy is based on the most heinous form of hypocrisy because they practice discrimination wherever they can. This pernicious and widespread practice permeates every fibre of our social welfare fabric, rendering the fabric putrid, and not worthy to clothe a dead animal.

No, we cannot let the hypocrites, uninitiated and subtle oppressors hijack our voices and make it their own. They exhort others to practice inclusion when they themselves encourage and practice exclusion. They pretend to know about poverty when the only stomach ache they ever knew was the result of overeating. What do they know about poverty, family violence, addiction, crime, punishment, recovery and discrimination? They read it about it in school text, and in schools that set admission standards aimed to exclude those who truly know about hardship and discrimination. Indeed, their whole practice mantra is based on patriarchy, disempowerment, exploitation and oppression. They perpetuate the cycle of abuse with their corrupt and exclusionary measures.

They exploit our stigma by profiting from our difficulties. Entire agencies spring up whose goal is to ease the pain and suffering of the poor by earning thousands of dollars annually to sit on their ass and do nothing but talk, talk, talk. They are full of prejudice themselves and this prejudice is clearly demonstrated in their human resource policies. They will not hire ex-offenders or offenders, the very thing offenders need. We need work, careers and jobs to make a living but they seal the door shut while asking others to open theirs. They have zero credibility and zero ethics. These people and agencies should not represent us because they simply do not practice what they preach.

As offenders and ex-offenders, we need to speak for ourselves because we know all about hardship and what it is like to be subject to hard times. We are the ones who do one program after another knowing full well programs do not change peoples' perception of us. Programs are a subtle way of blaming us for the program developers' own prejudice. They program us to death and this practice is based on pathologizing and blaming the victim. We are being blamed for the prejudice and discrimination that dwells in their minds and hearts. Programs that are set up to change us fail to address broader and more personal issues that program developers conveniently omit. They are

redneck, oppressive and hypocritical dumbasses who exploit us to profit from our misery, misery that is rooted in their own prejudice, fear and ignorance.

Ex-Conism is really the beginning of taking control of our voices and destiny by taking it away from the hypocrites and closet bigots. In my view, no social worker, lawyer, human rights advocate, or any person can adequately represent my interests as well as myself and my brothers and sisters who have shared in my experience. Only we really know what it is like to be subject to these hardships and only we understand what we truly need and how to get it.

“ized” to Death: The problems starts early for many of us because we come from poverty. This **povertization** is rooted in bad attitudes that are supported by stupid people who govern economic and social policies. No politician ever rose to power who truly helped the poor. They have all followed the capital system with its tax breaks for the rich, blaming the poor, exporting good jobs to other countries, low wages, high rents and inflated prices on goods and commodities. No prime minister or president has ever gained political office by being kind and generous to the disadvantaged. Politicians are created through wealth and power and these do not like to share wealth. Politicians represent powerful lobby groups like oil, insurance, banks, private corporations, huge multinationals and other vast conglomerate capital generating companies. Their agenda is wealth creation for the elite.

Povertization is a natural by-product of this system and decision-makers have devised ways to deal with it through punitive measures that find their way into our social welfare, education, business, health, law enforcement and corrections portfolios.

Criminalization is the single most powerful and toxic tool used to manage the poor. People of color, the disabled, mentally compromised and different are labelled and placed in secure facilities for punishment. But even before imprisonment, their mothers and fathers are subject to discrimination and punitive claw backs from insurance and social welfare agencies that cannot provide the basic necessities of life. Faced with the dire consequences of privation, many people make the decision to steal and when caught, they are criminalized. This transition is one of the most terrifying for these people because they are ordinarily good honest people who could not watch themselves or their kids go hungry or do without any longer. Woe to us who have made that decision because we now enter another realm entirely.

One of the most debilitating and demoralizing experiences for the poor is the **prisonization** experience. The madness and violence that is the prison system rips away any semblance of normalcy we may have had prior to being sent to jail. The barbarity, boredom and utter depravity one witnesses in prison defy logic and human decency. These people who enter into that realm may have seen fights in the bar or on television but they are now actively engaged in them. The whole process of being booked, processed, and led to your cell is a very daunting eye opener you'll not soon forget and apparently others will not either. We are cast into a dark world with unknown codes and mentality that betrays common sense. Few who undergo the prisonization

process ever are the same. This is true to the degree and length of time that one experiences the immersion in the culture.

Founder: The term Ex-Conism was first used by Richard “Ritchy” Dubé, a former offender from Sudbury, Ontario who was born and raised amid poverty, addiction and violence. He often says he was forged in the “fires of violence and hammered on the anvils of adversity”. We learn a lot about Ritchy from his autobiography, *THE HAVEN*, published in 2002 by HarperCollins. The book chronicles his slow and steady descent into addiction, crime and prison. Nothing is said about his life in recovery.

