

# British Society of Criminology Outstanding Achievement Award 2011

## Acceptance Speech

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### Thanks

*I have very little experience of award ceremonies*, even as a spectator. As a great movie fan, the model that comes immediately to my mind is the Oscars. Do I do a Gwyneth Paltrow and burst into tears? I'm sorry, but I'm too repressed for that. Or a Marlon Brando and walk out in protest at the treatment of native Americans? But I am too proud of my association over a quarter of a century now with the BSC. I have seen it grow from what was essentially a monthly criminology club in Bloomsbury to the truly national professional association it is now. And I am particularly proud of following in the footsteps of two distinguished predecessors Stan Cohen and Pat Carlen, both stalwart fighters for social justice whose records cannot be emulated.

But I will go down the Oscar route briefly by thanking a few of those who have helped me. My late parents and my family above all, and especially my wife Joanna and young son Ben (sitting in front of me) and my two adult children, Charlotte (a teacher whose struggle today is one that I am sure we all support) and my son Toby, who just got his PhD at Berkeley for a thesis on social justice - so he's following the theoretical route. Too many colleagues have inspired me over the years for me to do more than indicate my gratitude to those at Bristol, LSE Mannheim Centre and the BSC in particular. And my profound gratitude to Jill, an admired colleague first at Brunel and then at LSE, for her kind words.

### Message

Giving these thanks is made a little harder this year by the publication of Ian Loader and Richard Sparks' thought-provoking book *Public Criminology*. In it they caricature five styles of mission statement typically offered on occasions like this. I felt squarely nailed by one of them - but I imagine anyone standing here would also be caught by one or the other. Social scientists like me who live by the typology must squirm by the typology. But I must own up to feeling uncomfortably close to the statements they attributed to the 'lonely prophet'. Nevertheless, after suitable role-distancing, I shall claim my ten minutes on the mountain.

Instead of PowerPoint I shall use this T-shirt I bought recently and fittingly on the Berkeley campus. What I want to say is pithily caught on its logo, 'No Justice, No Peace' ... but handcuffs!. An ancient theme, stretching back at least as far as the Old Testament injunction to love your neighbour as yourself (Leviticus 19: 18), principles long hallowed as the foundation of all law. These principles are the essence of what can be called the social democratic perspective on crime, which was the tacitly assumed underpinning of much criminology up to the last quarter of the twentieth century.

There has been something of a *trahison de criminologists* (to paraphrase Benda) since then. This is found in the relative absence of critical attention given to wider social and political-economic sources of contemporary crime and criminal justice changes, with some few exceptions - notably David Garland, Jock Young and others depicted by Loader and Sparks as 'lonely prophets'. And much of the larger scale analysis has been directed at critically deconstructing trends in crime control, what

Hall, Winlow and Ancrum call the barbarism of order. Little has been said about the barbarism of disorder, at any rate since the new left realists of the 1980s.

In the early stages of neo-liberalism's rise, during the later 1970s and 80s, conservative criminologists of course cheered the neo-liberal turn. But *soi-disant* radical criminology also attenuated its critique of criminal justice in a variety of ways. For all their virtues, the various strands of the realist turn after the 1970s did imply a change in the subject, diverting attention from the large-scale social and cultural forces that were restructuring crime and criminal justice. Changes in funding and career opportunities for academic criminologists encouraged this, but perhaps a deeper factor was an excessive intellectual modesty in the wake of the political defeats of Soviet communism and Western social democracy.

Nearly a quarter of a century ago, Zygmunt Bauman suggested that the role of intellectuals shifted from 'legislators' to 'interpreters' as modernity melted into liquid postmodernity. They no longer enjoyed the respect or self-confidence to lay down laws from on high, mandating new values and directions, but could at best explain existing perspectives. In criminology as in other disciplines a horror of judgmentalism eviscerated critique. Criminologists became either policy wonks or interpreters of the florid cultures of deviance. But there is an excluded middle in Bauman's dichotomy (paradoxically as he is a prime exemplar of it). This 'third way' is the intellectual (or criminologist) as prophet (to embrace Loader and Sparks' caricature) - in the meaning that prophesy had in the Old Testament, not its contemporary usage of Mystic Megs who purport to tell us next week's Lottery numbers. As Michael Walzer (1993: 71-74) puts it, the Old Testament prophets' message "is not something radically new; the prophet is not the first to find, nor does he make, the morality he expounds.... The prophet need only show the people their own hearts". The prophet pointed out the way for people to realize values they already shared and accepted, but which their current practices frustrated. This was always a controversial intervention - not for nothing did prophets from Isaiah and Jeremiah to Jesus suffer grisly ends for reminding people of their falling short of their own principles.

