

Presenting the Outstanding Achievement in Criminology Award to Professor Stanley Cohen

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Talk given at the opening plenary of the BSC conference in Cardiff, 29 June 2009

First of all, congratulations to the British Society of Criminology for having inaugurated this award for the most notable achievement in criminology. Secondly, congratulations to the executive committee for choosing Stan Cohen as the first person to whom it should be made. As we all know, Stan has been for decades a towering figure not only in British but also world criminology; and not just criminology but the sociology of crime, deviance, control and, latterly, human rights. No better choice could have been made.

I have known Stan for nearly 50 years, almost as long as I have been ‘doing criminology’. In that entire period, I have never known him write a dull word, or strike a false note. He has incredible quality control. As Martina Navratilova, several times Wimbledon champion – but no criminologist – said: “It is not how you play at your best that matters. It’s how you play at your worst.” It is, though, difficult to find a ‘worst’ in Stan’s work.

However, one thing Stan recoils from is any hint of ‘over the top’ sentiment, so I will stick now to the bare facts of his achievement. First, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* in 1972, partly based on his PhD at the LSE on vandalism, made such formidable use of those concepts that the term ‘moral panic’ entered the language; has a universal usage far beyond the original instance of the ‘Mods and Rockers’ events, and greatly influenced the politics of naming, social work and the multicultural debate. That was followed by two co-authored works with Laurie Taylor, *Psychological Survival* (1972, again) and *Escape Attempts* (1976), the first of which showed how deep were the anxieties of long-term prisoners for the survival of any sense of identity, presaging his later work on human rights.

In 1979 the journal *Contemporary Crises* published his article “The Punitive City: Notes on the Dispersal of Social Control”. This article became one of a handful that continue to reverberate throughout the field over a generation later. Like Sykes and Matza’s “Techniques of Neutralization” and Merton’s “Social Structure and Anomie”, it was a fresh point of departure from earlier classic theories, in this case that of Foucault, to transform the agenda of criminological analysis. Several years later, *Visions of Social Control* (1985) greatly elaborated and registered those insights anew, most notably the implications of his celebrated fishing metaphor of social and cultural control: net-widening; mesh-thinning; blurring, and penetration. A few years ago, it struck me that he had practically written New Labour’s ‘tough on crime’ programme, but as a warning, not a manifesto. It sometimes seems as if Stan Cohen’s role in criminology is to be its Cassandra, much as one hopes he avoids her fate.

His latest book so far, *States of Denial* (2002), is his *magnum opus* or, at least, the latest of them. This book fuses his unique store of knowledge about crime, deviance and control with his concern for

human rights. The eloquent sub-title *Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* intimates how states and the powerful can utilize ‘techniques of neutralization’ to far more devastating effect than any delinquent. Stan’s criminology has, of course, always been an antidote to conventional criminology. This never meant an abandonment of criminology in its larger, critical and sceptical sense. He was always bemused by those who failed to see the irony in the title of his book of essays, *Against Criminology* (1988).

What, then, are the qualities that mark his work out as a unique influence in criminology for over four decades? First, his capacity for detachment means he is never captured by any approach or trend, even those he feels most sympathy with – he manages to maintain a disinterested and sceptical approach come what may. Secondly, there is his sheer intellectual honesty – he is not afraid to admit doubt, indecision and anxiety about his own work, let alone that of others. Third, there is his uncanny insight into underlying realities, not least those of self-proclaimed realists of both Left and Right. Fourth, there is his wit, dark humour and great zest for the comic, as in his characteristic line that, in seeking to unravel the meaning of punk culture in Britain in the 1970s, “the whole assembly of cultural artefacts, down to the punks’ last safety pin, have been scrutinised, taken apart, contextualised and re-contextualised...to aid this hunt for the hidden code.” This may be “an imaginative way of reading the style, but how can we be sure it is also not imaginary?”¹

Fifthly, as several contributors to his *festschrift*² made clear, his work has an intensely practical aspect. In exposing the mechanisms of denial, he has contributed greatly to the preconditions for any possibility of peaceful transition to ending political violence, not only in Israel and South Africa, of which he has direct experience, but also in the many places where such an outcome seems remote. The two fields of criminology and human rights have been seminally integrated in his work.

Finally, when we were compiling the *festschrift* for Stan Cohen, the editors represented both the criminological and the human rights aspects of his work. We aimed to represent his academic and campaigning work in South Africa and Israel as well as in Britain and the United States. We drew the line at 30 contributions but could easily have doubled that number, and in many ways I wish we had, as the warmth and enthusiasm for Stan and his work, not least from his former students, were quite remarkable. Those responses are embodied in this award, which I am proud to present to him on behalf of the British Society of Criminology.³

¹ Stan Cohen (1980) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 2nd. rev. ed., pp. ix, xv.

² David Downes, Paul Rock, Christine Chinkin and Conor Gearty (eds.) (2007) *Crime, Social Control and Human Rights: From moral panics to states of denial – Essays in honour of Stanley Cohen* Willan.

³ My thanks for a stimulating conversation on the award, and the work of Stan Cohen, to Elena Larrauri, Professor of Criminology at the Universidad Pompeu Fabra (in Barcelona), President of the European Society of Criminology, and translator of the Spanish edition of *Visions of Social Control*.