

South African CRIME QUARTERLY

No. 69 | 2020

On the record

Obituary for Professor Mike
Brogden – sociologist, social
historian, policing scholar,
troublemaker of sorts

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2413-3108/2020/i69a8955>

In 1991, Mike Brogden was a Visiting Professor at the then Institute of Criminology at the University of Cape Town. Recently, in the process of archiving the material pertaining to the Institute, we came across a stack of printed teaching notes for a course he convened, titled the History of Criminal Justice. It was not a course for those with short attention spans and little interest in history. The course stretched over twenty-odd lectures and the file contains 122 pages of typed notes. The subject matter was sweeping in scope and the timeline expansive: sixteenth- to nineteenth-century England. The notes illustrated that Brogden had a remarkable ability to situate conversations on crime, criminal justice and policing in the context of social history. At heart he was a social historian or an historical sociologist.

In the introductory session to the course, Brogden explained that the study of crime was a complex matter deserving of our attention. What is crime? How was the problem of crime quantified in the 17th century? What did its reporting reflect about power arrangements in society? Then followed brief histories of homicide, infanticide, suicide and ‘social crime’

throughout the three centuries. There was discussion on the social bandit (Robin Hoodism). References were made to Eric Hobsbawm and Richard Quinney. A session was devoted to witchcraft, its depiction in English law, and theoretical analyses of the phenomenon. The historical overview proceeded to touch on law enforcement, prosecution, the courts and

punishment. Law enforcement in early modern England was mapped and the models of colonial and European policing flagged along the way.

One emerges somewhat dazed from, but also dazzled by the class notes. Topics of key criminological relevance were turned into objects of deep social historical enquiry. What a project! And what an indictment on South African scholarship – 30 years later – that no such course is on offer in sociology/criminology at any of our South African universities.

A second feature of Brogden's work was that he had an uncanny ability to be ahead of the time. He engaged topics well before they were elevated to intellectual fads. His conversations on colonial policing, for example, happened a good while before comparative work on 'colonial police systems' ensued. In 1987, Brogden published a seminal piece on the origins of professional police, in which he took issue with conventional approaches to the subject matter.² He proffered instead the importance of policing experimentation in the colonies and the incorporation of those experiences back into the British police. He spoke about a feedback loop that others were yet to discover. Two years later, he would turn his attention to the origins of the South African Police (SAP), by exploring Dutch and British policing traditions in the forging of the SAP.³ That piece also reflected his taste for archival research and his fascination with the interactive influences at work between empire and colony in the shaping of police systems.

Being ahead of time, he had the good sense (together with Clifford Shearing) to engage with the SAP and South African policing well in advance of other foreign academics. His 1991 University of Cape Town visit opened up many other opportunities for engagement with the transition-era debates on policing. He was a regular participant at national conferences and workshops during the heydays of police reform.

He was appointed to the International Training Committee, a creature of the Police Board and the National Peace Accord. The Committee was tasked with rewriting the framework for police training and Brogden was a key member. As part of this project he reviewed the Police Science degree at UNISA and commented: 'The BA Police Science is like a dinosaur – all body and little brain. It reflects the thinking of a different era.' He found it curious that community policing did not feature in classroom discussions and quite 'astonishing' that the topic of race was wholly absent. 'The [UNISA BA Police Science] degree', he admonished, could not 'hope to move forward without bringing the question of race as an area of discrimination in police practice into lengthy critical discussion.'⁴ His comments rattled the SAP Training Division.

In 1993, Mike Brogden and Clifford Shearing's book, *Policing for a New South Africa*, appeared on the shelves.⁵ It exemplified the spirit of critical enquiry. The book considered the vagaries of apartheid policing before turning to a consideration of a future model of policing for South Africa. In quick succession other publications on the topic of policing followed.⁶ South African policing studies was birthed. Brogden and Shearing's template for the design of a new policing model turned out to have considerable local appeal. Later on, that very model also informed police reform debates in Northern Ireland.⁷

A third feature of the man and his work was his off-centre questioning of taken-for-granted dogmas. An illustrative example relates to his critical engagement with community-orientated policing (COP), at a time when the COP gospel was at its zenith. So too his critical investigation into the export of community policing from the global North to the South. Later still, he would question the way in which COP got mixed up with human rights discourses.

It is as if Brogden almost had an instinctive dislike for fads and fashions. His appraisal of the transplantation of community-orientated policing to transitional states provides a case in point. He mapped, in detail, the motives, processes and (ill-fated) consequences of such exports to complex places, such as Nigeria, Kenya, Malawi, and South Africa.⁸ He would find – contrary to the naïve expectation of COP as a tool for liberalising policing – that in many instances COP ‘simply served to reinforce undemocratic and oppressive structures’.⁹ Questioning taken-for-granted assumptions – that is what he did well.

After his departure from UCT, the stories about his sojourn hung in the corridors, grew tales and gathered motley hair. Two legends, in particular, stuck: it was said that he had little time for bureaucracy and administration. He took great delight in *not* reading the post that arrived on his desk. With the sweep of his left hand he would slide the unopened envelopes – containing perhaps minutes of meetings, memoranda, staff directives, administrative injunctions, parking tickets, human resources instructions, or whatever – across the width of his desk so that they would drop neatly into the bin below. He marvelled at the speed with which the bin filled up. He implored others to picture thousands of bins carrying the waste of bureaucracy to the city’s rubbish dump. ‘So much more peace of mind if one resists the temptation to open those dreaded envelopes’, he murmured.

