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Stanley Cohen

Life story interview with Paul Thompson

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Principle investigator's thematic highlights

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Professor Stanley Cohen
Interviewed by Paul Thompson
2 and 30 May and 14 June 2001

1. South Africa: social strangeness and blackness

P 1-3

I was growing up in apartheid South Africa. I was born in 1942, ... in Johannesburg. And there was very little in my parents' background which would have led me to any political commitment or sociological commitment, or social commitment. My father was a businessman who had arrived from Lithuania in the wave of immigration in the twenties and thirties. My mother was more interestingly different, in that she was - from a Polish family, but was actually just born in South Africa, and then went to Law School, after having grown up in an Afrikaans area. And she was very much on the Right, politically, was very racist, but kept her views hidden. My father was more middle of the road, more "liberal" by character. But there was nothing much in my family background which would account for becoming politically sensitive about South Africa, in the way that I did....

I had this acute sense, [of] things that I remember from childhood, looking out of the window at night, and seeing a black "night watchman" (as they used to be called), from a private security firm, who was guarding the house because my father was away. It was a cold Johannesburg night, and I suddenly saw the man huddled over this coal stove, and I was inside, and I suddenly had this epiphany of... why is he there, and why am I in here? There seemed something inexplicable about this poor old man having to stand outside, and here I was, inside, in this warm bed. You know, what had made the world like that? And I think once you start thinking like that, you always think like that.

PT: So what age was that, then?

SC: I find it hard to put an exact age; I'd say probably 13, 14, or something like that. ... And I could never, I couldn't understand - well, I suppose what we now call "the order of things".

It didn't make sense to me that, as somebody, and I was 13 or 14, but I had this black servant who would call me "Master", and he was 20, 30 years older than me, and an

adult, but we would call him a “boy”. And the house servant, the woman, we would call a “girl”. And things like that which are so obvious to an outsider, but to an insider, are part of reality... I think, from a very early age, I was aware of the strangeness of the social order there, and things which were taken for granted...

I think, yes, the domestic life was strange... you know, the servants, and what they were asked to do. It struck me as odd that they were there, but they were not regarded as human. My mother and father would continue - when the black servant would come to serve us dinner, he would come in and serve the dinner, and my parents would either carry on talking as if he wasn't there, or else they'd make an elaborate gesture of stopping to talk, because it might be something that would not be appropriate for him to hear. Actually, a lot of the time he was stoned, and my brother and I used to find... we knew that there was “dagga” plants (marijuana) in the garden, and my parents had no idea about this at all! But, yeah, you know, the presence of a domestic servant and I think it's an example that Goffman uses often, often, and it's such a striking example, the presence of a person who is not a person.

2. Jewishness and marginality

P 5-6, 7

But it was a typical Jewish middle-class neighbourhood as well, and I think that's the other influence, or part of my identity, which was important. It wasn't just being South African, it was being Jewish in South Africa. And from a very early age I started going to synagogue,... my parents weren't religious, but they were what one would call “traditional”... My father was very much a non-believer, but he said he didn't want to be the last one to break the tradition, so he would keep it up. Yeah, and they kept up all the festivals. I had a very large extended Jewish family. My father had four or five brothers and sisters, and we used to all, on weekends, we would meet at the senior brother's house, and we would play together, as kids. And I think that, going to synagogue, and the Jewishness, was always a constant culture, a backdrop; it was a Jewish atmosphere. The school, the primary school, was dominantly Jewish, though it was an ordinary State school... But at about 9 or 10, I joined the Zionist Youth Movement, “Habonim”, which many of the kids of my generation did. There were variations of it, some were more Socialist than others. This was slightly Socialist. And that was an important influence. That was a positive influence... But it's positive and negative. The negative I only saw

later. The negative was, I think, the very crude Zionist indoctrination that we received, which I learned later when I went to Israel, how crude it was, and how one-sided it was. But, on the other hand, there was the Zionist Socialist side to the Movement. And I unthinkingly absorbed the Zionist side, but the Socialist side of it (not Socialist in the sense of orthodox Marxist), was a Movement which did stress, and introduce you to rather abstract and difficult values for 10, 12, 13 year olds to deal with. These were things like equality and liberty, and co-operation, and learning about other people suffering. So that was a positive influence in that respect, but not in the way that they intended. But it certainly exposed me to ideas and thinking, which came later to be important...

But in addition, the Movement was always caught up by its peculiar South African setting. I think, later on, I became very aware that the Movement was caught up in a curious position of having some social consciousness, and some social conscience, but not applying it consistently to the South African world around them. It was only in a bit of this world. It was mixed up...

School was a negative force. I hated it, and I was never particularly good at lessons, I disliked the regimentation and the boredom of it... But by the time I'd left school, I had already a vague social justice commitment, in relation to South Africa. I had certainly a vague idea of Zionism, that I would end up in Israel. And I think I did have... a sense of wanting to do something to help. You know, this was a very strong kind of humanitarian impulse rather than a political impulse, which is why I actually did social work...

3. University: politics and friendships, black and white

P 7-8

I think things changed. I think that's why I mark going to university as *the* break. You know, because everything before that was either negative influences or the puzzles that I talked about. But once I'd made that commitment to go, that I was going to university, and that I was going to be an activist at some level, and the level was by doing social work, I think everything else then started changing dramatically.... Those were just marvellous four years for me. I don't think I've ever had four better years...

Yeah, University of Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg. "Wits" as it's known, yes. And... away from the numbing boredom of school, and the cadets and the sport and everything. I just found myself in an environment where all these little bits of identities

seemed to be available. I was reading a lot, I was involved in the Jewish part, I think I was Chairman of the Student Jewish Association in my second or third year. But most important of all, I was learning, I was getting exposed to sociology, to the social sciences, because part of doing social work was an Introduction to Sociology, which was not very good, but it certainly got me into the social sciences!

But above all, it was going there at a political time. 1958, '59 were crucial years. This was when the so-called "Extension of Universities Act", which shut the universities down to blacks, began, and there were immediate protests on the campus. And I was drawn to these, absolutely instinctively, and I knew that's where I belonged. And I think that's where, you know (going back to relationships with my parents), that's where... I started being different, and saw the difficulty of that. And I eventually ended up just by not telling them. They always worried about that, you know, that I would be arrested, and there was always that atmosphere of tension and disapproval from them. Not that I was really *doing* very much, but those were years where participation in campus politics was quite a significant way into other political commitment.

P 11-12

But everything seemed interesting. Everything seemed wonderful: the offer of friendship and comradeship and the sense that you were different, the excitement of having, for the first time in your life, black people [you were talking with] As friends, yeah [but in a very limited way]... There was a whole group of us, dominantly Jewish, dominantly from the middle-class background, who got involved together. And I think it was very much part of the group ethos that we should have friends, and go out of our way to make friends with the black students, who had dwindled in number. And I think my sense of marginality then began to develop.

PT: Did you actually make any long-term friendships with the black students?

SC: Yes. Yes. Well, "long-term" and "friendship", in the context, those are not simple terms. I mean, because, because there were always taboos about this. Even the notion of bringing my black friends home, that was a boundary which I would never try to cross with my parents. And yeah, we used to meet on the campus, we used to meet at parties, we used to meet at political rallies. Sometimes we went to their places, so "long-term", yes. I think we saw them as different, they were different kinds of "friends", there was

something romantic about it, I think, in a society like that, we were very very aware of the difference all the time you know; that sitting over lunch with a black person was almost like making a political statement. But there came, some point, at least with some of us, that it became more normalised.

PT: What about with black women?