Ritchy has a daughter Marisa, and three sisters, Lisette, Monique and Suzanne and an older brother Michel who served the better part of his life in prison for assault, murder and drug trafficking. Michel was considered one of the most dangerous offenders in Canada. He hanged himself in prison in 1998 while awaiting charges of murder and blowing up part of the police station, the latter a symbolic and desperate act of our struggle against a redneck, ultra-conservative, punitive-minded and exclusionary police state country.

The term Ex-Conism was not formalized until Dubé’s second book entitled *Ex-Conism, A Liberation and Anti-Oppressive Movement and Language*. In this book, Dubé outlines the basic tenets of his philosophy presented here. In addition, he documents his spectacular recovery in the front part of the book. These powerful epiphanies coupled with his subsequent struggles, redefines the word resilience.

Ritchy Dubé served eight years in Canadian federal prisons for manslaughter, armed robbery, assault and drug trafficking and while in jail he incurred over 100 charges that resulted in his serving about 400 days in solitary confinement. He was referred to the Special Handling Unit twice, a prison within prison reserved for the most violent offenders, and was subject to a Dangerous Offender Application, a process whereby parole is denied because the authorities fear the offender is likely to cause “serious bodily injury or death to others” upon release.

In spite of being deemed dangerous and incorrigible, Dubé experienced two very powerful divine interventions, one in Millhaven super max and the other a few months later in Burnaby, British Columbia. These planted the seed for his eventual success and transformation.

Dubé was released in 1987 and made a decision to quit drinking, fighting, stealing and lying after his wife was sent to treatment for alcohol dependency and a violent fight that almost resulted in the killing of another man. In the years that followed, he founded a company to help ex-offenders find work, completed a BA cum laude from Laurentian University, earned a Diploma in Addictions from McMaster, Humanities Certificate from Simon Fraser University, published THE HAVEN, earned his third degree black belt, founded a charitable organization for the prevention of substance abuse and crime called Y.O.U.T.H.S. and remained crime, drug and alcohol free.

He identifies himself as a non-denominational God loving person who believes in God and in true and natural social justice. "It is hard to swallow any religious doctrine that is rooted in the wholesale massacre of men, women and children, whether Christianity or Islam". Ritchy believes that most of us possess the innate intelligence to discern the difference between good and evil, and right and wrong if we are willing and able to look and challenge our self. "There are some who are so constituted that no amount of reflection or punitive sanctions will redirect". In this case, Ritchy understands the need for public safety while ensuring custodial conditions are not overly punitive, oppressive or such that will exacerbate the already existing psychopathological condition.

Ritchy lives in Sudbury, Ontario with Shari Michaud, a woman he attributes as being an additional solid force behind his decisions. "Shari" he says "is one of the best decisions I have ever made, and a sure angel and veritable blessing from God".

Definition: Ex-Conism is a blend of classism, feminism, racism and ableism aimed at reducing stigma, discrimination, oppression, exploitation and ex-sogyny (hate, contempt and distrust of ex-offenders) by seeking legal, political, social and economic equality.

Ex-Conism Theory: Ex-Conists denounce and challenge marginalization, criminalization, povertization, prisonization (specific effects of a debilitating, punitive and abusive prison culture), stigmatism, ostracism and discrimination. As such it is an interdisciplinary analysis involving anthropology, biology, criminology, economics, psychology, philosophy, religion and sociology. The main thrust is to examine and critique attitudinal barriers that pervade every aspect of society and study. The theory focuses on current beliefs and practices that pathologize, exclude and exploit stigmatized populations on the basis of erroneous beliefs and theories.

Of primary concern is how most countries marginalize, povertize, criminalize, prisonize and stigmatize millions of people. In Canada alone, ten percent of the population has been labelled and tagged, and in the US, that number is tenfold. These themes of wholesale labelling results in differential treatment, inequality, exploitation, recidivism and a vicious cycle of pain, poverty, punishment and exclusion.

Ex-Conists seek to destroy and denounce such pernicious and punitive social practices by elaborating on the social constructionist approach to crime and deviance. While some Ex-Conists may concur with some of the DSM-toting scientists, it is generally agreed that prevention, rather than punishment is the best remedy for crime. As such,

we aim to foster a greater understanding of the social forces that create inequality and advocate for a more equal distribution of wealth with less emphasis on pathologizing, demonizing and differentiation.

