

Obituary

Nils Christie, Professor of Criminology 1928 – 2015



(photo: via Creative Commons Licence:
<http://eldelito.blogspot.co.uk/>)

Nils Christie – whose death in a road accident in Oslo has been announced to the shock and dismay of many – was one of the great figures of European critical criminology and a protean thinker on punishment, the prison and many other urgent public questions. Like so many of those who have shaped criminology most profoundly, Christie was never wholly contained within its boundaries, frequently dismayed by its institutional embedding and often sharply, even sarcastically, critical of its more technocratic pretensions and proximity to power. Yet he influenced and inspired generations of its students and informed the aspirations of radical practitioners in youth justice, social work, mental health and probation among others for decades.

Christie burst upon the attention of English-speaking criminologists in the 1970s. Notoriously, on receiving an honorary degree at the University of Sheffield in 1976 and delivering the opening address of its Centre of Criminology he puckishly suggested that the proper role of scholars was to close, rather than to open such centres. Indeed, he added, “Maybe the social consequences of criminology are more dubious than we like to think”. That lecture, published the following year in the *British Journal of Criminology* as “Conflicts as Property”, became and remains a landmark not just in the sense that it provided a rallying point for subsequent intellectual advocacy of restorative justice and other ‘destructuring’ moves (to quote another of our recent losses, Stanley Cohen) but more generally for its questioning and ambivalent view of the progressive claims of modernity.

Christie's great work *Limits to Pain* (1981) encapsulated the core of his world-view with intense concision. That view was that there were conceptual, moral and practical reasons for "creating severe restrictions on the use of man-made pain as a means of social control". For Christie even to have entertained this thought was useful if it allowed us to envisage "situations where kindness and humanity reign - ideals never to be reached, but something to stretch towards".

I know no reason to think that Christie ever shifted in this view throughout the many further substantial works of his long and fruitful career, too numerous even to list within this short note. I knew Nils Christie only slightly, and he was closer in age to my parents than to me. Nevertheless I feel grateful to have known him as a person of great humour and great gravity, precision and simplicity. He was, to use an overworked expression, an inspirational person and one of the most challenging and original thinkers ever to wrestle with the fatal question of crime and punishment.

Richard Sparks, University of Edinburgh
