

In Memoriam

Mike Presdee (1944-2009) - Cultural criminologist and champion of a life less ordinary

By Keith Hayward and Jock Young

‘The most intense and productive life... takes place on the boundaries.’
Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (1941: 191)

Mike Presdee was a sociologist of international acclaim and considerable personal magnetism. His work focused on the sociology of youth and cultural criminology. He was fascinated by the way in which young people are criminalized and controlled; of youth being seen as the problem rather than young people being the locus of the problems of the system. Later in life he emerged as a key figure in the burgeoning field of cultural criminology, convinced of the impossibility of understanding crime (or any other form of human behaviour for that matter) in terms of survey data and quantitative analysis. He argued that ‘numerical life’ had little if any relationship with ‘actual life’, that there was a chronic split between academic knowledge, the gaze from above, and everyday experience and the view from below revealed by ethnography and biography. He maintained that orthodox criminology was driven by the administrative concerns of the powerful which present problems as obvious and uncontested and set the research agenda of the social scientist. Why he asks is it ‘obvious to all...that we need research into the ‘evilness’ of young people rather than the oppression of young people; the evils of drink and drugs rather than why we take substances that might even include enjoyment and the excitement of transgression’? (Presdee, 2004a). Such a power driven knowledge presents itself as part of a rational research agenda where the very presence of power is occluded. He then turns to the researchers themselves noticing their poverty of experience, their exclusion from the lived worlds of the people they research, thus neatly reversing the conventional nostrum: it is the social scientist who is marginalised from the social world rather than those deemed marginalised and objects of study.

Mike, himself, was one of those people who sometimes, whether because of class or ethnicity or migration are permanent outsiders, who never feel quite at home with the world as it is presented by authority, who find it difficult to take for granted the supposedly ‘taken for granted’ world and who, because of this, inevitably make the best sociologists and the most perceptive critics. He was born in 1944 in the English county town of Gloucester, an inland port on the banks of the River Severn. One of six children, he was the son of a telephone

engineer and grew up in a three bedroom temporary post war “prefab” house (Mike delighted in the irony that, while more vaunted “modern” housing projects came and went, his ‘ol’ prefab was still going strong’ – further evidence, if he needed any, that designers and planners rarely understand what works for everyday folk). At the age of 11 he won a place at the local grammar school. Mike, by his own account (see Presdee, 2006), heartedly disliked his school encountering not so much meritocracy but the astonishingly random way in which wealth is distributed (which kids had the bikes, the clothes, the big houses) from which his isolation in a working class community had shielded him. He describes a world where the middle class kids ‘looked different, talked different and had an air of confidence in this their rightful place in, whilst [he] would always be an outsider, an intruder in someone else’s world’ (ibid, 25). At the end of his time at school he recalls being caned for writing out a betting slip, using a copy of the Daily Mirror racing page in a Latin lesson, not sure whether it was the bet or the Mirror which incensed the teacher, or the long walk to the headmaster’s study for the caning and the lengthy sermon before punishment. When he walked out he smiled at the Latin teacher and with a touch of Alan Sillitoe, went down to the local pub, the Jet and Whittle, at lunch time and passed the bet in the toilet to the bookie’s runner. As a future criminologist he describes the seductions of crime as he tottered on the edge of delinquency and beyond. So when, at 16 he escaped school by joining the junior Royal Marines; he recalls how he was ‘saved from delinquency by becoming a delinquent for them, exercising my vice so that they could be virtuous... a legal delinquent ...instead of fighting authority I would fight for it. Or so they hoped’ (ibid, 35).