It was said that he was an engaging but demanding guest. His tongue was not tamed enough, and he was not particularly good at reading social cues. And so, he ruffled feathers. In 1991, senior UCT Criminologists, Wilfried Schärf and Lovell Fernandez, dragged the esteemed British professor along to a high-level meeting with the Commissioner of the South African Police. The Institute of Criminology was

about to release its second report on police torture of detainees. This time, the Institute had the good sense to provide the Commissioner of Police with a copy of the report *before* its public release. The enormous fallout that followed the release of the first torture report by Don Foster, Dennis Davis and Dianne Sandler in 1987 had taught the Institute some lessons. The report had detailed widespread torture of political detainees.¹⁰ For weeks after the report’s release the Afrikaans press had questioned the ‘scientific merit’ of the study and lamented the ‘ideological bias’ of all UCT academics. The criticism from the Afrikaner establishment was bruising. At the time of the release of the second report in 1991, transitional negotiations were slowly gaining momentum and a spirit of rapprochement was about to envelop former foes. At this delicate time, Schärf and Fernandez were eager to have a respectful interaction with the apartheid police leadership about a truly difficult topic. They invited Brogden along, believing that taking along a very knowledgeable, internationally recognised professor from the UK was a good idea...

The three made their way to Wachthuis, the headquarters of the SAP, in central Pretoria. A fair bit of ceremony prevailed at police headquarters: security clearance at the front desk, careful ushering along the corridors into the epicentre of power, crisp salutes in the corridors. Then, eventually, the audience with the Commissioner. The research evidence brought by the team from Cape Town was presented. But the conversation on police torture never gained momentum – the topic was so very treacherous, and the British professor did not succeed in charming the top brass. On the contrary, apparently, he did not show enough *respect*. His tone of voice, it was said afterwards, bordered on dismissive. Not good. The party of three returned home, somewhat embattled.

There was another legend about the quirky professor: at a national conference of note, at which the future of policing in South Africa was being scoped, Brogden took up position in the aisle of the conference venue where he lay down on the floor. (He had a troubled back at the time). From that horizontal position he proceeded to participate, making interventions and raising objections to the conversations happening on the podium, whilst dozens of well-polished shoes whizzed past him. It was said that some of the delegates were peeved. Professors hailing from the heart of the empire had to act in royal fashion. They should not lie horizontal and gesticulate with floppy arms.

The stories about the British professor had reached me before we met in 1992. On his invitation, I travelled to Liverpool. The details of the arrangements were not too clear. He had a tendency to swallow his words. In addition, I struggled to decipher the drawing English that made its way over the phone: apparently, I should present a talk to his students about police reform and, in return, he would provide us with accommodation. The accommodation turned out to be a room in a colleague's house. With me in tow, Mike's tour of Liverpool's pubs was thorough. He was warm and welcoming, if rather preoccupied. A mixture of work pressure and trouble at home consumed him at the time. He was somewhat dishevelled in appearance, but that did not detract from the precision of his mind.

The 1988 book he co-authored (with Tony Jefferson and Sandra Walklate), *Introducing Policework*, remains one of the founding texts of critical police studies, providing unique insights into British police culture and establishment.¹¹ Twenty-five years later,

Brogden and Ellison published a critical commentary on contemporary developments, in *British Policing in the Age of Austerity: A postcolonial perspective*.¹² The focus of their attention was on shifts in British policing in response to economic recession and organisational cutbacks. The policing scholar, Robert Reiner, had no doubt about the importance of their work. In an editorial review of the publication he said:

This is a major achievement by two pre-eminent scholarly experts on policing. It is the first detailed analysis of the implications for policing of the post-2007 economic crash and the regime of 'austerity'. But it goes beyond this in providing an account of contemporary policing that is theoretically sophisticated, brimming with policy implications, and grounded in a deep knowledge of the research literature. It should be compulsory reading for anyone interested in policing.

Sometime in 2019, an email popped onto my screen from afar: '*Just letting you know that Mike Brogden died early this morning in his sleep*'. Not much more detail came my way. Apparently, he fell, somewhere in rural Wales, broke an arm, was hospitalised and then died. The opportunity to sit him down and do a retrospective on his life and work has been lost. Not that Mike Brogden would willingly have signed up for an '*On the Record*' kind of conversation. He was just not that kind of person.

Those interested in South African policing too should follow Reiner's advice: reading Brogden's work helps us appreciate the structural contours within which South African police and policing evolved. It allows for a comparative understanding of the idiosyncrasies (or not) of

policing under apartheid, and the challenges we confronted during that whimsical period of political transition. Brogden's scholarship served to connect the story of South African policing in complex and refreshing ways to the history of British colonial rule; to the heady shifts of post-Cold War transitions and to global shifts in governance. He deserves recognition for inserting South African policing squarely into international debates and for insisting that South African experiments in police reform were of comparative relevance elsewhere in the world.

Mike Brogden may have offended an erstwhile Commissioner of the SAP, and he should not, perhaps, have participated in a conference from a supine position in the aisle. In the bigger scheme of things, however, his legacy will continue to inspire others. Thinking off centre, being ahead of the fashionable crowd, and never forgetting historical context are fine inscriptions on a tombstone that honours the intellectual spirit of Mike Brogden.



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Notes

- 1 Erena van der Spuy is a Professor of Criminology in the Centre of Criminology at the University of Cape Town. Her work focuses on the social history of police and policing in South Africa.
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