

Critical Education

Volume 16 Number 3

August 15, 2025

ISSN 1920-4175

Teaching Prison Abolition to Criminology Students

Critical Reflections on a Pedagogy of De-Initiation

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Catello, R. (2025). Teaching prison abolition to criminology students: Critical reflections on a pedagogy of de-initiation. *Critical Education*, 16(3), 72-92.
<https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v16i3.187020>

Abstract

The abolitionist movement is gaining momentum in the United States and the United Kingdom and calls to shrink the carceral state have become a staple of grassroots movements and activist groups fighting for a more just world in the 21st century. The role played by higher education (HE) educators in this struggle for a world without prisons is an important and yet difficult one, as they can expose university students to abolitionist ideas but have to do so in the context of a HE sector that is increasingly governed by neoliberal logics of marketization and professionalization. In this article, I reflect on my own experience teaching prison abolition to criminology students at Liverpool Hope University (LHU). The article revisits Richard Stanley Peters' notion of education as initiation to show how an abolitionist pedagogy grounded in critical perspectives on punishment can be practiced to de-initiate students from two problematic mindsets that criminological education tends to produce: that of guardians of order and internal critics.



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Teaching prison abolition to criminology students can be challenging. Prospective students often choose criminology because the discipline offers a pathway into criminal justice (CJ) careers and can help them find a place to inhabit within the professional life of institutions devoted to crime prevention and crime control. Learning that some of their lecturers believe that such institutions should be dismantled, then, can be a perplexing experience for students, especially for those who have a clear career-oriented rationale for choosing criminology as a university subject. Moreover, HE educators who opt to teach about abolition can themselves experience a sense of bewilderment and uneasiness because *abolitionist pedagogy* often puts them at odds with the work of colleagues and the overarching direction of the criminology curriculum at their institutions. On the very same day I decided to sit down to write this article, for instance, I received an email notification that revealed in full force the irony of the situation under scrutiny. The email notification was triggered by an announcement made by a colleague on the virtual learning environment of a 3rd year criminology course at LHU. The announcement was titled ‘Careers Session on Law and CJS Info’ and it provided a brief summary of a Career session held earlier that day by colleagues in criminology. “Thanks to those who attended today”, the announcement stated, “I hope you found it useful”. The session explored a range of career options related to law and CJ – police officer, crime analyst, probation officer, prison officer, and many more. “CJS careers: Huge range of jobs within CJS and related sectors” is how the session was advertised. Abolitionism – or “the call to abolish institutions of state coercion such as police, prisons, detention centres, borders, arms and the military” (Day and McBean, 2022, p. 4) – can be extremely useful when it comes to acquiring critical thinking skills, but it clearly will not help students find a reason to pursue a career in CJ.

As Whynacht et al. (2018) point out, teaching and learning about abolition “requires both the professor and students to acknowledge their complicity in the carceral state” (p. 141). How to make such an acknowledgment without being hypocritical, however, is not always clear: first we tell our students that we, as criminologists, must reject “the role we have played historically as architects of repression” (Currie, 1973, p. 28), then we show them how to apply for a job inside the very architecture of repression that some of us are trying to undo. In this article, I reflect on my own pedagogic experience as a critical criminologist teaching prison abolition. For three consecutive years between 2021 and 2024, I taught an Advanced Research Course (ARC) on *Understanding Prison Abolition* to 3rd year criminology students at LHU. The ARC has now been discontinued for reasons that do not really concern us; curricular restructures and reallocation of teaching responsibilities at Level H (3rd year) mean that the course will not be offered to students in the next academic year. The content of the course has nothing to do with its discontinuation, as other ARCs on mainstream criminology topics have also been retired. The article contributes to the growing academic literature on abolitionist pedagogy in HE. A number of reflexive accounts written by HE educators attempting to reckon with the complexities and challenges of teaching abolition have been published in recent years. Notably, a Special Issue published by *Radical Teacher* in 2010 focuses explicitly on teaching abolition (see Agid et al., 2010) and critical educators are increasingly coming to terms with the urgency of teaching abolition in a variety of educational fields ranging from teacher education and civics education (Dozono, 2022; Garcia & de Roock, 2021; Love, 2019; Riley & Solic, 2021; Sabati et al., 2022) to social work, anthropology, law, sociology, and queer studies (Akbar, 2019; Gillespie & Naidoo, 2021; Penn, 2022; Rocha Beardall, 2023; Todić & Christensen, 2022).

The place of abolitionist pedagogies in the criminology curriculum, however, remains a largely unexplored area of inquiry and, to this day, there remains a degree of uncertainty as to whether the discipline of criminology can truly sustain and nurture an abolitionist politics (Brown & Schept, 2017). That said, some progress in this area has been made in recent years. Advances in *activist criminology* over the past decade or so have been instrumental in making the case that criminology departments do not have to be training centres for CJ practitioners and that politically-charged themes like abolition have a role to play in criminological research and practice (Belknap, 2015; Canning et al., 2023; Lamusse, 2021). More generally, critical social scientists are becoming increasingly attuned to the need to address *carceral logics* in social science research (Coyle & Nagel, 2022; Davies et al., 2021) and analyses and discussions of abolition are becoming more common among contemporary critical criminologists (Coyle & Scott, 2021; Pavarini & Ferrari, 2018; Ryan & Sim, 2007). As of today, however, very little criminological research has been published that deals with abolition not as a topic of analysis and discussion but as a *pedagogic position* in a teaching context or that narrates how educators in criminology can use abolition as “a pedagogical approach that asks the unaskable, posits the necessity of the impossible, and embraces the creative danger inherent in liberationist futures” (Rodríguez, 2010, p. 12). While reflections on teaching critical criminology have been sporadically published since the late 1970s (Barton et al., 2010; Michalowski, 1977; Setele, 2018), criminological reflections on abolitionist pedagogy are conspicuously absent from the academic literature.

