



## **Keeping connected: introducing ThinkLets**

**Learning Together builds educational communities that bring together people who live, study and work in universities and criminal justice organisations. Together, we want to use the power of education to improve lives, institutions and communities.**

**Covid-19 is a major challenge to our health and wellbeing. It means that we cannot physically come together as a community to learn with and from each other. But we can still keep learning and supporting each other to stay hopeful, positive and engaged.**

**Members of the Learning Together Network have created ThinkLets to help us all keep connected. Each ThinkLet contains resources that will help us to think about new ideas and develop new skills together, even from afar.**

**Each week, for the next eight weeks, two ThinkLets will be shared across our national community. We hope you enjoy them and find them helpful.**

**Keep well. Keep hopeful. Keep connected.  
And keep Learning Together.**

**Please note:**

**The following resource was created with love and care by a member of the Learning Together Network. We sincerely hope that the creator's work will be respected by distributors, readers and users, and will not be subject to plagiarism or other forms of academic misconduct. Thank you for your cooperation.**

# ThinkLet #10

## Prison and Social Movement Theory

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*ThinkLet #8 focuses on social movements and asks "What is a social movement?" and "What have social movements achieved in the past?". It draws from a short article of mine called 'Desistance as a Social Movement' which I wrote for the Irish Probation Journal in 2017, arguing that we may be seeing the emergence of a social movement among the formerly incarcerated advocating for the rights of "people with convictions."*



### Defining a "Social Movement":

Experts disagree on how to define a "social movement" or even if social movements can be defined. In "The Concept of Social Movement," Diani (1992) argues that social movements are defined as networks of informal interactions between a group of individuals engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities. Social movements are thought to have four common characteristics: a *network structure*, the use of *unconventional means*, *shared beliefs* and *solidarity*, and the pursuit of *societal change*. Some of the aims of social movements, identified by the philosopher Nancy Fraser and others, include *recognition*, *redistribution*, and *social justice*.

### Why are social movements important?

Social movements are powerful forces that by their nature tend to take societies in surprising new directions. The remarkable achievements of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States is a well-known example. Yet, it is still shocking to realise that it was only in 1955 that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus beginning the Montgomery Bus Boycott in Alabama, and by 2008, Barack Obama was elected President of the United States. To move from being forced to sit in the "back of the bus" to the election of the first African American president within the lifetime of a *single* generation would seem unthinkable - except when one realises the phenomenal mobilisation and civil rights organising that took place during those five decades.

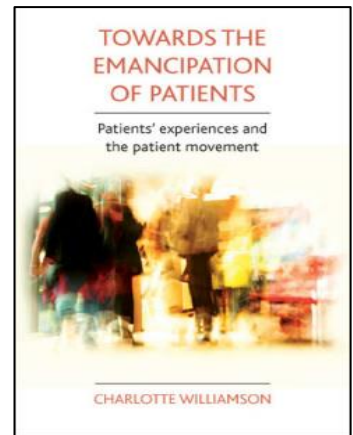
Martin Luther King, Jr. is often held up as the spokesperson of this movement, but in truth none of the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement could have been achieved without tremendous grassroots organisation among the African American community.



Of course, the struggle for civil rights in the United States is far from over, yet the palpable successes of the movement like the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act inspired many similar movements globally. Indeed, the United Kingdom had its own civil rights movement(s) led by groups such as the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD), founded in 1964, and the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, founded in 1967. There was even a Bristol Bus Boycott in 1963 modelled after the Montgomery effort to challenge the racist hiring practices of bus companies.

## Service Users and the New Recovery Movement

Similar social movements have transformed the fields of mental health and addiction recovery, where formerly stigmatised groups have collectively organised for their rights. Groups of advocates for “service users” and “disability rights” have played crucial roles in advocating for patient rights in the health care system, working to reduce discrimination against individuals struggling with a variety of health issues, but especially humanising individuals with formerly stigmatised health needs. As a result of this organising, there has been a discernible backlash against professionalised, pathologising medical treatments in favour of support for grassroots mutual-aid recovery communities.

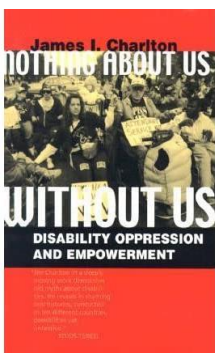


Perhaps the best known of these movements is sometimes referred to as the new “recovery movement” with powerful advocates like William White in the US and David Best in the UK. In 2009, the Centre for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT, 2009) estimated that 58% of all those who suffer addiction at some point in their lives will eventually achieve stable recovery. In other words, recovery from addiction is not only possible, it is probable. This is the message of hope at the heart of the new recovery movement and no one is better placed than those in recovery themselves to deliver it:

***‘The central message of this new movement is not that “alcoholism is a disease” or that “treatment works” but rather that permanent recovery from alcohol and other drug-related problems is not only possible but a reality in the lives of hundreds of thousands of individuals and families’.***  
(William White, 2000, “Toward a New Recovery Movement”)

This movement has shown that “celebrating recovery” as a public activity, whether in the form of **social events, marches or open recovery communities and groups**, can generate a form of **social transmission of hope** and a challenge to the stigmatised and pessimistic thinking, not only of the general public, but also of professionals, addicted individuals and their families” (Best & Lubman, 2012).