SC: Well, that's an interesting point No, not black women as women, I think in the sense of seeing them as women, in the way we saw other women, either as sexual objects, or as potential partners, or romance, no. I think that, for many people, was a taboo, or was... something which... which would not have come easily or naturally.

4. Goffman

P 20

I always found it striking when I first read Goffman. This was that idea that the structure of society is there in the bricks and mortar – our identity resides in the cracks. And that, to me, was a wonderful idea - that you build the identity against the institution. And, but I think that tied with what I was saying earlier, that nobody had a positive influence on me, but the environment had a powerful negative influence, in that I was building up my identity against the environment.

5. The master plan

P 20, 22-23

Robin, my brother, and I, were building up our identities against the dominant political environment, by being involved in the anti-apartheid struggle... We didn't think we were going to be academics. I thought I was going to be a social worker, and save the world through some combination of, you know, Mahatma Gandhi and St. Francis on the one hand, and some kind of political identity on the other! We thought going to university was part of that, was learning about the world, in order to do good....

Well, that was the track. I mean, that was the master plan, because while we were involved in what was going on in South Africa, we were all sure, our group of people, were all sure of two things. One was that we would leave South Africa as soon as we could, and number two, in our particular group, that we would be going to Israel...

And we thought, “Well, let’s go to London for a half a year, or a year, and see what it’s like, and then go to Israel”. And once we went to Israel, things would become more shut down, you know, that would be it. We would be fulfilling our “destiny” as Jews, and Zionists, by going to Israel...

We hadn’t thought things through, and I thought, “Well, you could do a little bit of each”. I really knew that, you know, that was not possible, that there were elements in the universal, and being a person, and in being committed to general ideas of social justice, which were vaguely in contradiction to Zionism. But I’d never articulated in this form, and I was still totally naïve, and totally indoctrinated by the Zionist Youth Movement...

You were conscious that if you stayed in South Africa, the theme I talk about in book, there was no way to stay there without being aware of the injustices, and doing nothing about them. And if you were not just playing at student politics, but got into the real thing, you’d eventually get into prison... And I think the path of leaving, for many of us, was leaving out of disgust, leaving because you could say, “Well, I can’t possibly live in a place like this. You can’t possibly survive in a place as unjust and horrible as South Africa”, so you had to leave. I think that was the stronger push. It was political, but political in the sense of people saying, “You can’t live in a place like this without being an activist”. And if you were an activist you’d get into trouble, and the best thing is to just pack up, to express your disgust by just leaving.

6. LSE

P 27-29

Then I decided I would come to LSE, because LSE, again, was a symbolically significant place. We used to sit at Wit’s reading some issues of *New Statesman* that were banned in South Africa. It’s astonishing to think of that now, but it was certainly a rather furtive, secret, underground, samizdat document – the *New Statesman*! At least, that’s the way we made it. And so I remember sitting in Johannesburg Library, reading *New Statesman*, and reading, at the back, adverts for lectures at the LSE, you know that’s I’d heard about this radical place.

And anyway, so I applied to the LSE and I came here, and I just... and I decided I wanted to work on something to do with delinquency. And that’s where I started...

Well, it was a combination of being enormously impressed with the *idea* of being at LSE, which was resonant then, as it is to me now, and the slight disappointment of the reality of it! I mean, in terms of radical politics, it wasn't quite the radical place that it was held out to be. It never was. It was always, it seems to me, a little mythical – not a bad idea anyway. And secondly, in terms of intellectual quality, it was slightly disappointing to me. You know, I went to courses which I had to do, which turned out to be very very boring, and so I was slightly disappointed with that...

I think I only heard one person who really knocked me out, intellectually, that was Ernest Gellner... To me, he seemed in a completely different class, intellectually, compared, say, to Bottomore and Milliband, who I thought were good, but not as striking... I had to do courses like the "Social Structure of Modern Britain", which never interested me at all! Because I think I realised then, I was never much interested in factual stuff about the world, but rather in ideas about the world.

P36

At the same time,... this, of course, was the time of the great – the beginnings of the LSE political events, the Walter Adams year, Rhodesia, the sit-ins, and this was terrific for me. I mean, I - I threw myself into all that! You know, this was, at last the myth had come true. Going to hear Tariq Ali and Robin Blackburn and, you know, the people of the LSE was exciting. So I think my political commitment was strengthened by the events, in a sort of anti-authority direction, you know, very anarchic anti-authority direction. And I think, the labelling theory, and the anti-authority direction combined in leading me to say (I knew this "makes me sound a complete caricature"): "Well, you know, the kids are all right, it's the authorities. It's the labellers, it's the social control agents, they're the ones to look at. We shouldn't be studying people at the bottom, the victims, or the powerless and the more meaningful innocent "Many had done nothing, others had done something". And so I think... in the clearest way, the simple idea of labelling theory, and the anti-authoritarianism that I picked up from the LSE sit-in days, and the spirit of, you know, the excitement of being anti-authority, reinforced for me the idea that I could find some connection between political commitment and intellectual life, which was one of the sixties themes that emerged – bearing all the myths, or problems, that we later saw.

7. Ph D: juvenile delinquency

P 29-33

I didn't know much about crime and delinquency. I know a lot about ideas about crime and delinquency. So I got attracted to more theoretical courses, but I never was much interested in these informative, empirical courses. But I did them...

When I started looking for a subject, I mean, I did it all myself, really, and I was completely... it was completely overwhelming to me. I decided I would do something on a subject - I don't know how I got connected - but I decided that the interesting thing about was delinquency was not delinquency, but how people reacted to delinquency. And I hadn't read labelling theory, or anything like that, I hadn't read much theory at all except the mainstream, which was subcultural theory. Up to that point, sociological theory of delinquency was subcultural theory...

Well, the first way it was conceived as a project on "attitudes to delinquency". A rather dull idea, a dull way of dealing with it; but still, in retrospect, interesting and opening things up to me. The idea was just go and interview people who dealt with delinquents, or delinquency, and present them with a questionnaire or an interview, and ask them what they thought. And then I would ask schoolteachers and probation officers, and judges. So with Terry's assistance, I drew up a, I mean, the word "sample" is too much, too dignified a word for it, but I drew up a list of people who, today, we would call "agents of social control" – magistrates and youth teachers.

Terry Morris was well known for having done this local study of Croydon, ... in the book that he wrote, called *The Criminal Area*, which was an application of the Chicago School model, to a British planned environment. And I thought, "Well, it will also be interesting to see, talk to social workers, or youth workers, and get a wider sense of the community". So Terry said, "Oh well, you can do this in Croydon..."

So that's what I started doing. And I started interviewing. This must have been about 64/65. I thought that was going to be my entire PhD. I had a questionnaire, and I had a list of about a hundred people, I suppose – ten school Principals, and ten probation officers, and ten magistrates... And it was interesting, and it was my first exposure to life outside London, because in London, I'd immediately gravitated to Hampstead and Belsize Park and the more cosmopolitan areas. And this was a strange world for me, a really strange world – to see that England wasn't all LSE and Hampstead! And there I was, I remember, I would put on a suit and a tie, and I'd go to Croydon, and it was foot-

slogging work, because I was going from schools to courts and interviewing these councillors. I don't know what they made of me...