To my knowledge, only a handful of reflections on teaching abolition written by criminologists or scholars teaching criminology have been published to date. Whynacht et al. (2018) reflected on the challenges of teaching prison abolition in a critical criminology class at Mount Allison University. Chartrand and Piquet (2019) published an inspiring reflection on their experience teaching prison abolition to criminology students at the University of Ottawa. Martensen (2020) shared their experience as an educator working in the Criminology, Law, and Justice Department at the University of Illinois Chicago who utilizes a practicum course to teach abolition to students who are pursuing a career in CJ and law enforcement. The most obvious reason for the absence of published research in this area is that there is not much abolitionist teaching taking place in criminology departments and, arguably, the *neoliberalization of the university* is largely responsible for this unfortunate reality. As various commentators have pointed out (Newfield, 2021; Oparah, 2014; Zembylas, 2021), far from being an idea that can be subsumed and absorbed by the neoliberal *ethos* of contemporary HE, abolitionism is one of its *nemeses*. With its emphasis on the marketization and commercialization of education, the neoliberal university tends to turn knowledge and learning outcomes into intellectual capital and commodities to be exchanged and sold on global markets. While the idea that HE in the United Kingdom should prepare learners for the world of work in an increasingly globalized context is not new and goes back to the Robbins Report of 1963 – “the first systematic attempt to relate the structure of higher education to the needs of modernized capitalism” (Maddison, 1973, p. 112) – neoliberalism took this trend toward the professionalization of HE to a whole new level.

Because abolition is not a concept that can be easily privatized and turned into a career opportunity or a product to be sold to third parties, abolitionist courses tend to be fundamentally incompatible with what Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) called *academic capitalism* and integrating them into HE degrees in the neoliberal university is no easy task. O’Sullivan (2023), for instance, offered a thoughtful analysis of the extent to which the HE sector in the United Kingdom succeeds at creating spaces of reflection for criminology students to engage with critical themes like post-

colonialism, zemiology, and prison abolition. As criminology degrees keep becoming more central to the professionalization of CJ agencies and practitioners, O’Sullivan argued, embedding critical, activist, and abolitionist themes and topics in the criminology curriculum becomes more and more challenging, as these tend to disrupt the conventional career paths normally advertised to criminology students. As Schram (2014) put it, neoliberal education is about providing “market-appropriate types of education” (p. 426) that can prepare students for the world of work in today’s global economy – and there is no genuine interpretation and application of abolitionist pedagogy that can operate under such an educational agenda. Similarly, Oparah (2014) argued that the neoliberalization of the university has led to the rise of “a symbiotic relationship” between academic circles and the prison- and the military-industrial complexes and to a “hidden alliance” (p. 99) between HE and the punishment industry worldwide. In such a neoliberalized context, Meyerhoff (2015) argued, prisons and universities have become *two sides of the same coin* and, as a consequence, offering courses that foster an abolitionist consciousness has become a contradiction in terms. In the rare instances where such courses are offered, there is always a risk that they might be turned by both students and educators into neoliberal tools “in the competition for grades and prestige” (Whynacht et al., 2018, p. 143).

In what follows, I detail my own personal contribution to the development of an abolitionist pedagogy in criminology. The next section outlines the ARC’s structure and content as well as some of the background influences on course design. I then define the contours of criminological education using Richard Stanley Peters’ conceptualization of *education as initiation*. I argue that teaching criminology is fundamentally about initiating the youth into a *civilizational narrative* that impacts learners’ identities in two primary ways: it entices learners to become practitioners who *materially* support the CJ system and it manufactures *ideological* support for the system by modelling friendly critics of CJ who use insider perspectives of the CJ system to develop technocratic critiques of the system geared towards its improvement and reform rather than its abolition. I then suggest that an abolitionist pedagogy can help critical educators in criminology *de-initiate* learners from such a civilizational narrative, invite them to focus on *political awakening* rather than *technical know-how* or *reformist sensibilities*, and show them that they can *learn how to unlearn themselves* and remake themselves into abolitionist subjects. The overarching aim of the following reflections is to show that critical educators can defy the current neoliberal climate of HE and empower students to create a more just world by experimenting with critical pedagogies that can aid us in understanding and reshaping the links between the classroom and broader society.

The Course and its Critical Pedagogy of De-Initiation

The ARC’s Structure and Content

Understanding Prison Abolition is an ARC that I taught at LHU between 2021 and 2024. LHU employs an integrated curriculum that relies on the delivery of almost exclusively compulsory blocks of study. Interconnected themes and topics are carefully assembled by lecturers in a way that provides a coherent grounding in a discipline’s basics, but students have little to no say regarding what they study. In other words, the curriculum is “centred upon an ‘essential core’, which ALL students study” (LHU, 2021). The ARCs are the only part of the curriculum that criminology students can pick and choose during their studies at LHU. In essence, they are stand-alone, research-informed electives that do not have to conform to the wider pedagogic goals of the teaching provision. The fact that the ARCs are optional, however, does not necessarily mean that

every student in the classroom has a predilection for the topic covered in their chosen course. Because the range of ARCs offered by the University is actually quite limited, some students choose their ARCs via a process of elimination, i.e., not based on what they are interested in the most but based on what they dislike the least. Students also base their ARC choices on other pragmatic considerations such as who is teaching the ARC, variations in assessment design and where they think they can get the best marks, what it makes sense for them to study given their career objectives, etc. This factor alone had a significant impact on the design of the ARC. Because I knew from the start that the ARC was not going to be attended by committed student-activists hoping to learn how to tear down prison walls but rather by pragmatic learners, I resisted the temptation to turn the course into some sort of explicit manual for abolitionist praxis and activism.