The discourse is interested in true social justice whereby ultra-right-wing conservatism policies are replaced with more humane approaches to poverty, addiction, crime and punishment. Much of the theory is energized through battling negative stereotypes and attitudinal barriers that create fear, differentiation, division, and derision from bigots with a hidden agenda to create a prison industrial complex to alleviate the ill-effects of their pernicious social policies.

Ex-Conism is a liberation, anti-oppressive language and movement that seeks to ally itself with other marginalized groups by finding bonds of commonality in our oppression and shared lived experience. While they recognize that their stigma arises from overt anti-social acts, it hopes to align itself with other movements and discourses.

Since Ex-Conism is a new discourse, it is open to various interpretations and philosophies, embracing and encouraging the unique and different perspectives and experiences of its population. These open and inclusive debates constitute the pioneering voices of a long overdue movement. We openly encourage all people who have been stigmatized to contribute to our fledgling movement since their voices have been silenced and oppressed for far too long.

Ex-Conists are people who have been through the judicial system and who have felt the pain, shame and sting of being labelled a criminal. Whether charged for smoking pot, drunk driving or more serious felony offences, your papers and feedback will contribute greatly to this ground-breaking discourse.

Ex-Conism will become the central rallying point where people from different backgrounds share their perspectives, ideas and beliefs with the rest of the world. It is the clearinghouse for a multitude of voices that have been fragmented, denounced, derided, and silenced for far too long. Ex-Conism will become to former and current offenders what feminism is to woman rights.

We herald a new era whereby we seek to challenge and denounce the shaming practices that have so far kept us silent and fearful, replacing it instead with a cry of indignation. We have been labelled and abased for many years and now is the time for us to unite and find a common voice to decry current legal, political and economic policies and practices that dehumanize, demonize and devalue.

Your contribution as an ex-offender will provide hope for many who until now have been denied access to mainstream media. The age of the internet will provide us with a venue and platform to unite and organize our movement and find our voices in way heretofore unavailable. From this bedrock we will establish committees and seek to reduce and remove barriers in many social, legal, economic and political areas. We will not let the stain of shame keep us in pain.

One Ex-Conist's central beliefs: The only ones who cannot change are those who have not been compelled to change. They are those in power who abase, decry and deride us. These are politicians, lawyers, police and policy makers that define wage, rent and food rates and who pathologize the poor, blaming victims for their plight. They are legislators and lawyers who define the parameters of the law without being just and lawful and equitable. Their view is to control, manipulate and to oppress the ex-offender, making it practically impossible to regain a rightful place in society because of their unforgiving and oppressive policies.

The recent Omnibus Crime Bill, while addressing violent crime, also lengthens the period for a pardon, thereby placing an added burden on many ex-offenders. Who can wait ten years for a job in this harsh and punitive social welfare culture? Policies such as these aim to build a prison industrial complex whereby private corporations will exploit and profit from misery and poor preventative measures. The Conservative government is pushing and bullying its way through the House and Senate with many oppressive Bills, many of which punish the poor and oppress the disadvantaged. These right wing rednecks have no idea what it is like to be hungry or to go to jail, but like to cloak themselves in an aura of superiority as elected members of our government. They assume a moral superiority that reeks of arrogance and false pride. They serve the reactionaries and victim rights and police groups, with little attention paid to social forces and social policies they have enacted that create the problem in the first place.

Corrections Canada, a natural evolution of Conservative, Liberal and NDP policies, is a social control institution aimed at warehousing the poor amid conditions that are cruel and unusual. The CSC website speaks of crime prevention and programs but they practice barbarity and abuse. The many inquests such as the Arbour reveal acts of brutality that shock the senses. Incarceration is an inhumane and barbaric knee jerk reaction to poverty. CSC itself is beyond social control, having been vested with immutable and entrenched powers not subject to any external checks and balances. The beast metes out punishment subjectively without any recourse for the offender. People are placed in holes for days, weeks and months without respite on mere suspicion. In other cases, parole and bail are denied on a whim.

Even the Human Rights Code, the last bastion of rights and freedoms for the oppressed, favours discrimination in that it does not afford any protection for those who seek federal government jobs. Many Human Rights Tribunals, from Province to Province fail to protect the oppressed from discrimination. The result in less jobs, substandard accommodation, more poverty and more discrimination and exclusion, despair and desperation. The vicious cycle does not stop because legislators refuse to acknowledge that people can and do change. They are redneck bigots who impose undue hardship on many who mature out of crime and addiction.

It is as well-known fact and statistic that less than 2% of pardoned offenders re-offend and it is also true that 98% of offenders stop offending before the age of 30. This alone shows us very clearly that people can and do change permanently and positively.