## “Nothing About Us Without Us”



Activists in the disability rights and neuro-diversity movements have insisted that in the future there be “nothing about us without us” (“*Nihil de nobis, sine nobis*” in Latin) (Charlton, 1998). They argue that if experts want to convene a conference on the problem of clinical depression or prepare a report on the prevention of autism, the **voices** of those who have been so labelled need to be represented in the discussion. In other words, important policy-level discussions of individual lives should not take place “behind the backs” of the very communities that are impacted by the policies, and the inclusion of such voices has led to impressive progress in the scientific and public understanding of these issues.


Of course, this is a natural stage in the study of any scientific topic involving human beings. Eighty years ago, it would have been possible to have a government panel or expert conference on the subject of “the negro family” in the United States that featured only the voices of white experts. Today, such a thing would seem an absurdity and an offence. Not that white scientists cannot make important contributions to such discussions. They can, and do, but were they to do so without collaboration and dialogue with African American families themselves, their analyses would inevitably involve a process of ‘othering’ and de-humanisation.

Likewise, for decades, outsider experts would write about homosexuality – sometimes as a “crime”, sometimes as a “sin”, sometimes as a “disease” – but always as the actions of the deviant “other.” Today, such voices can still be heard of course, but they are always in competition with the far more widely recognised experts on LGBT issues who work alongside or from *within* diverse LGBT communities.



## The Formerly Incarcerated: An Emerging Social Movement?

Belatedly, the “nothing about us without us” revolution is coming to the world of prisons led by a number of campaigning organisations led by and for the formerly incarcerated:



# NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US

A manifesto by people who use illegal drugs

*We* are among the most vilified and demonized groups in society. Simply because we use illegal drugs, people and governments often deny us our rights and dignity.

*We* are the “junkies” and “crackheads” of the popular media.

*We* are tagged as “undeserving troublemakers” even among some of those who provide services to us.

*We* have been hard hit by the epidemics of HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C.

*We* are often sent to prison or to compulsory detoxification and rehabilitation, instead of having access to the evidence-based prevention and treatment programs we need.

*We* suffer oppression and human rights abuses in countries waging a “war against drugs” that all too often has turned into a war against people who use drugs.

*We* are regularly excluded from the decisions that affect our lives and those of our brothers and sisters.

*We* are your sons, daughters, fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters.

And we have the same human rights as everyone else.

*We* have the right to meaningfully participate in decision making on issues affecting us.

*We* have the right to be able to make informed decisions about our health, including what we do or do not put into our bodies.

*We* have unique expertise and experiences and have a vital role to play in defining the health, social, legal and research policies that affect us.

Today, we demand to have a say.

**We have the capacity to:**

- educate and be educated;
- form organizations;

- represent our community;
- serve on government consultative committees; and



The national charity UNLOCK, for instance, seeks to provide “a voice and support for people with convictions who are facing stigma and obstacles because of their criminal record.” On their website, UNLOCK estimates that there are around 11 million people in the UK with a criminal record, suggesting considerable potential (and need!) for such a mobilisation effort.



Another ex-prisoner-led organisation that has grown with remarkable speed in the UK is User Voice, founded in 2009 by former prisoner and best-selling author Mark Johnson. User Voice has argued that the key to improving rehabilitation was to give prisoners themselves more power to influence how prisons operate and has put this vision into reality with their elected prisoner councils found across 30 different prisons in the UK.



Finally, in 2018, the Prison Reform Trust launched the Prisoner Policy Network (PPN) – a network of prisoners, ex-prisoners, relatives and supporting organisations – in order to provide the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated a stronger influence on how policy on prisons is made.

Similar organisations can be found around the world, including groups like Just Leadership USA in New York and All of Us or None (AOUON) based in California.

**“Advocates have spoken for us, but now is the time for us to speak for ourselves.**

**We clearly have the ability to be more than the helpless victims of the system”**

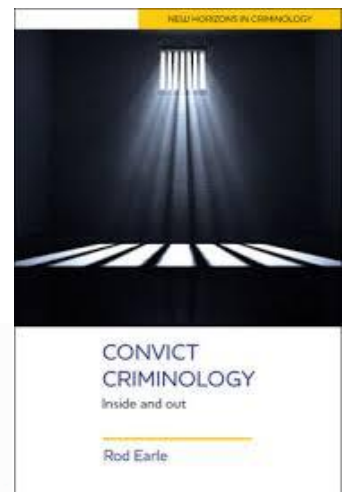
**(“All of Us or None”)**

The “Nothing About Us Without Us” message is even starting to reach academic criminology in the form of a movement called “Convict Criminology”.

Largely consisting of ex-prisoner academics, Convict Criminology has made important strides in changing the way in which crime and justice are researched in both the US (Richards and Ross, 2001) and the UK (Earle, 2016).



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Even criminology education in universities has recognised the need for a move away from “behind their backs” teaching of this subject. Prison-based university courses involving prisoner students and university students learning about criminology (and other subjects!) together have spread rapidly throughout the US, UK and beyond as a result of the dynamic work of organisations like Inside Out (Pompa, 2013) and Learning Together (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016).

***Is this the start of a true social movement?***