Instead, I designed the ARC in a way that could be broadly appealing and pedagogically appropriate regardless of students' abolitionist inclinations. In Aristotelian terms, it would be fair to say that the ARC was partly theoretical and partly practical in orientation. For Aristotle (1836), we pursue practical rather than theoretical aims when, in the course of an inquiry, the focus is placed not on knowledge acquisition but rather on *the doing of* or *the becoming* that into which we inquire. Instead of inquiring "merely in order to know what excellence or virtue is", for instance, we inquire "in order to become good" (p. 36). Instead of wishing to know "what bravery is" we seek how "to be brave" and instead of asking "what justice is" we endeavour to find out how "to be just" (Aristotle, 1915, p. 1216). Accordingly, the ARC was both about 'what abolition is' and about 'how to be or become an abolitionist' in this Aristotelian sense. That said, the Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) were crafted in a way that is explicitly theoretical and apolitical to avoid administrative complications with course approval: i) Think critically about punishment, incarceration and the prison system, ii) Understand the fundamentals of prison abolitionism, and iii) Imagine what a world without prisons would look like. The ARC ran on a yearly basis over a single academic term and lasted for 8 weeks, with each weekly session consisting of a 1-hour lecture and a 1-hour seminar discussion. The course was designed in a way that made it possible to accommodate the positioning of its abolitionist content within a broader range of *critical perspectives on punishment*. As stated in the Course Descriptor:

This Advanced Research Course (ARC) introduces students to critical perspectives on punishment and incarceration and to the challenges and promises of prison abolitionism. The Course invites students to engage with seminal readings on the failures of incarceration and to imagine a world without prisons. Building on the perspectives of key thinkers and critics of modern punitive power such as Michel Foucault, Angela Davis, Thomas Mathiesen, and Loïc Wacquant, it provides students with the intellectual arsenal needed to understand radical criminal policy and to appreciate the abolitionist mindset in the 21st century.

As it will soon become clear, the ARC's broader focus on critical rather than purely abolitionist perspectives was not meant to show that abolitionism is just one critical perspective on punishment among many. Rather, critical perspectives on punishment were utilized pedagogically as tools to open the doors that lead to abolitionist territories and to invite those students who dared to enter them into the abolitionist community.

With a couple of exceptions, each week revolved around a key thinker (George Bernard Shaw, Donald Clemmer, Michel Foucault, Thomas Mathiesen, Angela Davies, and Loïc

Wacquant). The first part of the course (Week 1 to Week 4) focused on critical perspectives on punishment, with each weekly lecture telling what might be provisionally described as a *de-initiation story* – we shall return to this concept in a moment. Students would then take a week-long break to do independent study – what LHU calls ‘reflective week’. Once they returned to campus, we looked at the history and development of abolitionist movements (Week 5 to Week 8). Critical perspectives on punishment and the history and praxis of abolitionist movements formed the backbone of the course. The order and organization of the ARC’s weekly topics changed slightly over the years but remained roughly consistent in each academic year:

Critical Perspectives on Punishment

- *Week 1* The Crime of Imprisonment: G.B. Shaw on the Moral Indignities of Prison
- *Week 2* Prisonization: D. Clemmer on Imprisonment as a Source of Criminality
- *Week 3* Discipline and Punish: M. Foucault on Punitive Power
- *Week 4* The Prison is an Outlaw Institution: L. Wacquant on Neoliberal Carcerality

History of Abolitionist Movements

- *Week 5* The Politics of Abolition: T. Mathiesen and Scandinavian Abolitionism
- *Week 6* Are Prisons Obsolete? A. Davis and the Prison Industrial Complex in the U.S.
- *Week 7* Abolition in the UK: From Radical Alternatives to Prison to the Present
- *Week 8* Conclusion: Imagining a World without Prisons

The rationale behind the first part of the ARC was to introduce students to four sets of critiques of prison and criminal punishment. Students first learned about a one-century-old moral critique of the prison system by reading G.B. Shaw’s ([1920] 1946) *The Crime of Imprisonment*. Then they studied the micro-sociological critique of *prisonization* first developed by D. Clemmer (1940) in *The Prison Community*. After that, they were introduced to Foucault’s (1979) *Discipline and Punish*, his critique of the disciplinary society, and his contribution to prison activism with the *Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons* (GIP) in the early 1970s. Lastly, they familiarized with Wacquant’s macro-sociological and political-economic critiques of *penal expansionism* and the carceral boom in the neoliberal era. For the sake of concision, the second part of the ARC will not be discussed in any detail, as it consisted mainly of descriptive accounts of how abolitionist movements came about and its pedagogic value is therefore less relevant in this context.

