

# Remembering Geoff Pearson

Harry Blagg offers a personal tribute

*The British criminology community has been orphaned this year. The deaths of Stan Cohen, Mary McIntosh and now Geoff Pearson have left many of us feeling bereft. Barbara Hudson's reflection on Stan's career in the June 2013 issue of Criminal Justice Matters was adorned with memories of his kindness and unerring decency. For those of us fortunate to have known Geoff well and work alongside him there are clear parallels. Geoff Pearson left us a glittering legacy of scholarly works that have become embedded into the 'common sense' of criminological theory. Yet, Geoff himself was no lofty scholar, he was one of the most approachable and personable individuals one could wish to meet: generous with his time, interested in the views and experiences of others and a passionate advocate for the outsider.*

In his obituary in *The Independent*, Dick Hobbs wrote eloquently of Geoff's life long adherence to fundamental socialist values, shaped by his own working class origins and experiences, and his interest in ethnography. Yet, Geoff has also left his mark on British social work theory and practice as well as ethnography and criminology. His first book, *The Deviant Imagination: Psychiatry, Social Work and Social Change* was a profoundly humanist exploration of the workings of contemporary social work practice and the potential for a socially engaged practice. Geoff took social work seriously. His first chair at Goldsmith's was as Professor of Social Work and he was immersed in contemporary debates about its future, most notably through his contribution to the *Barclay Inquiry*, where he defended some fundamental social work values in the face of attempts to de-professionalise social work and hand it over to 'patch' based volunteers. Geoff saw this move as symbolic of a broader shift in the post-war settlement that had improved the lives of many working class people. He was never seduced, as some were, by anti-statist rhetoric or simple formula reducing social work to a repressive state apparatus (we called that 'social workerism'). Geoff had a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the relationship between social structure and individual biography. His involvement in social work scholarship, and his own experiences in psychiatric social work as a practitioner gave shape to his other writings; a gifted theoretician he was also able to relate theory to practice in quite concrete ways.

I met Geoff when he became an external examiner at Lancaster University in the mid 1980s. It was my first job. We were all slightly awed by his reputation; then comprehensively impressed by his capacity to comment critically on a diversity of topics, from sociological theory

through to the mechanics of case-work. What impressed us most, though, was his good natured engagement with people and his willingness to listen. He was immersed in writing what was to become his best known text, *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears*. His major worry was that Macmillan kept editing out the jokes and acerbic asides that make the book such a joy to read. I recall having some interesting discussions with him about the origins of the term and how it have achieved such universal currency: even in Czarist Russia, where *Khuliganstvo* became a metaphor for rural then urban disorder and eventually a legal construct (the 'Pussy Rioters' were sentenced under 'Hooligan' legal codes).

Geoff loved a good story and was adept at extracting information from anyone he came across, be it a meeting or chance encounter in a public bar. He loved the idiosyncratic minutia of daily life: he wrote to me from a trip to Israel to say that a street deal of marijuana was 10 shekels ('just like the Bible'); being stuck in a German airport was like 'enduring an Hegelian nightmare'.

My major experience of working with Geoff was during the 1980s on an ESRC funded project on inter-agency collaboration. I was one of the 'et al's' (along with David Smith, Alice Sampson and Paul Stubbs) behind Geoff on some innovative writing on the complex field of multi-agency liaison, involving the police, social work and community based organisations. The project provided a perfect platform for Geoff to display not just his skills as a writer and thinker, but his capacity to relate to a diversity of people and organisation, from senior hierarchy in the Met ('count your fingers after you shake that Inspectors hand'), through to an inter-agency/community engagement forum on housing estates in Lancashire and inner London. What one noticed about him was his *attentiveness*. His capacity to listen earnestly to people: give them his undivided attention. These are the qualities that made him a genuinely decent human being as well as a skilled ethnographer. I liked Geoff because he did not differentiate between people based on their status or reputation, everyone had a story, a background, a biography, nothing human was alien. Geoff was also a shrewd observer of changing times: it was he who suggested we should all expunge any references to the word 'social' in our job descriptions and 're-brand' ourselves as criminologists, which we duly did and escaped some of the worst excesses of the Thatcherite purges. Thanks Geoff. ■

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Thanks to Professor David Smith for his suggestions.