But then, well, life was changed... and the PhD. was changed, and my whole interest was changed, by two random events, and then by theoretical changes. The first event was my new interest in vandalism. Terry had a friend, Jean Graham-Hall, who was a stipendiary magistrate... She told Terry that somebody had asked her to talk about vandalism, and she knew nothing about it, and did he have a student around who would be willing to find out something about vandalism for her? And so Terry asked me, and said, "Look, why don't you do Jean Graham-Hall's research" so I went to meet her, and she said she'd pay me, I don't know what it was, "£50?". It seemed to me an enormous amount, to just look through press cuttings and find out from the criminology literature, if anything was known about vandalism. And I discovered that nothing was known about vandalism, at all... and I started thinking about why there was so little written... and I thought: "Oh well, let me kind of take vandalism as another little bit of the thesis"... And I think, here, I was bringing in a lot of kind of politicisation, in a way. I was saying, "Well, unlike what it appears, vandalism is a more socially meaningful act, it's not just a pathological act. There are patterns, types, trends". So I started working on that, and I got terribly interested in that. And ... that became another part of the thesis, what was a whole thesis on vandalism. And I eventually wrote something on it in a book, on *Vandalism and Architecture*, because I got interested in urban design.

Then, of course, probably *the* most important thing, in terms of my later career, and interest in sociology, happened, which was the '64/'65 Mods and Rockers "riots"... And I remember reading [about everything, seeing some photos] and this seemed to me to be really fascinating. So I just added it on! So I had three studies! The one is, this Croydon study – interviews on delinquency; I've got vandalism; but then I've got this big public stuff that was going on in Clacton and Brighton and Margate, which seemed to be so interesting! And so I started to do work on that as well, and that became incorporated, and that became a third of the thesis. And so I had those three parts, which was much too much!

P 34-37

I was quite excited by the drama of the events, and although I missed the first one, I had only read about the first one... That's the Clacton one, yes. I certainly wasn't there! I was dependent on the media. I had the sense of exaggeration and drama as being important, and really, I suppose, the sense that the forces of law and order (or "agents of

social control”, as we would now say), were over-reacting. It seemed to me, that what happened couldn’t have been like what the media were saying. The lurid headlines, and English newspaper-speak, which was new to me, seemed to me utterly bizarre...

I think I need to jump to two other strands, before I can talk about how I researched it. The one was the theoretical one, because I think it was at about this point that I discovered the simple idea that was later to be called, “labelling theory”. You know, I think, in an intuitive way, that’s what I was always thinking, that it was the reaction, it was the label, it was the social response. But at that point, I do remember two intellectual experiences, which were almost revelations...

I’ll do it in sequence. First one came in a book by Leslie Wilkins, called *Social Deviance*, ... in which he had this theory about social events being deviant or non-deviant, according to their frequency. It was an interesting idea, so simple... and I was sitting on the train, and I read the thing of Leslie Wilkins, and I thought, “That’s it! That makes sense of it all!” You know, this rather simple idea. And then he went on to quite interesting ideas about deviancy, amplification, all those ideas were in Leslie Wilkins, deviance, amplification, and feedback loops, and self-reinforcement, and - and the very interesting idea, which sounds banal now, that the reaction to deviance might make things worse rather than better. That was all there. You know, the idea of amplification and self-fulfilling prophecies, in a different language, was all there. And I found this immediately something really interesting.

And then a short time after that, I was here at LSE, in the Library, and I picked up Becker’s *Outsiders*, and I can still see, sitting in the Library, I remember reading that. There was the famous line there, “Deviancy is not a quality of an act”.¹ ... And I was absolutely knocked out by this! This simple idea would make sense of all the very pre-theoretical ideas I had...

What was also influential, ... was the very special influence of Laing and anti-psychiatry. This was terrifically important for me, because when I worked at that hospital, I felt that I was learning about an “order of things” which we had to criticise. At a conference that they organised while I was still there, I heard Laing, and he was absolutely electrifying... Curiously I saw crime as peripheral, I never saw that delinquency and law were major problems to be thought of, but mental illness certainly was! The idea that, the idea that mental illness is not illness, you know, the Laingian idea that everyone around me was buying into and the notion that conformity, this was just a way of labelling people. And that whole mish-mash of ideas that came together then –

Laing, Goffman and Szasz. We later “discovered” that they had completely contradictory... But, nevertheless, at the time, it seemed to cohere.

8. Mods and Rockers

P 33-34

Probably *the* most important thing, in terms of my later career, and interest in sociology, happened, which was the ‘64/’65 Mods and Rockers “riots”. The first one was Clacton in ’64. And I remember reading [about everything, seeing some photos] and this seemed to me to be really fascinating. So I just added it on! And again, Terry didn’t query me when I said: “Look, I’ve got... This is interesting. I’ll do this as well”. So I had three studies! The one is, this Croydon study – interviews on delinquency; I’ve got vandalism; but then I’ve got this big public stuff that was going on in Clacton and Brighton and Margate, which seemed to be so interesting! ... So that’s how I got into the subject that started my academic life. It just struck me, as a series of events which entered public consciousness in such a dramatic way, that it was another thing to think about. “Attitudes to delinquency” wasn’t just what magistrates thought, in a rather dull way, were the causes, but it was rather these spectacles and the media. I suddenly got interested in the media, and became aware of British popular media, in a way that I wasn’t before. You know, started reading the *Daily Mirror*, and looking at how.

P 38-42

So I thought, first, this is a media-driven phenomenon, so I must really do a thorough job on the media, and that’s where I first started doing that. And I would go for a simple, thorough coverage. In those days, the techniques were fairly primitive, I just went to *Daily Express* cuttings offices, and I sat for hours, you know, I read everything in every paper that I could find. And then I thought, “Well...” “There will be things in the local papers”. So I, you know, I started looking again. I simply went to all these places. I had weekends by the sea in the middle of winter, in sort of boarding house/bed and breakfast places in Hastings, in Bournemouth, and Clacton and Margate, and Brighton, and all of them, sitting for hours, and days and days, in the local library or the newspaper office. Of course, you didn’t have any technology, I mean, it was just the old papers piled up in the local library. So the media part, you know, I was very much constructing things around the rather simple idea of media distortions of reality.

There wasn't yet that more complicated idea of social construction, nor, of course, the idea of narrative. It never would have occurred to me to be as relativist as that. I would never, it would never have occurred to me to say that, you know, "There's a narrative which is in the *Daily Mirror*, there's a narrative which is a sociological one, and there's a narrative which is... they all have equal worth", that sort of idea would never have struck me then (and it would strike me now as something that has to be argued with), but otherwise as just stupid, because I always had a firm sense that there was this reality, what was happening, and there were these stories. How and why these stories were constructed, this was to be studied...

Then I said, "Okay, let me then talk to the people in these places, to see how they saw it".... So I then was using the same method that I did in Croydon. I had a list of questions, a very simple interview schedule, and I would go, when I was in those weekends, I would go and talk to local police if I could, local magistrates. And then I saw that there were other actors who were important, like the shop keepers, and hotel owners, so, you know, I would just look up in a directory, "Margate Hotel Owners' Corporation", and phone up and go... and, of course, they were all too delighted to speak, because it would give them an opportunity to tell their stories and justify themselves...

Then I went down to Brighton and spent the weekend there. I was trying to interview people on the spot... with a tape-recorder. And I had some friends with me [two fellow students]... We went down to Brighton, and stayed at the most bizarre place, it was a was a place called "Little Spain", which was one of these horrible seaside resorts, little huts with names like "Toledo" and "Barcelona" and stuff! (LAUGHS) ... I roped them in to do some of the interviews for me... I got them all to just go up to somebody standing there in a crowd, and say to them, "What do you think of this?" And you can just write it down. And nobody minds you, you could be a reporter, you could be anybody. So I did a lot of that....