In line with the practical-theoretical orientation described above, in the first part of the ARC critique served a dual purpose. Theoretically speaking, critique equipped students with a set of *arguments*, namely:

- The moral argument that *punishment is worse than crime itself*
- The micro-sociological argument that *prison is criminogenic*
- The historical argument that *prison is a symptom and a symbol of a new society*, i.e., a *carceral* society governed by *disciplinary* power, and
- The macro-sociological argument that *prison is not a CJ institution but a political institution* used by the state to deal with those undesirable groups who are routinely left behind by certain political-economic arrangements

At the level of ideas, the aim of this part of the ARC was to lay the groundwork for an *abolitionist weltanschauung*. Each week contributed in its own way to expanding the intellectual arsenal that students can tap into whenever they need to persuade their interlocutors that *prison is an indefensible institution* on moral, micro-sociological, historical, and political-economic grounds. In the process of learning these arguments, students were introduced to a different way of understanding prison and came to appreciate how an abolitionist epistemology sets itself apart from “the state-sponsored epistemology of crime and punishment” (De Giorgi, 2014, p. 27). As abolitionism is a political project embedded in social struggles that connect with border publics outside of academia, abolitionist pedagogy is inherently practical. It would therefore be wrong to characterize this part of the course exclusively in terms of a knowledge transfer from educator to learners. Instead, as mentioned above, the content shared in Week 1 to Week 4 also served a more explicitly civic objective: to induce a transformation in thought and action through a process of *de-initiation* from conventional modalities of understanding prison and punishment. As shown in the next section, this process of de-initiation can be understood using a variety of different lens borrowed from the philosophy of education, critical theory, and Foucauldian scholarship.

Criminological Education as Initiation into Civilization

In the philosophy of education, the notion that learning is a form of initiation was popularized by Richard Stanley Peters. Peters ([1965] 2010) argued that “all education can be regarded as a form of ‘socialisation’ in so far as it involves initiation into public traditions which are articulated in language and forms of thought” (p. 61). Teachers and educators are *initiators* in the sense that their task is “to try to get others on the inside of a public form of life” (Peters, 2010, p. 70) that they share and regard as worthwhile – the natural and social sciences, the arts and humanities, and the like. Unlike traditionalist philosophies of education that conceive of teachers and educators as *detached operators* who simply transmit facts and skills and of students as *passive learners* and recipients of knowledge and practical wisdom, Peters’ conception of education as initiation implies that teaching and learning are participatory and socializing endeavours. With the help of teachers and educators, learners “become increasingly active participants in modes of thought and awareness” (Beckett, 2011, p. 245) that a society cherishes, thus setting themselves on the path that will lead them to gain full membership in that society and its communities. This way, education becomes both a socializing and a formative experience, or a shared experience in which educators perform a specific initiatory function, namely, to conduct “shared exploration[s] in accordance with rigorous canons, and convey, at the same time, the contagion of a shared enterprise in which all are united by a common zeal” (Peters, 2010, p. 71). As Waks (2013) put it:

“Initiation” for Peters indicates learners and teachers joined in gaining knowledge, understanding, and active cognitive perspectives. To be an initiate in an activity is to know its traditions and rules, to understand its point, and to be able to participate as a social “insider”; initiates share, and care about, the values inherent in the activities. (p. 133)

Though the notion of education as initiation is not totally incompatible with traditionalist and conservative modes of education and can, in fact, be detected in the writings of prominent conservative educators like Michael Oakeshott (1962), initiation acquired a peculiar pedagogic significance with the advent of progressive, *liberal education*.

This is because liberal education emphasizes cultural *growth* and *regeneration* over cultural *transmission* and *preservation*. In liberal education, learning moves beyond its traditional task of bequeathing cultural traditions, values, and beliefs and becomes a way of fostering and instilling active capacities in learners, first among them the capacity to critically scrutinize our existing traditions and cultural and intellectual inheritances. Though liberal education is not predicated on the destruction, overcoming, or forgetting of past ways of knowing and doing things, it does demand that learners be encouraged to *actively challenge* their teachers and educators instead of simply and *passively learning* from them. Likewise, the task of teachers and educators is not purely to ensure the *absorption* of learners into given intellectual and cultural traditions but to initiate them into such traditions in a way that facilitates their improvement, advancement, and evolution (Peters, 2010, pp. 73-74). In this sense, education is an initiatory process of *personal transformation* rather than a merely scholastic one centred around the acquisition of knowledge (see Luntley, 2009, pp. 42-43). Through the *rituals* of education, learners acquire more than knowledge and skills; they acquire *a new place in society*, that of agents of social change and instigators of intellectual advances. This is how the process goes (Peters, [1966] 2015, pp. 46-51):

- Learners start their educational journeys in societies ruled by certain beliefs, canons, and conventions that shape the starting point of their intellectual development
- Learning begins within the context set out by existing institutions and traditions and the development of the learners' mind and way of thinking is "the product of initiation into [existing] public traditions" (Peters, 2015, p. 49), each of which has its own body of knowledge, procedures of inquiry, modes of thought, etc.
- By progressively becoming familiar with such traditions, learners develop an *insider-view*, i.e., they get *on the inside* of such and such a form of thought or tradition of thinking and master the skills needed to critique and further develop its content *from within*
- By being initiated into a tradition or form of thought, then, learners ultimately contribute to its transformation and evolution
- In turn, the contours of public life and its institutions are also transformed.

Thus understood, education becomes *a driver of progress and social change*. Peters (2010) used a famously problematic metaphor to describe this process. He referred to students and learners at the start of their educational journeys as "barbarians outside the gates" and claimed that the job of teachers and educators consists in "get[ing] them inside the citadel of civilization so that they will understand and love what they see when they get there" (p. 73).