He spent six years as a marine commando, part of it in Aden (Yemen), fighting the insurrection there against British colonial rule and encountering many dreadful things which haunted him all his life. Later in his academic career, Mike would draw on these experiences in his teaching, especially when illustrating the way crime is socially constructed by the powerful. Holding students captivated, he would recount stories of going on morning foot patrol through villages that earlier had been bombarded with mortars from hillside positions, and how this forced him to reconcile his role in the destruction wrought on innocent victims in the name of imperial power. Like so many ex-soldiers he was disgusted by war but indelibly impressed by the warmth and courage of his comrades. In later life, Mike reconnected with some of his former comrades through various Marine alumni organizations, but this was a bittersweet experience and one that often evoked dark memories. Aged 22, he suffered blast damage to his arm, leg and ears, wounds that would ultimately see him invalided out of the forces and into ‘Civy Street’. Unable to find work in the U K because of his injuries he went to Canada where with poor health and wretched living conditions he contracted hepatitis and returned to England and the council estate he grew up in.

His health regained he was persuaded by a girl friend to study for teacher's training at Matlock College as part of a Labour Party special entry initiative to increase the recruitment of teachers. After six years of 'fighting and firing on the "enemy" when directed', the genteel lifestyle of teacher training college was something of a culture shock, as he recalls in his own words: 'It was all confusing. Now I had to argue without anger, reason and not hit, lose without seeking retaliation... When I had completed my application form, they had asked for my second "subject", and when I rang to ask what a subject was, they sounded incredulous' (ibid: 36). The long struggle to "become middle class" was underway. On his own admission Mike mastered aspects of life across what he described as "the great divide", but it was clear to all who knew him that his was a personality marked with indelible streaks and strands of working-classness - and it was this deep-rooted class consciousness that would subsequently shape his academic interests.

Graduating from Matlock College in 1971, Mike once again departed England's shores, this time migrating to Australia as a '£10.00 Pom'. Originally, his goal was circumspect: to find work as a teacher and develop his educational qualifications. However, as was so often the case in Mike's life, his chosen path turned out to be one with many unexpected twists and turns and the '£10.00 Pom' ended up as a government advisor and policy maker for youth and education. During almost two decades in Australia, Mike earned a reputation as both a scholar of education and youth studies, and a gritty union activist; but it was for his defence of academic research autonomy that he is most remembered in Australia. Working closely with his great friend Reece Walters, the pair took a stand against the South Australian Government who attempted to bury controversial findings from a major academic study into youth crime. By defending academic integrity and highlighting how research can be corrupted by the mobilization of political power, Mike garnered much respect from the Australian criminological community.

He returned to England in 1990, with posts first at Canterbury Christchurch University, the University of Sunderland, and finally at the University of Kent. It was during his time at Sunderland that his career took off. In particular, he carried out a number of innovative studies on youth (see e.g. Presdee 1994); writing amongst other things a series of trenchant attacks on neo-liberal social policies and in particular New Labour's neurotic obsession with anti-social behaviour (see e.g. Presdee 1990, 2009). Such concerns inevitably chimed with the emerging field of cultural criminology, which Mike had been exposed to during his frequent visits to the United States.

Cultural criminology was made for Mike and he was one of its chief architects. If traditional criminology mistakes textual dullness and robot like social actors for

objectivity, cultural criminology zooms in on the phenomenal experience of crime, victimization and punishment, stressing anger, humiliation, exuberance, excitement and fear. It reveals the energy of everyday life whether in the transgressive breaking of rules or in repressive nature of conformity and boredom. Mike Presdee's *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime* published in 2000 epitomized this. It is a firecracker of a book which focuses on every thing from hate crimes to joyriding, from knife crime to the criminalization of raves. It explores notions of transgression and resistance, drawing on the earlier cultural criminological analyses of Katz, Hebdige and Ferrell, and augmenting them with a rich mix of continental theory, including the work of Bakhtin, Deleuze, and Baudrillard. It is one of the best introductions to cultural criminology and holds students spellbound.