I had spent all of three or four Bank Holiday weekends in Brighton, particularly, and I was changing identities. I was sort of spending the night, often all the way through the night, in the clubs, or in the projects that these youth groups developed, dressed in jeans, and – what must have been rather bland version of "youth culture" clothes. And then I changed for the next day...

PT: You didn't dress as a Mod or a Rocker?

SC: No, I was never a Mod or a Rocker, but... I somehow had to find as neutral a teenage image as could be. ..

PT: And were you keeping a fieldwork diary when you were down there, then?

SC: It wasn't really a diary, it was more of an instant clarification. I think I was already getting into something which I always did afterwards, categorising immediately, not keeping sequential records, "This happened then, and then this happened then", but thinking of the world in terms of categories. I still say to my students today: "Well, just put down a list of categories. When in doubt, make a list". And, you know, I was already making a list of my "sensitising concepts", like exaggeration and distortion. I was keeping records of some of the interviews on tape, many of which I don't have any more. But I was recording them in, what I would say are theoretically informed categories, rather than recording them blankly.... Analysing it as I heard it, yes. Yes...

PT: But I mean lots of anthropologists keep sequential diaries with interpretative comments.

SC: I could have done it that way, that's true. But I think, somehow, there is something in my fascination with the theoretical concepts, rather low level/middle level ones as they were. It wasn't as if I was walking around with concepts in my head about capitalism, or modernity, but I was walking around with ideas like labelling, and social reaction, and amplification. Those ideas. So I was already, yeah, I was already recording things in those terms or immediately seeing the media as shapes, even "provokers" of a reality, rather than just simple recorders. So when I saw, when I watched newspaper reporters and photographers get kids to pose for a photo by kicking in a telephone booth, and looking at the way they took that photo, I was really, I was already observing things in terms of those categories. Yeah, I think I was. And I think that has something to do with what I said earlier, that I'm probably not very good in getting that graspable sense of the world in the way that anthropologists would do and reproduce this in field notes. I don't think I would have thought of them as field notes, I would have thought of them (to give the "worst" interpretation), as collections of observations which would fit my concepts. There were some key conceptual ways which I decided were going to be interesting, or useful, or important, and I was finding them. I don't think I was distorting, I still don't think I did

distort, nor did I ever lie or deceive, in the sense that I made something more of it or less of it than it was. But I certainly was pre-constructing things, yeah.

9. Folk Devils and Moral Panics

P 43-4, 46-8

But by that point, all sorts of other things had been happening, intellectually. The beginnings of the Deviancy Conference, and the popularisation of these ideas, and my realisation that there were other like-minded people around. When I started meeting Jock Young and Stuart Hall; I was beginning to grasp ideas around which made the Mods and Rockers part much more significant than I'd even thought of it at the time. And when I was writing the thesis, I was thinking of the concepts like "folk devils" to describe the Mods and Rockers, and moral panics to describe the reactions...

I didn't use them in the thesis... Somebody's done some rather pedantic tracing, when the word "moral panic" was first used. I never claimed to be the first person to use it. Jock used it somewhere in some earlier article, and he said he thought he got it from Leslie Wilkins, but he couldn't remember. [I thought it was McLuhan.] So there was an idea that was around that I remember we talked about. But when I came to writing the thesis, I was then much more "mature", in the sense that, you know, I had a sense of what was... I'd already taught sociology for four years by then, and I'd written stuff. I was much more self conscious about the theory...

That was when the National Deviancy Symposium started. And one of the things that was very different about it from its equivalent in America (the Americans were always surprised, they couldn't understand this), is that we had lots of social workers there. And those were the days when there was a lot of us, you know, radical political groups trying to form links with radical social work, as a movement. Then there was the idea that social work was a form of social control. ... We spoke about Laing, the other week, of psychiatry also as a form of social control, and all these rather crude ideas, I think were around at the time, and I couldn't but pick them up. And yet I think I retained enough of my social work scepticism to see that this was not the only way of looking at things. You know, I remember, distinctly, demonstrations in which people walked around with slogans like, "Social Workers are Police Without Uniforms", you remember that?... A pretty standard thing! ...

But by 1973 or so, by the time the book came out, the split in our group was already evident, between those of us who had a more anarchic, libertarian, individualistic background and interest, and those who were going much more to a structural Marxist position. So, at that point, I wrote a critique of the new criminology, dealing with just this point. I gave it some title like, "It's all right for you to talk"². This is what social workers can say to radical people who are giving them a structural explanation, and tell them: "You're just patching up the system, and you just deal with individuals, and that will never work". But there was something deeply deficient about that. I believed that then, and I believe that now... I think my views were much more, if you want, social psychological, in the theoretical sense, but also geared to individual social work, in the political sense, than those of most of the people around me.

PT: And the concept of "moral panics", I mean, when do you actually take that one on? ..

SC: Yeah. But that part I picked up from that deviancy amplification idea, which came from a very different discourse altogether. That was, you know, Leslie Wilkins with his statistics, drawing flow charts, and talking about cybernetics and negative feedback loops. You know, it was a different language to express ideas about stigmatisation and labelling. That was the convergence. The problem of deviance amplification in the generation of the moral panic". But one of the interesting points about it, which the Mods and Rockers and various forms of youth cultures illustrated, was that the effect of the moral panic was the classical labelling, stigma and amplification. Whereas as you say, I think I drew upon a rather large and eclectic lot of ideas to justify it, ideas which came straight from deviancy theory, and then all these amplification ideas and the cybernetics, feedback loop language, and all these things about disasters, the analogy with physical disasters that, you know, as false warning. It has the effect of solidifying the phenomenon. The kind of analogy that people, today, when they talk about stock markets, will use panic on the stock market when somebody says: "You must sell all those shares", it has that self-fulfilling prophecy.

So, all sorts of ideas seemed necessary at the time, to buttress each other. It seemed a time when a lot of intellectual things were converging....

PT: But the actual terms, "folk devils" and "moral panic", are those yours? Do you know where they come from?

SC: Well, I honestly don't know! They were current at the time.

10. Anti-positivism and post-modernism

P 55-57

Those were the discussions I remember having with Jock Young when we worked together on a book about the media (*The Manufacture of News*, 1973)... Yeah, we were working together, and he was, you know, more into media... I might have been slightly “more” of a social constructionist than he was. We both never would have entertained the idea that there was no access to an external reality apart from positions of power, you know, in the extreme post-structuralist, post-modernist position. We both knew that there was no point going this way...

And when, 20 years later, I got so involved in human rights work, this all became even more obvious. Our type of social critique draws its meaning, its whole legitimacy, from being able to make comparisons *that matter*, to see differences. Twenty years earlier we knew that there were patterns and differences between deviance and “images of Deviance”. The patterns then had to be explained – political interests stereotypes, racism, etc. It wasn't just all up for grabs, totally random, a sort of ontological circus, in which you just picked up whatever you wanted.

PT: Which is post-modernism, do you think?

SC: Well, I'm caricaturing it! I'm obviously caricaturing it! But, I mean, even before that post-modernist language was invented, I remember clearly, sitting with Jock for a long time, trying to sort out which positions would simply say: “Look, it's all up for grabs. There's no way of knowing what is actually going on, but they're just different narratives”. And there's nothing which would say that the narrative in the editorial in the *Daily Mirror* was any more correct than the narrative of a sociologist observing it, or the narrative of a judge, or the narrative of a policeman, or the narrative of a hotel owner. You couldn't just treat these as discreet little stories. You had to sense some pattern, and somewhere in that pattern there was... you could say things like exaggeration and distortion, because otherwise there was no way of saying distortion, if all are of equal importance.