The traditionalist overtones of Peters' conception of education *qua* civilizational practice are abundantly clear. In fact, Oakeshott was of a similar view when it comes to the question of the relationship between education and civilization, which is why Peters' initiatory pedagogy has been critiqued for being inherently conservative (Biesta, 1997; Waks, 2013, pp. 134-135). For Oakeshott ([1967] 2010), education is precisely "an initiation into a civilisation" and teachers and educators are *sages* and *agents of civilization* whose educational efforts should be geared toward "the deliberate and intentional initiation of [learners] into the world of human achievement" (p. 110). Students and educators in criminology are fully familiar with the way in which their discipline has historically been presented as a modern intellectual factor in what Norbert Elias ([1939] 1978)

called *the civilizing process*. An outgrowth of the Enlightenment critique of political power and medieval despotism and superstition, criminology emerged in its classical form in the mid-18th century to infuse the functioning of criminal law and CJ with principles of rationality and fairness. Thanks to the efforts of penal reformers like Cesare Beccaria, Jeremy Bentham, and others, the penal and legal systems of Europe were progressively reformed throughout the 19th century to conform to this emerging civilizing discourse of crime and punishment. The rise of prison as the preferred mode of punishment in modern societies came to be seen as a manifestation of a more rational, just, and humane solution to the crime problem and as the most effective and civilized means of guarantying what liberal jurists in the early 19th century called *the legal condition*, i.e., “the coexistence of human beings in accordance with the laws of the legal system” (Feuerbach, [1832] 2007, p. 1006). Within this narrative, the rise of penology and criminology as established fields of knowledge and practice constituted one of the unquestionable success stories in the world of human achievement.

Teaching criminology, I would argue, inevitably involves initiating the younger generations into this civilizing narrative. We treat first-year criminology students as barbarians outside the gates of civilization who do not yet know how order is maintained in society or how justice works in practice. Pedagogically and metaphorically, the task of those who teach criminology is to open the gates of CJ so that initiates can, one day, become agents of civilization themselves and help criminology advance its civilizing mission. Training criminology students to become the practitioners of CJ of the future is only one aspect of this educational and civilizing process. According to Prospects (2024) – the United Kingdom’s biggest graduate careers website – 14% of criminology graduates are working as police officers, prison service officers or probation officers 15 months after graduation. This shows that criminological education is only partially designed to *materially* support the functioning of the CJ system – i.e., by providing recruits or manpower. In the past, criminology’s duty to provide material support for the CJ system was more central to the discipline’s educational mission. The ideas of the founder of the modern science of criminology Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) were clearly intended to inform the reform of CJ agencies through the scientific training of their practitioners. An obvious example concerns the training of police officers. Lombroso’s lifelong efforts to reform CJ, criminal law, penal policy, and so on in Italy gave life to the Italian School of Scientific Police in 1902 and, for years to follow, courses of scientific policing infused with principles of Lombrosian criminology were compulsory for aspiring police officers in Italy (Torre & Mattutino, 2009).

Similarly, in the United States, the origins of CJ education can be traced back to the efforts of Berkeley Police Chief August Vollmer, who made the learning of criminological knowledge a key part of the training of police officers in the early 20th century (Oliver, 2016). Well into the 1960s, criminological education at the Berkeley School of Criminology remained “closely tied to the technocratic demands of the state and professional training” (Platt, 1988, p. 132). Likewise, in the United Kingdom, the opening of the Cambridge Institute of Criminology in the early 1960s was motivated in part by the need to train CJ practitioners. In fact, the design of postgraduate, specialized CJ training courses was “regarded from the beginning as one of the most important tasks of the Institute” (Radzinowicz, 1961, p. 124). In short, for as long as criminological education remained subservient to the needs and demands of the state, the job of educators in criminology was essentially that of moulding learners into what the Schwendingers (1975) called *defenders of order*, or practitioners of a state-sanctioned version of criminology whose main professional role is that of materially sustaining architectures of state repression and executing CJ functions, i.e., a

sort of *system maintenance*, or the reproduction of the CJ *status quo* (Table 1). Though the arrival of academic capitalism and the neoliberalization of HE in recent decades have once again led to the establishment of a seemingly organic link between criminological education and CJ training – especially by emphasising CJ employability as a natural outcome of criminology degrees – it is doubtful that criminology departments will be entirely transformed into CJ training centres in the foreseeable future. As Peters (1981) himself understood, to say that education is initiation does not mean that universities should become “centres of the ‘knowledge industry’” or that they should be concerned “mainly with providing the theory to solve the practical problems of the community” (pp. 93-94).

Table 1. Defender of Order

Outcome of Criminological Initiation	
Learner Identity	Defender of Order
Social Role	CJ Practitioner
Type of Support	Material
Function	Maintain CJ
Tool	CJ know-how
Orientation	Technical
Philosophy	Status-quoism

Instead, it is the socializing aspect of criminological education – that is, its attempt to initiate the youth of today into the hegemonic public traditions and forms of thought of contemporary society – that almost invariably takes priority in the criminology curriculum. Accordingly, it can be argued that criminological education is primarily designed to support the CJ system *ideologically* rather than materially. Put differently, criminological education is not just about initiating learners into a *status-quoist mindset* that habituates them to the idea of becoming CJ professionals, i.e., defenders of order who materially support the system. Rather, the primary purpose of criminological education is to initiate learners into a *reformist mindset* that produces *liberal CJ critics* who know how to use insider perspectives of the CJ system to develop friendly technocratic critiques of the system geared towards its improvement and reform. In this regard, the main aim of criminological education is civic, not technical, in scope. Entering the gates of the civilized citadel of criminology and CJ is a euphemistic way of referring to the initiatory process whereby the youth of today are socialized into the CJ *status quo* and its reformist ideology. Enrolling in a criminology degree is an educational ritual that, if successful, transforms learners into social and professional insiders of the civilized citadel of criminology and CJ; initiates (i.e., alumni) who either materially contribute to the maintenance of the system through professional CJ practice or ideologically reproduce the system’s beliefs, values, rules, and conventions in broader society. When I was an undergraduate student in criminology back in 2009-2012, I only vaguely self-intuited that criminology was the

prototypical civic education – i.e., that was I was learning had primarily to do with *making publics*, being initiated into a certain way of life and being assigned a specific role and place in society. It was only more recently that I understood why my intuitions were right.

