

Professor Stanley Cohen: an appreciation

Barbara Hudson remembers the eminent sociologist

Like so many others, I am saddened by the death of Stan Cohen, my PhD supervisor, mentor, and supportive friend at a particularly difficult time in my life. I first met Stan in summer 1976, when I was applying for a PhD place. In awe of the author of Folk Devils and Moral Panics, a book which did so much to open criminology up to the sociological imagination, I was soon at ease and enjoying a wide-ranging conversation, with the difficult questions posed gently and seemingly lightly, that was Stan's distinctive style. Stan was, of course, the perfect PhD supervisor: always encouraging; nudging me back in the right direction when I was veering off-track. I began my teaching at Essex, and the deviancy 'dream-team' – Stan and Ken Plummer – was the best possible start to an academic career.

During this time Stan made several research/lecturing visits to the USA, particularly California, and on his return the Essex sociology department was the forum for presentations of his developing critique of 'community corrections'. His paper 'The punitive city: notes on the dispersal of social control' (1979) drew on Michel Foucault's work *Discipline and Punish* (1977) to present a penetrating account of the spread of the principles of incarceration (control of time and space; continuous surveillance) beyond the prison and into the community. It introduced ideas which became the basis of both academic and professional critical engagement with the intensification of social control, particularly of young offenders. 'Blurring the boundaries' between inside and outside, between friends and control agents; merging public and private, and in particular, 'net-widening', were adopted as critical, evaluative terms which influenced a generation of radical social workers and probation officers, prompting the introduction of 'gate-keeping' and diversion from court and custody.

This paper and others from the late-1970s and early 1980s came together in *Visions of Social Control* (1985), which traced 'master patterns' and 'master narratives' of social control in western societies. The book offers a compelling critical appraisal of too much classification, too much intervention, with a vivid critique of the euphemism and dissimulation of 'control talk'. Stan's advocacy of 'moral pragmatism' provided a powerful voice in arguments for reining in the seemingly ever-advancing punishment and control juggernaut.

By the time *Visions of Social Control* was published, Stan had become Professor of Criminology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I visited him in Israel in the summer of 1985, having spent some time with a friend who was then Field Director for UNWRA in Gaza. As he showed me around West Jerusalem and the university,

Stan's disquiet at Israel's policies towards the Palestinians and the Arab-Israelis was apparent. The intensity of his social/political preoccupations was balanced, however, with the lighter side of family life in the Cohen household, memorably an evening in front of the television watching the Miss World competition.

Stan's condemnation of torture used by the Israelis against Palestinian prisoners signalled a move from, as he put it, doing criminology to doing human rights. *States of Denial* (2000) in fact wove the two together, since he drew on ideas from the criminology/deviance literature to interrogate the phenomena of ignorance, denial and justification for torture, genocide and other gross human rights violations. Sykes and Matza's *Techniques of Neutralization* sit alongside Stan's wide-ranging moral, psychological and literary insights, making the book the key text for bringing human rights into the criminology curriculum.

The last time I was with Stan was in London, at a workshop at which developments in social control were brought to the attention of human rights professionals. This was not the usual legal discussion of punishing human rights violations but rather, how to promote and protect human rights in policy field such as health, migration, and policing. The project exemplified Stan's commitment to using his exceptional intellectual powers to contribute to progressive social development. He was an outstanding academic; he was the most humane of public intellectuals, morally engaged with the world beyond the ivory tower.

Stan has been a profound influence on my teaching and writing, as he has with so many of us who position ourselves as critical criminologists. For so much, including introducing me to the music of Dr John and the novels of Robbe-Grillet, as well as to so much criminology and human rights work, I am privileged to have known Professor Stanley Cohen.

Barbara Hudson is Professor (Emeritus), University of Central Lancashire

References

- Cohen, S. (1977), *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, London: MacGibbon and Kee.
- Cohen, S. (1979), 'The punitive city: notes on the dispersal of social control', *Contemporary Crises* 3, pp. 339–363.
- Cohen, S. (1985), *Visions of Social Control: Crime, Punishment and Classification*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Cohen, S. (2001), *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Foucault, M. (1977), *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, London: Allen Lane.