PT: But, Stan, when did you become aware of that as a danger, moving too far in that direction?

SC: Oh, much later. Much later, I think if you really mean “danger”. All of us are in this story: well, I’m referring to the group of people with whom I was involved in the sixties. I mean this is part of a wider story, which is the anti-positivist reaction, which is complicated, because positivism has a particular meaning, in sociology, of trying to use as a model, the model of natural sciences. Whereas, in criminology it had other sort of connotations which, perhaps, I shouldn’t go into in detail. But, the attack on positivism was, essentially, an attack on the scientific notions of objectivity and neutrality, and the idea that there was “something out there”. And I think *Images of Deviance* (1971) was the popular version; my introduction to *Images* summarises all our objections to positivism, both in the sociological sense and in the narrower criminological sense. And I think ... that that kind of intellectual scepticism about the categories that were used, was all right as long as you didn’t carry it all the way to a total relativism, which led to a dead end, where some kind of commitments were made impossible because of that.

My experience of Israel, which was negative in many other ways... was very important in teaching me, in drawing me away from that extreme relativism which was hinted at in those positions. But... I find myself schizoid about ordinary crime, ... there’s a sort of social constructionism going on, which is important, and an object of study. Whereas in the Human Rights area, we’re seeing not an exaggeration, but we’re seeing a deliberate attempt to shut out the seriousness of the problem. Because in the old days we were implying that. But I think that was a romantic, and rather silly application, which was to say, “Well, look, the ruling class and the media, are exaggerating the significance of street crime, because it’s a way of drawing attention from the depredations of the powerful”, so it was crime of the powerful that was really the problem. But that’s a rather crude way of putting things. But it’s identified with, correctly, as critics point out, with a position which is saying, “Well, these other things are only moral panics, and not to be taken too seriously”.

Now what I have been doing for the last 20 years of my life, looks the opposite. Somebody pointed out to me: “Well, now you... instead of trying to dampen down moral panics, all your work on Human Rights is trying to create moral panic”. Which is correct in some way – we want to create positive moral panic. We say, “Look, here are millions

of children dying every year of measles and malaria, and easily preventable diseases, and nothing is done about it. This is objectively happening, is dreadful, and why don't you do something about it?" ...

You are [too easily] drawn into a kind of academic - into a kind of intellectual position, which you can get away with in a seminar room, but you can't get away with in the world itself, because it sounds ludicrous. And my experience with studying torture (which perhaps we'll come to), which changed me.

11. Anarchism and Colin Ward

P 66-67

When I went up to Durham, I remember joining the Tyneside Anarchist Association, which used to meet in a pub outside Newcastle. And then I, it was anarchism, which I'm still interested in, and always identify with.... Sitting in this pub, somewhere half way between Durham and Newcastle, I can't remember where it was, where they had these weekly discussions, and they were having a discussion about what rules an anarchist society would follow. And there was – a discussion about traffic lights, about, you know that's it! (LAUGHS) But actually, anarchism was very important for me. I think this is worth mentioning, that anarchism was an extremely powerful influence in those early years. For me, it signified my difference with Marxism, and also signified my interest, reignited my sense that, that bread and butter daily issues of daily life – in schools and families, and the question of psychiatry and social work – were important... I got to know, through David Downes, ... an extremely interesting person, Colin Ward? Who you probably know? ... Colin was very influential on me, because he was a lovely person, and he was a person who combined a sort of common sense scepticism about highly abstract Marxist, academic type of radicalism, with a very down to earth interest in, you know, architecture and schools and things. The first article I ever published was in Colin Ward's, *Anarchy*.

12. Jock Young and cultural theory

P 69-70

Well, not a simple "influence". He's remained a kind of counter person. I mean, in his last book, he wrote a dedication saying, "I think we must be the only two people around who ever still talk about these things". So he's always been a source of ideas, you know,

we've both been interested in the same thing. We've had differences, because when he got into his Marxist phase, I was then much more anarchist and individualistic! But we were continually, like, playing, because when he entered his Left Realist phase, I became more social constructionist, and so on. So we were always just slightly playing each other off. But he's been a constant friend, and also, not close, but somebody who's always been there, and who I worked with, and respect. .

13. Ian Taylor

His early ideas were much too Marxist for my, for my taste. And his roots in English working-class culture, I mean, I think the way he wrote about football hooliganism I found quite problematic. And when I got to writing the new edition of Folk Devils, my targets were people like him, and some elements of the Birmingham School, for over-theorising, and over-symbolising, and complicated positions, underneath which there seemed to be this something which I missed by not growing up here (and I think they stressed too much). I might be wrong about this, but, no, I don't think so – there's this kind of romanticisation of English working-class culture...

Coming from outside, and not, not having that deep English sense of history which is very striking here, to me. I didn't have that, and I didn't have any contemporary experience. I mean, I always hated, *loathed* pubs, from the beginning, and so did Ruth, and drinking, everything associated with that kind of culture was wholly alien to me. So, when... Ian [Taylor] got to theorise about territory, and football hooligans being a reaction to the bourgeoisification of the game (they were symbolically reclaiming the terraces as part of their working-class heritage against this commercial culture), that, to me, was utterly far-fetched. And I had no sympathy, theoretically, with it, and no personal empathy with the substance of the theory. And I think that's right! As far as I knew the first people to grab commercialism as supporters of football, were traditional working-class fans. I don't think there's any evidence that traditional working-class supporters don't like having seats, or would prefer not to have paper toilets - well, whatever the theory is!

14. Durham prison project and *Psychological Survival*

There was a guy called, unremarkably, John Smith, who was a lovely old-fashioned man in the old-fashioned WEA tradition in the Durham Extra-Mural Department. Someone he knew had contacts with the prison, and he was asked by the prison officers, initially, to run a course for them. And I wasn't too keen on this, but John talked me into it, and I thought it might be a good way to find out about prison. And that's where I started.

It was a revelation for me. I think it was, like, eight lectures. And I remember, particularly, being struck by a discussion on drugs, which I had with them, on about the fifth or sixth week, in which they all expressed the most conventional, censorious, anti-drug dealer. And then I had the idea, I don't know why, of going round and asking which of them took things like Valium. They all were! And the work was so stressful, and so ugly, and so, this subtly changed the discussion. And, you know, it just opened up. And the other thing that opened things up was, I showed them that Paul Newman movie, you know, the wonderful one called *Cool Hand Luke*. I don't know if you know that? It's a great prison movie, and a great scene where Paul Newman is like the rebel against the system, and he eats 50 eggs in a competition. I don't know if you've ever seen it... oh, it's just a marvellous movie. Absolutely genius. And they loved that. And we used that as a discussion about authority.

And then, somehow, that led to the project. They'd just opened the E wing, in Durham Prison. The wing was part of what was called the "Dispersal Policy", in which they were dispersing some high risk prisoners. These were the prisoners, this was after the Great Train Robbery, the Richardson Gang, the Kray Gang, that whole series of rather notorious organised crime or any murders, and the Train Robbery, and they were all put in this special prison. And John Smith, through his contacts with the prison officers, if I remember this correctly, I'm not sure that I do. John got an invitation from the Governor of the Wing, the Governor who was in charge of the Wing, who turned out to be a very liberal person, a very decent person. Jimmy G. was his name, and he could already see that the tensions building up in this place, were going to explode. They were all locked up together in this very small regime, with a large number of prison officers watching them, and that they needed some break. They weren't going to get physical breaks, because there was high security, so they weren't going to get weekend excursions to London! But they could get things like lectures.