Maturity has a lot to do with reason and decision making as does sobriety and proper medical care. Not all people who are offenders and ex-offenders are career criminals, in fact, very few actually are.

I'm not advocating a soft on crime approach and thereby devaluing victims of crime because we are all victims of crime, directly or indirectly. I just think we need not make it so hard to reintegrate and rehabilitate after we have made a mistake. Prolonged periods of stigmatization only increases the risk to re-offend, placing us all in danger. Keeping an offender on parole and without a pardon for three, five and ten years is truly useless in terms of its rehabilitative value because street time alone does not bring about change. A person who wills and desires change is the only one who can bring about change and this can be done much easier within a legal and social framework that supports these individual efforts, thereby encouraging the natural trajectory into adulthood.

Some Legal Context: In Canada, The Supreme Court of Canada makes it illegal to discriminate in employment on the basis of a pardoned record of offences, but the practice is rampant and practically undetectable. Employers have ways of finding out if people have pardoned records. This is especially true in smaller communities where law enforcement, media, the judiciary and business are connected through various social and civic circles.

The Ontario Human Rights Tribunal states that it is a violation of the Code to discriminate in employment if the person is pardoned. Unfortunately, the Ontario Code is very limited in that it does not afford protection in many other social areas such as housing, contracts, services, education, health and many other important areas of the whole person.

Recently, the Canadian Conservative Government introduced Bill-C-10, an omnibus crime bill intended to criminalize and prisonize more youth. The bill will result in less bail for kids who commit break and enters, sell pot and lie to the police. The measures will also extend the waiting period for pardons, thereby creating a bona fide prison industrial complex with super jails being built in unprecedented numbers.

Meanwhile many southern US states are under orders from their governors to release inmates due to overcrowding, but they are still building some 500 new beds every month to accommodate the incarceration rates. Their tough on crime and light on prevention approach has boomeranged and finally caught up to them.

According to the Canadian National Parole Board 98% of pardoned offenders never re-offend. The fact is that people convicted of more serious crimes are less likely to re-offend. According to Corrections Canada, people convicted of murder and manslaughter have the lowest recidivist rate.

Religious Context: The transformative process has been well documented in many religious books from the Bible to the Quran, yet many followers of these faiths have a

difficult time believing in change for ex-offenders. Miraculous changes in people have been occurring since the beginning of time and are still witnessed on modern media outlets. Some changes are slow while others are sudden and dramatic but both require a sustained effort.

Jesus is probably the best known miracle worker, casting out demons, helping the blind see, the cripple walk and the dead to resurrect. He was followed by Paul and Peter and many apostles and disciples in this work and one could argue quite convincingly that miracles are still with us. Personal transformational testimonials represent a huge market in the book industry because of the stories of spectacular and compelling changes in individuals.

Chuck Coulson and Ernie Hollands are two of the most well-known convicts who have turned their lives around with the help of Christ but there have been millions of others. Entire prison ministries have sprung up and we have witnessed a surge of truly amazing and inspiring metamorphoses. Broken, demented, destitute and dangerous men and women have had their minds, bodies and souls transformed in ways that science cannot account for. Contract killers, prostitutes, bank robbers and pedophiles have been cleansed and have never re-offended.

Psychological context: There are a few reasons why people dislike, distrust and deride ex-offenders. Some people do not believe in the transformative process because they have not experienced it, retaining their worldview they acquired through socialization. They are the ones who say that a leopard does not change its spots, but indeed human beings are much more than animals running on instinct. Many of these folks are imprisoned by old stereotypes that they refuse to challenge or discard. They become the lawless and law breakers by violating Human Rights. They engage in slander and libel and cannot see how anyone can change. The vast majority of these people are incapable of understanding the dynamics of change from any perspective, either spiritual or psychological. Their view is narrow and hostile, characterized by disdain, denial and derision.

There are others who have been victims of crime whose pain, grief, resentment, desire for retribution and insecurity prevent them from considering the fact that people are agents of change, both changing self and the world. If that were not so, the world would remain static. These people will erect barriers wherever they can, taking solace and feeling justified by a sense of moral superiority. They lead the charge for tougher sentencing and harsher laws, often influencing public officers to bring about punitive social policies. They condemn, judge and injure if they can without any remorse, thereby assuming the qualities and characteristics they assign to the ex-offender.