Outside his work on crime and carnival, Mike's contribution to cultural criminology was most apparent in two other closely interrelated areas. First, he was a passionate proponent of 'biography from below'. He was part of a generation of British criminologists entering the academy in the post 1960's with the expansion of university provision, who no longer looked down the class structure from a position of privilege, gazing with interest, sometimes charity but always social distance. Rather they spoke *for* those low in the social structure not *of* them and were aware not only of the background 'factors' of social action but the foreground rush of consciousness which gives it life and meaning. 'Cultural criminology', he wrote, should always focus on 'the pain and loss involved in all aspects of crime and criminal justice. Of lives lost and damaged through the activity we call crime. In plain terms, it strives to reclaim lives buried in graphs, statistics, league tables and performance indicators and by doing so resituate 'social justice' at the top of the crime agenda' (Presdee, 2004b: 283). Relatedly, he also advocated self reflexivity via autobiography, upholding C. Wright Mills' axiom that 'writing about the 'self' is a sociological act, an interrogating of the 'truths' of experience' (Presdee, 2004a: 44; and Presdee, 1988). Second, biography, ethnography and other such tools should be used to ensure that cultural criminology maintains focus on *everyday life*, to ensure that 'theory learns from real life experience' ('It is here, in the 'everyday' that the criminologist ought to reside - analytical yet passionate about how the 'crime' question affects us all', Presdee, 2004b: 276). Here Mike was at his analytic best - especially when highlighting the 'dynamic tension between order and disorder' that is such a feature of the social and economic structures of late modernity. The following quote exemplifies his thinking in this area:

In the background of everyday life we can hear the shrill shouts of the political classes protesting against the social activities of the dispossessed as they make clumsy attempts to control social behaviour through absurd 'antisocial behaviour' legislation. At the same time, politicians create paternalistic and protective social

policies supported by an army of social workers who set out to salve the collective guilt of the 'chattering' classes. The more politicians attempt forgiveness for their failure to achieve real change through social policy the more extreme will be the actions of those who seek more meaning in their lives than being the thankful poor. (Presdee, 2005: 81).

Presdee was very much a public intellectual frequently asked to comment on television and the radio on matters of youth, transgression and matters as diverse as arson and rugby union in his home town Gloucester. He lectured widely in Australia and Europe, and was a perennial feature at the American Society of Criminology Conference, where it has to be said, he took more pleasure from the socializing and the music than he did from many of the papers! He was one of the original associate editors of *Crime, Media, Culture*, an active member of the Critical Criminology and Criminal Justice group, and a regular contributor at the Critical Criminology Common Study Sessions, giving lectures recently at the Universities of Hamburg and Rotterdam as part of faculty exchange. He also acted as an expert witness on several sadomasochism trials. Towards the end of his life, even though his health was fading, Mike maintained an eclectic range of academic interests. He was thrilled that a longstanding interest in photography was to be realized with the publication of *Framing Crime: Cultural Criminology and the Image* (Hayward and Presdee, 2010), commenting that 'after decades of writing on culture and crime, it's great that to be at the point where cultural criminology can now bring out books on specific and very focused topics'. Sadly, he didn't live to see the book in print. His final project, to highlight the value of the French post structuralist, Georges Bataille, to cultural criminology, remained unfinished.

Mike Presdee died on the 10th of July 2009 after a three year fight against cancer, he was stoic and good humoured throughout. Near the end of his acknowledgments to *The Carnival of Crime* he apologizes to his friends for enjoying life too much and to his employers for seeming to enjoy work too little. And that was it: Mike was a *bon viveur*, an intellectual enthusiast, a proud father, an inspired writer, a bit of an agitator-a wonderful man. He leaves behind his wife Gill, four older children and stepchildren Ceinwen, Merren, Ellie and Nick, six grandchildren and his youngest daughter Hannah.

Knowing him well we feel Mike would have approved of this final quote as both an epitaph and a clarion call to all future cultural criminologists: 'We need always to remind ourselves that we are not 'pieces of nature' but have 'become' who we are and therefore are subject to change. In allowing the stories of life to include the minutest of details; in investing all stories with the description of truth; in not being judgmental; and finally in not allowing pre-existing prejudice to interfere with the stories we gather, then, and only then, will we begin to fully understand the story of crime' (Presdee 2004a: 44).

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