Many criminologists used to talk in this manner, presuming that a major source of crime and disorder was social injustice. For much of the twentieth century this social democratic perspective at least implicitly informed most sociological criminology, suggesting limited potential for criminal justice to control crime levels. Although intelligent policing and penal policy could more effectively relieve the symptoms of criminogenic political economic structures and cultures, this was what (in the context of the 'war on terror') Paul Rogers has dubbed 'liddism': an ultimately futile struggle to hold the lid down on the smouldering sources of crime. Social peace required getting tough on these causes. Whilst this perspective has for the time being lost the political battle, I would claim it has not lost the argument. There are still mysteries in explaining the sudden rise of neoliberalism to dominance in the 1970s, sweeping away so rapidly the post-World War II social democratic consensus that had delivered so much in terms of widely shared growth in material prosperity and security, as well as relatively low crime and benign control strategies by historical standards. To my mind too many of the existing accounts assume the success of neoliberalism is attributable to fatal rather than contingent flaws in the social democratic or Keynesian models. In economics and political philosophy possibilities of recapturing the virtues of social democracy are being vigorously explored, but as yet with little echo in criminology.

Even more important, and at least as mysterious: where are we going now? It is remarkable that so soon after the economic and financial crunch in late 2007 seemed to discredit the neoliberal model, its savagely deflationary prescriptions for dealing with the sovereign debt crisis (resulting from governmental support for banking) are the new orthodoxy. How can this zombie neoliberalism be explained? And what will it mean for criminal justice in Britain, in the hands of the new Conservative-led coalition?

Many liberals were impressed and surprised by early signs of coalition willingness to reverse some of the trends to harsher punitiveness and the erosion of civil liberties under New Labour (and Michael Howard before that). The philosophy of the 1991 Criminal Justice Act, that prison was an

expensive way of making bad people worse, seemed back in favour. For the first time in nearly twenty years, there was government questioning of Howard's mantra that prison works. It was sadly predictable that these liberal ambitions would be frustrated in practice by increasing crime and disorder flowing from the financial cuts and downturn. As before, the 'freeing' of the economy was likely to engender a strong state penal and policing response to the social dislocation it produces. The growth of demonstrations and protests against the coalition's cuts and the unjust burden placed on the relatively poor by the legal tax avoidance of the rich, spearheaded by heroic groups like UK Uncut, and the harsh policing tactics they have been met with, indicated this clearly. What was less predictable was the speed and savagery with which David Cameron squashed Kenneth Clarke's reforms, buckling under to tabloid fury.

The bottom-line, to borrow one of its favourite clichés, is that neoliberalism fans social injustice, and feeds the barbarisms of both disorder and order. An alternative narrative to neoliberal instrumentalism and egoistic aspiration is needed, evoking the mutualism of Buber's ideal of 'I-thou', not I-it (as argued by Benjamin, 2010, in relation to financial markets). This echoes the ethics of the Golden Rule that underpinned social democracy. A core criminological responsibility, I believe, is to chart a way forward to reviving the conditions for social security and peace, which social democracy had begun gradually to deliver. We cannot put Humpty Dumpty together again. 1940s techniques may not work in the 21st century; but we must strive for new economic, social and criminal justice policies that advance the peace and liberty of the majority of people. We must keep faith with the dream that I believe brought most of us into criminology. Read my T-shirt: 'No justice, no peace'! Criminologists of the world unite - you have nothing to lose but your research grants! And they're disappearing anyway.

Thank you BSC for this great honour that you have conferred on me. I hope and trust that you will continue to flourish in the tough times ahead, under the wise guidance of Loraine Gelsthorpe, continuing on from Mike Hough's fine leadership.

**Robert Reiner, June 2011**

## **References**

Walzer, M. (1993) *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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