

Criminological Reflections From The City Of Quartz - Paul Rock

We still await what might in modern discourse be called a 'conference turn', a focusing of sociological interest on the structure, process and functions of the academic conferences in which we spend so much of our professional time without, it seems, exercising much reflexivity. Stan Cohen attempted something of the sort years ago, but he concentrated lightly on the comforts and amenities of the conference in the mode, as it were, of a travel writer, and not that of a social anthropologist.

The meetings (never, for some reason, the meeting) of the American Society of Criminology deserve scrutiny. They serve multiple purposes: a hiring fair in which the earlier token of a piece of straw has been replaced by adhesive paper badges of different colours; a tribal gathering, in which members

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of the profession at large award themselves praise and prizes, view one another and marvel at the scale of the increase in their numbers; a

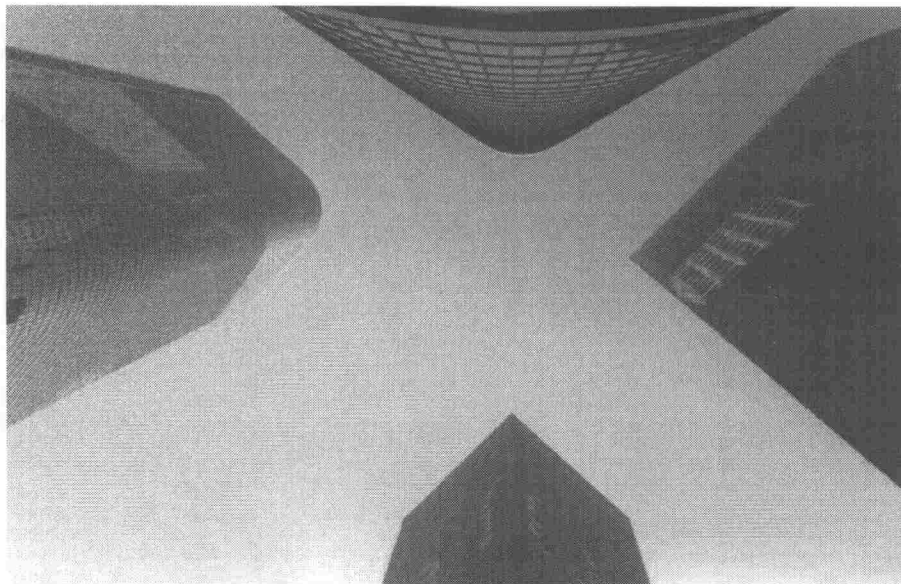


Los Angeles, site of the 2006 American Society of Criminology Conference

promenade, in which people stroll in the manner of academic flaneurs to see and be seen (recalling Oscar Wilde's observation that the only thing that is worse than being spoken about on such occasions is not being spoken about), anxiously looking about them to check whether there might not be someone more interesting to talk to; a forum for the exchange of gossip about who has died, retired, changed position or partner or received big grants; and a jamboree and junket in which bebies of criminologists saunter abroad en masse to drink, listen to the local music, visit factory outlet centres and, in the case of the more refined, art galleries.

The British cohort has for the last few conferences been

substantial, inviting the notion that there may be some correlation between the volume of a nation's crimes and the numbers of its criminologists. Its members tend to be awarded what are described informally as the 'graveyard slots', the unholy times in the programme's schedule when people are asleep or otherwise diverting themselves. 8am on a Saturday seems to be especially favoured by the conference organizers for foreigners, even for those whom the British criminologist might deem distinguished and worth hearing. And that may be a mark of the treatment of the event chiefly as a domestic American affair, the American Society of Criminology meetings leaning towards treating criminology as an American



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discipline focusing on American crime and criminal justice, and one supposes that may not be wholly unreasonable.

In the main, criminologists do not appear to attend the conference for the speakers and the papers: on many occasions the people in the audience are out-numbered by those on the panel; there is rarely much selectivity or theme in the composition of the panels themselves (the submission of a paper often being the passport needed to secure financial support for attendance);

the panels are too large for the purpose of stimulating interesting discussion from the floor; the papers which they offer tend to be instances of what C. Wright Mills once called abstracted empiricism - statistical digests without theme or scholarly interpretation; and the academics presenting them are obliged to gallop through their argument at breakneck speed, sometimes to the point of incomprehensibility. Laurie Taylor and Stan Cohen once geyed the whole process on one inimitable occasion at the ASC meetings in Toronto, gabbling through a joint

paper in the manner of I'm sorry I haven't a clue panellists, bouncing back and forth, one stopping in mid-sentence to let the other pick up the narrative.

Yet there were papers at the Los Angeles meetings which were memorable, including the panel convened by Richard Wright on ethnography (and no group containing Wright and Shadd Maruna can fail) and the panel in which Tim Newburn and Trevor Jones talked about the vicissitudes of the policy transfer process, because these are fertile scholars in their prime. Equally memorable was the panel of new feminist scholars chaired by Frances Heidensohn, because they are young and not so young scholars entering their prime. Next year, the meetings are to be held in Atlanta, Georgia, where, it should be noted, the Reebok South outlet store is on 980 Hammond Dr NE, and the Rolane Factory Outlet is on 531 Roselane St NW.

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