

Life on Mars

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Titles of annual academic conferences are intriguing matters. The title of the BSC Cardiff Conference was “*A ‘Mirror’ or a ‘Motor’? What is Criminology for?*”. Prospective delegates were asked to deliberate on how they viewed themselves and their work. Should they be providing a ‘mirror’ that ‘seeks to reflect as accurately as possible the conditions that are encountered in the contemporary social order?’. Or should they have an applied orientation with their research being ‘a ‘motor’ of social change to advance key values of justice and security?’. Now of course the ‘either/or’ nature of the quotes are worthy of a paper in themselves and a plenary session addressing the ‘what is criminology for?’ theme directly would have been fascinating.

As with every conference, the initial session reflected the organisers’ struggle to manage the array of interests that define British criminology. The opening of the conference runs to familiar formula of a brief welcome by the President and someone representing the place hosting the event. There would also be an opening plenary paper by an eminent criminologist tasked to, in some way, capture the theme of the conference. In this case it would be Lawrence Sherman seeking to evidence the enlightenment credentials of ‘Experimental Criminology’. However, this year’s opening would also include the BSC’s new Outstanding Achievement Award. Eventual confirmation that Stan Cohen would be the recipient of the first award added an extra buzz to proceedings. After all, it was Cohen who has described his ambivalent but ongoing relationship with criminology as one of “repressive tolerance”.

Proceedings started with delegates being welcomed formally to Cardiff by the Chief Constable Barbara Wilding. This turned out to be a quite extensive review of how the police and Cardiff University’s Police Science Institute were working to produce a ‘safe, secure and just’ Wales. Her main message was that high quality criminological research can help the police to ‘do the right thing’. At ‘the sharp end’ criminal justice professionals do have time for academics if only they would learn how to ‘interface’ properly with the policy making process. A stronger case for an applied criminology, or at least police studies, could not have been made. The Chief Constable left with an anxious, time-conscious aide and then we moved on to the BSC award.

David Downes’ provided a synopsis of Stan Cohen’s contribution to criminology both in the form of key publications and key ideas and principles. But with due respect to what David was saying, what was much more fascinating, not least because the microphones were not working properly, was the projection of a little Polaroid(?) photograph of Stan Cohen and others taken at a National Deviancy Conference in York. Here was the visual summation of the concepts Downes was referring to - ‘social control’, ‘punitiveness’, ‘intellectual detachment’, ‘intellectual honesty’, ‘exposure’, ‘politics’, ‘inequalities’ and ‘injustice’ - that were used to rupture and revitalise post-war British criminology. Cohen reflected on the complicated politics of both making awards and accepting awards before going on to discuss the status of one of his key concepts, ‘moral panics’. Again, it was difficult to hear towards the back of the hall but I am sure I also heard him refer to concepts such as ‘ethical behaviour’ and the ‘conscience of criminology’ and ‘values of the sixties’. I think he also made the point that in accepting awards one had to be careful in case the awarding body had caused offense to powerful interests. He had reached the conclusion that the BSC was not really capable of offending anyone! As

Cohen left the stage, the NDC photograph flickered from the screen - a little like the BBC Test Card F on *Life on Mars*.

And then Lawrence Sherman woke us up from our 'sunken dream'. We were catapulted back to the present with a power-point presentation demonstrating the need for evidence-led policy making to protect and improve democratic liberties. In passing, Sherman berated the current Commissioner of the NYPD for his irresponsible 'evidence free' approach to policing whilst lauding the Greater Manchester Police for taking a much more progressive approach. Of course underpinning this talk was Sherman's advocacy for an 'Experimental Criminology'. Once again reality began to flicker with images of incorrigible DCI Gene Hunt and politically correct DI Sam Tyler engaging in vigorous debate about 'what works' in thief-taking!

It could be argued that presentations by a progressive Chief Constable, the most important representative of 'new deviancy theory' and an experimental criminologist signals the diversity, inclusiveness and responsible attitude of British criminology. BSC conferences should, in theory, be places where you can gorge on a *smorgasbord* of criminological perspectives. And of course the conferences have a host of other important functions - delegates can testify that the BSC has always had a strong social side to it! However, several points need to be made here. First, it was noticeable in Cardiff that there seemed to be many more well attended papers on the applied, institutional side, particularly on the applied side of policing. By contrast, the session on torture which took place in a large lecture hall was attended by about twenty-five people. Maybe this imbalance was because of the sponsoring role of the Police Science Institute. Second, there were few papers stemming from, on the one hand, critical and cultural criminology and, on the other, experimental criminology and crime science. There are indeed specialist conferences dedicated to these themes. Third, I sensed that there were fewer European papers, most likely because of the growing significance of the ESC conference. Finally, I seem to remember BSC conferences attended by curious journalists and reporters. So the question has to be asked. Has the BSC conference lost its pulling power? If it has, could it be because - for understandable reasons - organisers have to try to do too many things and have to do so on an annual basis? Maybe instead of posing the 'mirror or motor' type questions, in the most 'whatever' of terms, BSC conferences could 'fire up the Quattro' and give delegates something substantive to focus on. It is pleasing to see that next year's conference is on the vitally important theme of 'Human Wrongs'. Let's hope that the organisers and delegates give substance and direction to the theme. And finally...whatever happened to the NDC?