So he asked John to find somebody in the University. John went to me. And that was the time I was getting friendly with Laurie [Taylor], and I said to Laurie, "This, this sounds interesting". And Laurie met John, and that's how we started. So there was a

course on sociology, I think, it was called something almost as boring as “Introduction to Sociology”! And so we went in (nearly each week), sometimes together, sometimes separately, taking it in turns. But we always used to meet afterwards and talk about it. And we write this history in the book. It was really very much an experience, which was quite formative, very interesting.... We taught them, well, you know, the kind of sociology that was around – Berger and Luckman, and that – and that was quite popular. And we talked about drugs, and then we started talking about prison.

We started using prison books, and that’s what really started us off in a subtle conversion of the classes into a research project, because... though they wanted to talk about sociology in general, we were pushing, Goffman and Sykes and the classic works on the sociology of inmate subculture, as a way of sort of testing their reactions. What did they think of what other people had said it was like to be in long-term prison? And some of them were deeply interested in this. But I think most of them were more interested in things which... had nothing to do with their daily life. I mean, other things to get away with. I think, you know, that is the difference which I think we’re all familiar with in other settings. Some people's way of adaptation is to colonise the setting they’re in, by getting to know it very well, getting immersed in it, and others, it’s to get away from it. You know that this was actually the tension we then used in *Escape Attempts*, that central idea of structure being made up by the bricks and mortar, and identity being made up by the cracks – the great idea that Goffman uses. And we immediately started teaching them about all this, you know. I think it was then that it became even clearer to me that what Goffman was about was not about prisons at all, it was a book about identity, a book about - it was a Durkheimian book about the power of the social structure. And that it was much more rewarding teaching these men than it was to ordinary students...

They did, did understand, intuitively, a lot of what this was about, you know, the problem of insider/outsider, you know. I suppose not so formally in the sense, I mean, they wouldn’t write an essay on Weber, but they understood, they had a sociological and a psychological sense of life, they had enormously sophisticated an experience compared to ours. They’ve lived a complicated, devious, deviant, and sometimes rather ugly lives, and they knew what it was like. And you didn’t have to explain to them things like role distance, and concealment, and irony, you know, they knew what those things were about. But gradually we tried to push it more and more into them, talking about prison...

Well, I think the stuff on time is still very good – there’s stuff in that book which I’m still attached to, because I think we identified problems which are still, if anybody

goes into prison now, to study long-term imprisonment, life imprisonment, the same question, "How do people, sentenced to 25 years, deal with it?" And the kind of joking way in which they dealt with it, like saying, when a newcomer came in and said, "Well, how am I going to deal with 25 years in prison – that's just impossible", he would sit there and he was crying. And they'd say to him, "Well, it's easy. Just do it five year at a time!" (LAUGHS) And I always remember things like that, a, a kind of ironical wisdom but also the criticism of authority...

We took notes. It was later, you know, that the whole thing fell apart, when the Home Office discovered what we were doing! But then we had a very sophisticated tape-recorder, which we hardly ever were able to use.

So we had these essays, which were not very satisfactory, always, because many of them were not good at that kind of abstract writing, for obvious reasons...

The second was diaries, and my memory is not good here... We asked them to keep diaries about what had happened during an average day, or an average week.

And the third, which became more and more important, when we severed the personal connection when the Home Office... It's a long story, most is written in that Bell and Newby book, *Doing Sociological Research*, which I think is a fairly accurate account of what happened. But then the third source became letters and that became more and more important, you know, partly because the Home Office stopped us from going in, and partly because they started a radical dispersal policy, in which the men got railroaded from one place to the other, sometimes deliberately, so they'd keep their relatives guessing. And so, you know, to keep family ties open... the mother would have to visit in the middle of Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire, at Long Larton, and then would have to go to Isle of Wight. But the men got dispersed, and some of our key informants and went to places where we couldn't get in. So we started relying on letters a lot.

And, you know, I just can't remember what happened to all those... to all those sources. But there was a fantastic amount of material, much more than we used.

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The story was about our application... It was about what we said we'd *done*, which was accurate, but what we said we were *going to do*, was rather mischievous... We were playing a political game that the Home Office, and paid a price – in the end, we were completely out-manoeuvred, because I don't think they had any intention of letting us do it anyway. But we thought that we could do it... We were going to say, "Look, this is just

a game”, and all you have to say is that you’re going to take a sample, and that you’re going to go to this prison. You know, they had a whole lot of objections, like, “You talk to X numbers of people”, “You must speak to people at different stages of their sentence”, like five years, and ten years, and 15 years. They also had this idea which we made a lot of fun of in the second edition of the book (by which time we’d lost all access), which was, you know, the term the “control group”. We said, “Well, what would be a control group?” I mean, people who are spending a long time (if you look at the question of length of time spent doing something!), the psychologist at Hull who was studying these matters (he became a big shot in the Open University), who’s a great authority on long times, was seriously suggesting doing things with firemen, as his control group. You see, you just can’t have a control group. And I think he said that the control group he was using is, in a sense, people who have been in periods of time like solitary confinement, relative (?) sensory deprivation, closeness of contact, authority strength... got, really, the basis of the Goffman type total institutions there. The comparison, if we wanted to speak of a control group the comparisons would be, you know, journalists taken hostage, for example... Well, we at least could have found them, but to take firemen! There was just nothing, not enough in common, to make it interesting as a control group. The fact that people have just worked in the same job for years and years, was not the point...

15. Israel: from Peace Now to Dai l’Kibbush

P 88-98

By a series of coincidences, like these things happen, I got an invitation to spend a sabbatical in Jerusalem. We thought, “Okay, this is a good test. Let’s see, let’s go back to the plan that we had 20 years before, when we were coming to England for a few years”. We ended up, we suddenly woke up, and we realised we’d been in England for 18 years, without ever consciously deciding that we would stay longer than the original two years...

Ruth had a large welcoming family there, and we’d never had family in England – my parents were in South Africa, Ruth’s parents were in Israel, her brother there. I did have a brother here who I’m close to, but at that stage, he was moving around the whole time. He was in Nigeria for two years, and Trinidad for two years, and so on, so it wasn’t a constant presence.

So, if I had to list things, it would be tedious but there were three or four key things. The one was I enjoyed being in Jerusalem, it's a very thrilling and exciting city. I enjoyed the weather. I was getting here, by that stage, I was just, I just got beaten down by the English weather, and just the thought of being in the sun for three-quarters of the year, and walking around barefoot, was attractive! Then the people I'd met seemed so attractive. That was another reason. We had the family around us. And I think, in a crucial way, it we had the possibility, or I sensed the possibility, of a sense of community, you know, which I'd never - in England, my community was the other rootless people...

And what Israel seemed to offer were... three dangerous things. Three things which are admirable, but are double-edged. They all have their darker side, as we've discovered in the last decade. The one is community, and a sense of belonging, which has its ugly side of tribalism and xenophobia.

Secondly there was commitment, there was some belief that you felt you could do something, you could make a change... It seemed the time when, "Peace Now", and there were possibilities of doing something. So community is number one on my list. Number two, commitment.

And number three, I think the most dangerous of all, and the one which we inherited from the sixties, was integration. That, somehow, you could put all these things together. I think that, that silly feminist slogan, "The personal into the political" summarises the worst of that ideology. Of course, there are things about the personal life which can be understood in political terms, and that's very important. The things about politics which have personal ramifications. But to say that the personal is political, just cuts off, just simplifies things so much, and I think we'd absorbed too much about this integration.

PT: And why is commitment dangerous, then?