There are others who are just plain hypocrites and these can be found in the ranks of social work, from grassroots organizations to government offices. Their hallmark practice is “we will work with ex-cons but not with them”, thereby assuming a patronizing, matriarchal and hypocritical social work practice that marginalizes, dehumanizes, disempowers and devalues. They often take public office and set

themselves up as the voice of the oppressed but they are closet bigots. They neither hire ex-offenders or if they do, they hire so few that our voices are silenced. They like to be viewed as pillars of society who are helping the poor and stigmatized but their hearts and minds are full of control, manipulation and pride. They practice hypocrisy and oppression at best while speaking of social justice. They are the double minded and forked tonged who remind me of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Recovery, Rehabilitation and Redemption: There are many people who endorse rational recovery over spiritual methods and these cases demonstrate positive and permanent change. Whether achieved through counselling, group work, self-help groups or decision-making, these transformations speak about people as agents of change and not as static creatures incapable of transforming the boundaries of self. Recovery and rehabilitation can occur under one's own volition or can be triggered by applying interventions at various points in the individual's life.

Change is a very difficult state to monitor and explain because of the complexity of the human condition. However, many attempts have been made to categorize change with various cognitive models such as the Stages of Change model. While these clinical tools prove useful, it is much harder to explain how some people will and others will not change. The tendency might be to pathologize the individual who resists change, as opposed to reflecting on the method exerted to encourage and induce it.

In any case, recovery occurs regularly and so does rehabilitation, the latter connoting judicial intervention methods. Rehabilitation is also involved in treatment centres and these employ counselling techniques whereas rehabilitation in prison relies on punishment. Despite this difference, both can induce religious feelings and conversions.

Possible Solutions: Prison is viewed as a necessary evil but its inner workings can be improved to achieve better outcomes, namely; remorseful, educated, empathetic, work ready and honest people. This shift would entail depending less on punishment and boredom, and instituting education programs, moral reformation and employment training for both guards and inmates.

While it is true that offenders need to learn the nexus between their acts and punishment they must also be provided with opportunities to redeem themselves. A constant string of punishment may effect change but an institutional program aimed at effecting and monitoring positive change has a lot better chance of success. Failure to plan for success is a sure plan to fail.

The judiciary needs to employ former offenders who have demonstrated they can live drug and crime free in an atmosphere of intolerance and discrimination. This peer helping model has gained a lot of traction in the addiction field for good reason yet corrections refuses to adopt it. Their failure to adopt these inclusive hiring policies perpetuates a cycle of failure because offenders and ex-offenders would benefit greatly from this exchange. Ex-offenders would be given training and jobs while helping others achieve their goals.

The current antagonism in prison between inmate and prison personnel is not conducive to effect positive change. There is no trust or respect between the groups. The prison milieu is often characterized as an escalating cycle of violence where one act leads to a more brutal act. In such conditions, there is little room for calm, respectful and open dialog to achieve the triumvirate pillars of communication, camaraderie and conversion.

Movements and Ideologies: As with many anti-oppressive languages, Ex-Conism is subject to a broad range of beliefs ranging from far left radicalism, central liberalism to ultra-conservatism. No school of thought can survive without embracing the plurality of voices and experiences. The distinction is often expressed in the manner individuals and groups express their point of view and explore the issues.

For example, a post-modern capitalist examination would reveal wealth, class, power structures and social constructionism as central ideas. Philosophically, this school would analyze language and the use of modern media as a means of controlling ideas in the development of our prison industrial complex.

Neo-Marxist-Ex-Conists would consider the issues within a framework of class struggle, social inequality, power differentials and unequal ownership of information and technology. Monopolizing information is power and this centralized centre of dominance is ruled by a few elite wealthy classes.

Meanwhile, radical Ex-Conism is best described and represented by the Occupy Movement whereby groups take to the streets and clash with authorities to gain exposure. Their struggle is simultaneously fought on the internet as masses plan and orchestrate their actions.

Patriarchy, Matriarchy and Disempowerment: For most Ex-Conists, the real issue revolves around access, opportunity and having a venue to express their voice. Many agencies purportedly established to serve ex-offenders typically have very few, if any, ex-offenders in their employ. Few ex-offenders have access to political committees, lobby groups or to legislative bodies. Access is usually granted to lawyers, clergy or non-offenders. This practice tends to devalue, diminish and discount our voices and experiences, thereby rendering us silent. Many ex-offenders possess the intelligence and education to self-represent but agencies tend to appoint non-offenders in top positions, thereby controlling dialog, policy and practice.

Literature: Many former and active offenders have produced autobiographies, essays, and works of fiction that have informed professionals and laypeople alike. While this genre continues to be underrepresented, it is sustained in the Christian market where it informs the public. This collective body of work has never been formerly recognized as Ex-Conism but its contribution to our understanding of the issues affecting offenders and ex-offenders is undeniable.