When Peters (1981) claimed that “Plato was nearly right about education” (p. 3), this is what he meant; education is not about teaching facts and skills to learners – like the hard employability skills required to be eligible for specific CJ professions – as much as it is about *making citizens*. As Peters (2015) himself acknowledged, education is not that different from “reform” (p. 25). To educate learners is to reform them, to change them for the better and to transmit to them something worthwhile. The youth of today choose criminology in a belief they will one day be able to reintegrate offenders, fix CJ systems, help the state reduce crime, bring wrongdoers to justice, deliver justice for victims and, ultimately, make the world a better place. What they only rarely realize is that the true object of reform and transformation is *criminology students themselves*. Even Foucault got this partly wrong. In his critique of criminology, he famously argued that the discipline is “entirely utilitarian”, or that it is “of such utility” and is “needed so urgently and rendered so vital for the working of the system, that it does not even need to seek a theoretical justification for itself” (Foucault, 1980, p. 47). He then went on to articulate his own theory of criminological utilitarianism which, stated briefly, asserts that criminology is inherently useful to modern society because it provides the knowledge base necessary to justify the functioning of a penal apparatus centred around the reformation of incarcerated people and their rehabilitation and transformation into law-abiding subjects. But the Foucauldian adage that *school is a prison* – first popularized by Shaw (1946, p. 18) – implies something deeper than that. If school is a prison, then *students are the real criminals*; they are the barbarians, the uncivilized, the ones on the wrong side of the gate, the ones in need of reform.

Solicited by societal pressures and conventions, prospective students *turn themselves in* by enrolling in criminology courses in order to escape from barbarism and become members of the civilized world. In turn, educators in criminology are the agents of civilization – i.e., the *prison guards* – that oversee and guide their reform and reintegration into society once they have served their ritualistic, educational *sentence*. Essentially, then, criminological education in its conventional form is indistinguishable from a process of personal reformation and transformation whereby students are initiated into the ultimate form of public life, namely, civilization itself. To socialize learners into a mode of thought that conceives of prison, police, criminal law, and criminal courts as pillars of modern society is central to the educational mission of criminology. The ultimate aim of criminological education is to initiate learners into a civilizational worldview that portrays CJ agencies as legitimate entities that ensure social order and keep the modern world together through a mixture of coercion, paternalism, technical know-how, and scientific knowledge. This does not mean that criminologists cannot or do not critique police, prisons, and other CJ agencies or their role in modern society. In fact, this is a key pedagogic locus of criminology within the context of liberal education. In the vast majority of cases, however, criminologists criticize the agencies and institutions of CJ in the spirit of what Michael Walzer (1987) dubbed the *internal critic*, and it is this attitude that most criminological educators tend to pass on to learners (Table 2). The internal critic is the kind of critic who is perceived by those who are being critiqued to be a friend, an ally, *one of them*. Mainstream criminologists see themselves as part of the CJ systems that they study and criticize and seek “the success of their common enterprise” (p. 39), that is, their reform and improvement rather than their partial or complete

dismantling. The common stance of criminologists who personify the figure of the internal critic is “commitment to the success of the enterprises they criticize” (p. 61).

Table 2. Internal Critic

Outcome of Criminological Initiation	
Learner Identity	Internal Critic
Social Role	Regular citizen
Type of Support	Ideological
Function	Reform CJ
Tool	Internal criticism
Orientation	Civic
Philosophy	Reformism

Criminologists rely on the language of reform rather than abolition precisely so as to enter into a constructive, polite, liberal dialogue with fellow criminologists, CJ practitioners, judges, policy-makers, and the broader public. They capitalize on their insider views and technical understandings of the CJ system to identify shortcomings and defects in the functioning of the system and to propose incremental changes and reformist adjustments. They know that many countries are experiencing penal crises, so they push for penal reforms and improved prison conditions. They can see that prisons are inhumane and claim they should be humanized and made to conform to human rights standards. They know that prisons are failing incarcerated women, so they advocate for gender-sensitive prison design (Giofrè & Posocco, 2020). They know that prisons are not ecologically sustainable, so they call for green eco-prisons and the greening of justice (White & Graham, 2015). They know that prisons are intrinsically painful but believe this problem can be dealt with by modelling prisons around an architecture of hope and the construction of healthy prisons (Jewkes, 2018). In the last instance, *they cherish a world where prisons work and not a world without prisons*. To study criminology is to be initiated into a mindset that values CJ institutions and wishes their success.

Abolitionist Pedagogy as a Practice of De-Initiation

Abolitionist pedagogy in criminology is a quintessentially de-initiatory modality of teaching because it involves an outright rejection of the naive optimism that pervades criminological education and an *exit* from the liberal, technocratic, and reformist mindset of the discipline’s initiators. Initiation rituals are generally meant to facilitate initiates’ identity formation through role commitment to their social systems. In other words, they are designed to induce some kind of transformation in the initiate’s self-image and social identity by guiding them through a

learning process that ultimately leads them to conform to and accept the beliefs, values, and rules of such systems – thus helping strengthen the systems themselves (Schwartz & Don Merten, 1968). By contrast, de-initiation stories can be thought of as antagonistic narratives that assist initiates in *disengaging* from the traditions and forms of thought that they have entered. Initiations are centred around rituals that, when successful, grant full membership of a community or tradition to the initiates. By contrast, de-initiation is about *rescinding or refusing* one's membership to a group. Abolitionist pedagogy in criminology is de-initiatory in the sense that it is predicated on the abandonment of the discipline's *technological dream* – or the idea that we live in *societies ruled by science*, not politics (Gadamer, 1981) – which deceives us into believing that criminological education boils down to training students to become *practitioners, experts, analysts, social engineers, and social technologists* who know how to apply theoretical insights, empirical observations, CJ know-how, and reformist thinking to confront the crime problem. Accordingly, the ARC was informed by *a politics and pedagogy of refusal* (Rodríguez, 2019) that helped students understand that there are aspects of criminological education – such as faith in prison reform – that should not just be actively challenged through liberal critiques grounded in technical rationality but more fundamentally resisted and rejected at a political level. As Zahra Bei (in Day & McBean, 2022) put it, our method as abolitionists should be that of refusing to compromise, or “refusing to be complicit, refusing to be neutral, refusing to stand and watch” (p. 210).