SC: Well, because the underside of commitment is what I came to write about afterwards, in *Denial*. The underside is the feeling of self-righteousness and that what you're doing is beyond scrutiny. And that people who are not committed, are far inferior human beings. And also that your commitment is in the right commitment...

And so we went there; we decided this with great difficulty, it was a very difficult choice because, really because of the children, because it would mean, really, dislocating them from an environment in which they were quite happy... We intended to come back,

but somewhere in the course of the sabbatical, it's a complicated story, I was offered the possibility of a job there, a more permanent job. We came back here, I think we spent a few months getting ready. I can't quite remember the sequence. We sold the house, and went straight back, and then came into a career, a path of life which was to change my whole life...

The first three years were, I think '79, '80, by '81 we'd already bought a flat and committed ourselves, and in that early period things worked because, I think partly because we were so busy just getting settled down, the mechanics there. It's a difficult society. It's not at all the kind of Western Ashkenazy Jewish society which dominated our cultural imagery. It is a Levantine, Mediterranean society, where everything is a struggle.

And so we struggled to get, to find an apartment, and to get involved, and not to be ripped off, and to get a phone, and to find a place for the kids for school, and to start learning Hebrew, which was, for me, the biggest challenge. This probably, on the personal level was the *single most important reason* for me to give up – just my total inability to master the language, and the frustration that resulted from it. I mean, I did, eventually, lecture in Hebrew... But I found, every minute I had to spend learning it, I resented, and I also felt outside the society, at a personal level. So the first two years, I think, were spent, you know, doing what any immigrant does, is integrate and try and absorb, and try and learn, and try and figure out how the place works.

But gradually, and I think the turning point, politically for me, was the Lebanon War... At first, Ruth was quite involved, politically...

PT: And also, didn't she get a pottery going?

SC: Yeah. The first year she was struggling with that, because she didn't have a place where she could sell and exhibit, so she was renting from one place to another. But she was working at it, yes. You know, the kids were very unhappy, and most of our time, emotional and actual time, was spent with them, because the schools were not particularly welcoming. It's a hard society, even though they make a lot of noises about absorbing immigrants, the kids had difficulty with the language, it was an alien culture to them, much more rougher, physically...

But then something happened. At the political level, for me, round about '81, '82, '83, things happened, and at the work level, things happened. Let me start at the work level, because that's simpler. At about that point, I just realised that I had completely

romanticised the work environment that I was in. I saw these people as being another set of colleagues that I'd work with. But it turned out that their interests were really so far different from mine, their commitment to Israel was so politically different. They would think nothing to invite, senior police to come around all the time. In fact, one of the people in the Institute, I'm sure, served as a police informer. Their attitude towards war and the Army, seemed to be absolutely uncritical. .. So I found myself very unhappy at the University. I suddenly realised, after two or three years, "Here I am, in the Institute of Criminology, in a Law Faculty, and I've got nothing in common". We had a very, there were very few areas of intellectual thought that we had in common...

So life was difficult: firstly, it was a continuous struggle on the personal level, the personal family level – the language, the kids being unhappy and not fitting in. Secondly, university work was just boring and unstimulating, and I felt myself very excluded from the mainstream of intellectual life, partially because of my difficulty with the language, but I never would have had the courage to try and write an article in Hebrew, or try and intervene through a letter.

But, I think, thirdly, and most importantly in terms of my later development, it was a politicisation in a different direction. I began, and I think the war in Lebanon was crucial (and what's coming out now about Ariel Sharon confirms his role in the Sabra Shattila Massacre). My strong sense that what the Israelis were up to, was quite unjustifiable, led me to what seemed to be the main group that was active at the time, "Peace Now", which had been formed some, some years before. And I went to "Peace Now". You didn't really join, but you went along, and the meetings seemed quite democratic, although afterwards, it was easy to see that there were, there were just a few people who controlled them. And I remember... drawing up a pamphlet, which was a whole history of the Lebanese War, and how Israel got involved, and why it should not be involved, and what was going on. And I mentioned adding to one paragraph, something about the Labour Party support for Begin and Sharon. And they said, "No, no, we can't, we mustn't attack the Labour Party". And I said, "Well, why not?" I just couldn't believe that level of political cynicism. That opened my eyes to some problems which I should have understood long before..

But above all, round about that time, I could see, in the protest movement, that something which I think is absolutely true then, and it's true now (if one reads Amos Oz and people like that, writing about what's going on now). There wasn't, in these groups, a sense of being motivated by social justice. There wasn't a sense that they felt that, (1) yes,

on the balance whether they called themselves Zionists or not, but whatever the case, in the course of Zionism, some terrible injustices were done, and (2) that they could, some of them, at least, could be redressed, that there was a possibility for doing that. And that, thirdly, they shouldn't be made worse, The Palestinians shouldn't be punished over and over...

And my sense of the moral limitations of the Israeli Liberal position, really became the strongest motivating factor. Again, I was delining my identify against something. I just saw that they were very interested, and they still are, in what this does to them. Not in a general sense of social justice, not in the sense of real sympathy for the Palestinians, but, you know, in the sense of that famous Golda Meier statement, in which she blamed the Palestinians (Well, she didn't call them "Palestinians"), she said the - Palestinians don't exist. She said, "The Arabs - look what the Arabs have done to us. They're making our boys suffer, by having to go out and take part in wars". It's really was that kind of supreme kitsch. Well, there's an Israeli expression, which started quoted in my book which is "Yurim V' Bochin", which means "shooting and crying", which expresses, perfectly, that Israeli hypocrisy, that you shoot, and then afterwards you come and express great liberal noises of sympathy and regret, and how you had to do it, and how terrible you feel, and how your own exquisite moral conscience, damaged, your history as a victim tarnished. And this fed, exactly, into the kind of American Hollywood schmultz...

I discovered a lot through what seemed like one issue, one group called, "The Committee for the Friends of Bir Zeit" (which was the Palestinian University in Ramallah). But there was an issue that had come up about that time, about academic freedom, and I understand it wasn't a pure academic freedom... And it became clear that you weren't really just doing something like defending the right of lecturers to be there, of books not to be banned. This was a time when the military government were involved in direct censorship. They were actually forbidding books about the history of Zionism, they were forbidding books about Israel. "Banning books", this sounded, to me an academic freedom issue. But the ordinary Israeli university lecturer just didn't get involved.

So I got very involved with this Group, which, correctly, as its enemies pointed out, was a kind of "popular" front group for various groupings of what was then... let's say the Zionist, or the non-Zionist Left. I mean, they were very subtle. Israel is very complicated, politically, between the pro-Zionist, and anti-Zionist, and non-Zionist, and

post-Zionist, and all these positions! But anyway, I suddenly felt at home with these people. Some of them were at the University, some of them were on the peripheries of the University. They were very good people. And they became our, our friends and subcultural support for the next ten years. And we formed a group called "Dai l'Kibbush", which means "End the Occupation".

16. Israel, torture and denial

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Roundabout 1991... a whole series of allegations developed about the use of torture in interrogation of Palestinian prisoners...

And I was approached, it seemed to me by chance, on that issue, by people who had decided to start a group called "The Public Committee Against Torture in Israel". There was a leading human rights lawyer in Tel Aviv called Avigdor Feldman, a psychiatrist and an East Jerusalem based Israeli human rights lawyer, another medical doctor, somebody who'd been a nurse, another academic. A miscellaneous group of people, but all in that kind of milieu. And what was absolutely crucial for me, because as I got involved in the group, which was a lot of work, frustrating work, it also allowed me a lot of contact with Palestinians, as had the previous grouping, the Bir Zeit grouping. And through both these I got very friendly with my Palestinian counterparts working with Palestinian Human Rights organisations.