As Norwegian abolitionist Thomas Mathiesen (2008) put it, abolition is *a political stance*; it is “the attitude of saying ‘no’” (p. 58). The ARC's de-initiation stories, each with its own protagonist (Shaw, Clemmer, Foucault, and Wacquant), were designed to help students see what to say *no* to. With Shaw (1946), they learned how to say ‘*No*: criminal punishment is not a morally justifiable institution’. *No*, retribution is not a rational principle of justice but “a euphemism for vengeance” (p. 118). *No*, deterrence is not a technical principle of CJ intended to prevent crime but “a euphemism for terrorism” (p. 118). *No*, we cannot “produce white by two blacks”, that is, we cannot abolish violence and evil by *duplicating them* in prison (p. 93). With Clemmer (1950), they learned how to say ‘*No*: prison does not eliminate criminality, it creates it’. *No*, imprisonment does not keep us safe by separating dangerous people from the rest of us. Instead, prison sentences “breed or deepen criminality” (p. 316). *No*, prison does not turn convicts into law-abiding citizens; on the contrary, it “increases the criminality of the individuals it holds” (p. 319). With Foucault (1977), they learned how to say: ‘*No*: prison is not a sign of societal progress, humanism, and rationality’. *No*, prison is not a more civilized and more humane form of penalty than the corporal punishments of the Middle Ages’. *No*, prison's ultimate function is “not to punish less, but to punish better” (p. 82). With Wacquant (2013), they learned how to say ‘*No*: prison is not a technical implement for law enforcement but “*a vacuum cleaner for the social detritus* of a society ravaged by economic deregulation, welfare retrenchment, and ethnoracial anxiety” (p. xi, italics in original). *No*, penal expansionism in the neoliberal age is not a response to rising crime rates; incarceration is not about stemming offending but about staging political sovereignty, governing social insecurity, and managing urban marginality.

At the level of critical theory, then, the ARC's de-initiation stories represented an attempt to develop an area of emancipatory learning that could empower students to see what it means *to study the social sciences in an unjust world* and what it takes to change it in a transformative rather than in a reformist way. This is what Patti Lather (1986) called *research as praxis*. Research is praxis when it is informed by a transformative agenda – and not by a reformist one – that aims to *change* our present condition instead of merely improve or enhance it. In this context, then, praxis

simply means “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire, 2005, p. 79). Though strictly speaking this was not one of the ARC’s educational requirements – i.e., it was not part of the learning outcomes nor a component of assessment design – the course invited students to become “dreamers and doers” (Coles et al., 2021, p. 103) and to engage with course content in a way that could lead to *political awakening* rather than technical know-how or a reformist attitude. In the eyes of critical theorists, education is de-initiation when it involves i) *an exit* from the positivist paradigms of learning that misrepresent educational experiences as neutral and objective fact-finding and evidence-building voyages of empirical discovery and verification and ii) *an entry* into critical domains of intellectual inquiry where the power imbalances that contaminate the dynamics of knowledge production can be demystified and the artificial barriers between the university and broader struggles for justice in society can be overcome. In this epistemological and methodological *rite of passage* from a neutral positivism and sterile empiricism to a reflexive post-positivism and critical scholarship, students experience a *civic epiphany*: they start to see *the political content of their learning* and experience a *transition* from their existing state of either passive supporters of the CJ *status quo* or liberal-minded CJ critics to a new condition of *active citizens* (Table 3).

Table 3. Defenders of Order, Internal Critics & Active Citizens

Outcomes of Criminological Initiation & De-Initiation			
Learner Identity	Defender of Order	Internal Critic	Active Citizen
Social Role	CJ Practitioner	Regular citizen	Activist
Type of Support	Material	Ideological	Opposition
Function	Maintain CJ	Reform CJ	Transform CJ
Tool	CJ know-how	Internal criticism	Political stance
Orientation	Technical	Civic	Politics of refusal
Philosophy	Status-quoism	Reformism	Abolitionism
Educational ritual	Initiation	Initiation	De-initiation

It is fair to ask whether this should be taken to mean that critical pedagogy is, in the last instance, just another form of initiation (see Alexander, 2018). Addressing this question is beyond the scope of this article, but a provisional answer would suggest that this is a suboptimal way of thinking about critical pedagogy. To the extent that the dominant civic philosophy of today corresponds to what Habermas (1973) called *civic privatism*, or “political abstinence combined with an orientation to career, leisure, and consumption” (p. 37), critical pedagogy disrupts the very meaning of education and dislocates its place and purpose in contemporary society. In a historical context where market fundamentalism is reshaping universities into neoliberal knowledge factories and training centres that commodify the youth and initiate them into traditions and forms

of thought that produce depoliticized and atomized learners who compete for personal success so that they can enjoy their private lives, critical pedagogies are not simply alternative educational projects. Instead, they represent attempts to rescue education as a whole from the naivete of a technocratic civilization that professes to be able to solve political and collective problems through technical and individualized means. Instead of teaching individual learners how to survive in an unjust world, critical pedagogy “opens up possibilities for generating strategies of resistance to the status quo and potential for social transformation through collective action in solidarity with others” (Cooper, 2015, p. 60). Critical pedagogy in criminology is not about letting the barbarians (i.e., learners) inside the citadel of civilization through a different gate but about showing them that “a society without injustice” does not await them inside the gate but rather lies *within them*, or within their capacity to weaponize critical thought against the “positivist notion of neutrality” as part of a struggle for a better world (Giroux, 2009, p. 35).

Using Foucauldian terminology, it could be argued that the ARC’s de-initiation stories provided students with an abolitionist foundation for *constituting the self* and becoming *anti-carceral subjects*. The ARC tried to persuade students that though universities are often “factories of obedient behaviour”, they can also be “the locus for a critically-informed, oppositional micro-politics” (Leask, 2012, p. 57). By questioning the relation between power, knowledge, and subjectivity within an abolitionist framework, students learned the meaning of Foucauldian critique, or “the art of voluntary insubordination” (Foucault, 2007, p. 47). According to Foucault, the central objective of critique is *de-subjugation*, or a transition from *letting oneself be instructed or conducted* to learning how to *conduct oneself*. This is *the art of not being governed*, the art of governing oneself or, we could say, the *art of being free* or making oneself free by fighting and resisting the power of discipline, subjection, and normalization. This is essentially what I mean by de-initiation. By studying critical perspectives on punishment and abolition, students learned how to develop a *critical attitude* and a new *ethics of the self*: they came to the realization that they could, if they chose to, engage with the ARC’s content in a way that would enable them to become agents of resistance who know how to use abolitionist knowledge as a source of *counter-conduct* (Davidson, 2011). In this context, resistance is not reducible to acts of disobedience and constitutes, instead, a form of *self-knowledge*, a way of pedagogically problematizing and understanding oneself. Learning about abolition becomes a way of positioning oneself on the “road to emancipation” (Marshall, 1997, p. 33), of becoming a subject by de-subjugating oneself and by grasping the intrinsic dialectic that exists between being a subject of knowledge and being an object of power.

If the exercise of power consists in *conducting conduct* and is ultimately a “mode of action upon the actions of others” and a force that structures “the possible field of action of others” (Foucault, 1982, p. 790), then the exercise of individuality is about finding ways to conduct oneself in this perpetual struggle against power. Resistance and counter-conduct are *practices of freedom* that attempt to antagonistically re-modulate the relationship between power and its subjects, between state and citizen – and between barbarians, agents of civilization, and the various citadels of knowledge that make up the Western world – by crafting alternative modalities of thinking and living. In a Foucauldian sense, then, education is a process of de-initiation when it functions as a *technology of the self* that enables us to *unlearn* ourselves, to *undo* ourselves and to refashion ourselves in light of newly acquired self-knowledge of our individuality and positionality within a given set of power dynamics. In this regard, the ARC’s abolitionist pedagogy is consistent with the principles for a more general *pedagogy of unlearning* that has been instrumental in various areas

of the social sciences that link directly with social justice projects – such as unlearning Western ways of thinking in the context of the historical and sociological study of colonialism or unlearning the universality of the white middle-class heterosexual practitioner in social work and other fields (McLeod et al., 2020). This pedagogic process of unlearning must be undertaken not just by learners but also by abolitionist educators themselves who, in order to do their job well, have to *unlearn how to teach* (McWilliam, 2008). Crucially, not only do we have to unlearn the traditionalist and conservative role of the *Sage-on-the-stage* but also the more progressive role of the *Educator-as-liberal-initiator*.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, I reflected on my personal experience teaching prison abolition to criminology students at LHU. First, I discussed some of the complexities relating to teaching abolition in the context of a neoliberalized HE sector that aims to restructure the relationship between educators and students according to the logics of the job market. With HE becoming more and more commodified and geared toward the professionalization of a transnational workforce, I argued, university courses that teach ideas that are not easily bought and sold on the market become harder to advertise, and this often forces HE educators to design courses that are appealing to pragmatic learners. While teaching the ARC, I was never approached by a student who asked: “Why should I study something that won’t help me find a job, like abolition?”. If that had ever happened, however, I would have liked to respond: “Because at this university we teach what’s true, not what’s useful”. In reality, I have been teaching about abolishing architectures of state repression while some of my colleagues in the next classroom were sharing guidance with students on how to apply for jobs inside those very same repressive architectures. Next, I engaged with Peters’ conceptualization of education as initiation to emphasize the dangers inherent in romanticizing the links between the classroom and broader society. Arguably, *all* education is *civic* education in the sense that it aims to initiate learners into the traditions and modes of thought that a society values and cherishes. In criminology, the initiatory character of education has historically been instrumental in socializing the youth into accepting the legitimacy of apparatuses of repression and punitiveness, luring them into the civilized citadel of CJ and teaching them how to materially contribute to its preservation and how to ideologically sustain it by critiquing it *from within*, i.e., within a liberal, technocratic, and reformist framework.

Lastly, I showed how an abolitionist pedagogy of de-initiation can help critical educators in criminology undo some of the damage that our discipline causes when we open its gates to learners who get inside and, often unknowingly, end up accepting the fate of guardians of order and internal CJ critics. Understandably, some might perceive the de-initiatory pedagogy discussed in this article to pose an existential threat to criminology. But if promoting human liberation and intellectual emancipation through critical pedagogies endangers the survival of the civilized citadel of criminology and CJ, then perhaps the citadel should fall.

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criticaleducation.org

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