And I began to feel what was really the truth (and had been for a long time): in terms of mainstream Israeli society, the idea that I was coming back to a place where I belonged, was utterly ludicrous. In fact, I'd never felt less at home anywhere. Over those years, and over the years when we decided to leave, it was clear that not only did I not feel a community, but I'd never felt more marginal in my life. That, by being secular, by not speaking Hebrew very well, by being on the Left, by taking up the Human Rights issue seriously, by identifying with the Palestinians, by having more Palestinian or foreigners than Israeli friends (I would still say that my closer friends, over that period, were more Palestinians than Israelis). And when the Palestinian Authority got formed, I certainly knew more people there than I knew in the Israeli government.

So that led to, curiously that led back to a kind of universalism... I did feel, at that stage, that I had to find something which would combine my academic and political

backgrounds. I couldn't write about Israel. I did some writing about things like psychological barriers to peace. At the time when the Intafada started in 1987, there were a lot of professional groups – doctors, lawyers – but particularly, there was a group called “IMUT (Mental Health Workers for Peace), and I spoke at three or four of their conferences, and I wrote a piece for them on psychological barriers to peace. And so, you know, I was writing about some things in the Israeli society, which those occasions allowed. But they had no connection with what I was doing at work, they had no connection with the people I was working with, and there was certainly no integration. In the trilogy of community; commitment and integration, I felt no community. Commitment I felt only to a set of beliefs which had been defined as being on the margins of the margins. And integration, certainly not.

But through the Public Committee I got involved in the issue of torture, which is a disturbing issue, and an issue which I still am obsessed with, and I think we haven't come to terms with that... Then I met somebody called Daphna Golan, who was the Research Director for *B'Tzelem* the mainstream Israeli Human Rights organisation, and we got talking, and she asked me if I'd join with her in writing a research report about whether these allegations about the use of torture in interrogations were true. And that really set me off. We started working together in 1991. I devoted a lot of time to the report, which came out in different languages, and which was, to me, the most important bit of research that I'd ever done. It was very difficult. We had to rely on interviews that were translated...

PT: Can I just say that this is *The Interrogation of Palestinians during the Intafada: Ill-Treatment, "Moderate Physical Pressure", or Torture?* And you had that published by the Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights?

SC: Yeah. In '91, I think... It was difficult, of course, because we could only interview a small and select group. Firstly, we obviously were not going to have access to detention centres at the time that people were being interrogated, that was obviously a major problem. Secondly, we had no access to the major source of information about interrogation, which is the ICRC – the International Committee of the Red Cross – because one of the conditions in which they're allowed to examine jails and prisons, is that they don't reveal their intervention or any information at all on individual cases. (And there's a long dispute over whether this condition is worthwhile or not). And

thirdly, obviously, we were not going to get information from the authorities. We worked together with a Palestinian researcher because we didn't know Arabic. So there were major difficulties... But we ended up with a group of 41 ex-detainees (a good sampling of detainees) who our interviewer interviewed and transcribed from Arabic into English, or into Hebrew... We read the transcripts, and more than once or twice we came along with the interviewer, who we keep anonymous, because we were worried that he would get into trouble. And he still is anonymous in this. But he, obviously, had arranged to meet them through the political groups, who had an infrastructure of support, after the people had been interrogated. And I did a lot of work on the legal background, you know, because of the legal paradoxes about torture...

[An official government commission argued that] a liberal democratic State has three alternatives. The one is to just allow the Security Service to do what it likes. And they said, "Well, this is obviously totally unacceptable. No democracy can allow its security agents complete autonomy"... The second alternative is what they call the "hypocrites' way". And the hypocrites' way is to actually go along with the prohibition against torture, to actually believe that the protocols, which the Israeli government have signed, which state, clearly, that torture is not justified in *any* circumstance, whatever the case. As lawyers say, "nonderogable" it's like genocide, you can't come up with any reason. You just can't do it. And the Landau [Commission] comments: "Well, this is hypocritical. We could come out with a recommendation like that, but it would be pointless, because the agents have to use something like force". So the first way is the Fascist way, the second way is the hypocrites' way. And then they say: "Well, we'll come out with a third direction". And that is that you have some regulation.

Not total autonomy, not total prohibition, but some regulation. This regulation would put limits on the amount of force that can be used, and we will provide a list of conditions under which force can be used. Although much of this force could be psychological pressure – physical force cannot be ruled out...

So you now end up with the worst of both worlds. You end up with a high level judicial Commission [Landau], in fact, putting the stamp of approval on what the *Shabak* [Israeli Secret Service] been doing anyway. All it was doing was saying, "At least we're stopping them from lying". It's terrible, but that they had to lie. Now they can tell the truth. "Yes, we used these methods, and these methods were allowed by the Landau Commission". So we have a legitimization, and we have secrecy. We don't know what methods they used.

So working on that project absorbed me, and absorbed me in the direction that goes right back to what we talked about earlier: growing up in South Africa, and having problems of how people shut out uncomfortable knowledge. And I think, probably, instead of repeating it here, look at the preface to my book, *States of Denial*, which is a personal preface, talking about the connections between the Israel and South African experience...

I think I've always been interested in the psychological questions. But the question of causation is a different one. I think the simplest way to express it is to talk about this "atrocities triangle". There is a triangle - in one corner there are the victims, to whom things are done, and to whom bad things happen, and they're the objects of genocide or political massacre, or they become slaves, or whatever. They're the victim corner. Then there's the perpetrator corner, which is dominated by the causal question: "Why do people do terrible things?" ... So the victim and the perpetrator corner.

But I always was interested in the third corner, which is the onlooker corner. I think that's the difference... But my interest from the start was not on formal human rights agenda alone. I was always going back to my South African interest, which now was, "Well, how do the average Israelis deal with this information?" I mean, I give examples there, in a later report) of one of the interrogation centres in what was called the "*Moscobiya*" prison station opposite a Russian Orthodox Church in the centre of Jerusalem (therefore this nickname of "*Moscobiya*"). And there, people were being tortured. And in one case, somebody was tortured to death by a method called "shaking", in which they just kept held him by the lapels of his jacket, of his shoulder, and just shook him, and unfortunately for the interrogators, he had some particular bone problem, and they killed him like this. And this was happening within the distance between you and me. It was on the other side of the wall of the street. And in the cafes, people were sitting next to the *Moscobiya*, and sometimes the agents of the *Shabak* were sitting in the cafes and the bars, I kept thinking, "Well, what do these ordinary people make of what's going on in there?"

Because it's not that they don't know. And I'm going back to the crucial thing which shaped my book on denial. It's not that they don't know, in the cognitive sense. And this is closely connected with the problems of human rights' work altogether... I was sitting on a bus, and Israelis are very voluble, shouting, and having open arguments, and two people in front of me were having an argument about whether shaking a person by the lapels, was really "force" and whether it was moderate or not. Now, of course, when

that happens, then you're already in a discourse in which people are not asking whether something is bad and good, but they've certainly stopped asking *whether it* happens. They're just normalising it. They're normalising it. They say, "This is a feature of everyday life".

And we know that this is the problem... Which leads to the central problem, which is, what does this sort of information do to you? And what do you do to the information? And once I'd got that question clear I was about to start to write a book based on it, which is close enough to what I eventually did in *States of Denial*.

ENDNOTES

¹ "... deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather the consequences of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender'", Howard Becker *Outsiders* (1963) p.9.

² "It's all right for you to talk": political and sociological manifestos for social work action', in R. Bailey and M. Brake (eds), *Radical Social Work* (1975)