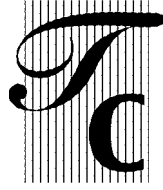


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Reassessing police and police studies

Wesley Skogan and Susan Hartnett

Community Policing, Chicago Style

New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. 258 pp.

\$35.00 (hbk)

ISBN 0-19-510560-5

George Kelling and Catherine Coles

Fixing Broken Windows

New York: The Free Press, 1996. 319 pp. \$25.00 (hbk)

ISBN 0-684-82446-9

Richard Ericson and Kevin Haggerty

Policing the Risk Society

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. 487 pp.

\$65.00 (hbk), \$24.95 (pbk)

ISBN 0-8020-4121-3 (hbk), 0-8020-7967-9 (pbk)

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It has never been easy precisely to locate the role of the police in society. The police perform many different functions, respond to numerous and diverse audiences, and comply with a range of official and unofficial dictums. Police officers must be understood, in the first instance, as agents of the state: they are, in fact, the principal and most visible reminder of the state's coercive power. However, police departments are also bureaucratic institutions, and thus convulse with complex organizational dynamics. Like all state and bureaucratic institutions, police departments interact with outside agencies in myriad and complicated ways. To make matters even

more muddled, officers possess considerable discretion to pursue variant courses of action. As a result, the informal dynamics of the police subculture may be the most determinant influence on officer behavior. In short, it is hard to explain either individual police behavior or the broader role of the police in society.

These issues—what individual officers are or should be doing, and what broader purposes policing serves—remain the subject of considerable political and academic discussion. This is partly because of recent police efforts to redefine their mission. Indeed, police departments in the western world can only remain legitimate if they genuflect before the altar of ‘community policing’. In the academy, there are two distinct efforts. One is to assess the effectiveness of community policing practices, the other to subject these practices to critical scrutiny. The first is interested more in whether community policing works (see, for example, Skolnick and Bayley, 1986; Sadd and Grinc, 1993), the other in trying to determine what community policing means (e.g. Crank, 1994; Lyons, 1997).

Two of the books reviewed here, the Skogan/Hartnett and Kelling/Coles volumes, lie in the former camp. Both sets of authors see considerable promise in the adaptation of new paradigms in policing, and seek to demonstrate how these strategies can work. They share a view of the preferred role of the police in society: to prevent crime by reducing neighborhood disorder and citizen fear. This disorder takes both physical and behavioral forms. Physical manifestations of disorder include the by-now famous ‘broken windows’ and other architectural symbols of decline. Behavioral disorder is represented by aggressive panhandling and pandering, by individuals and activities that make many residents feel unsafe. To reduce disorder is thus to simultaneously reduce fear. If police can help reduce each of these, the theory goes, they will enable law-abiding citizens to maintain a presence and diligence that will keep criminality in check. A short-term focus on disorder, then, results in a long-term reduction in crime.

The third volume discussed here, by Ericson and Haggerty, takes a decidedly different tack. For them, the police are best understood as a central cog in the ever-evolving risk society. The prevailing logic in risk society is based in insurance, i.e. the need to control reality via the calculus of permissible dangers. Policing increasingly means the contribution of data to the computations of this calculus, data ultimately used by various insurance institutions to construct risk profiles of individuals and events. Community policing manifests this trend, Ericson and Haggerty assert; it represents another instance of police entering the circuitry of a broader risk control enterprise.

These three volumes, then, provide something of an opportunity to assess policing and police studies. We learn both what many officers are doing in the field and how the police are interacting with other societal institutions. If these volumes leave us uncertain still how to comprehensively understand the role of police in society, that is because they serve ultimately to

highlight certain contradictions inherent in policing, contradictions that cannot be easily resolved in either theory or practice.

As mentioned, the Skogan/Hartnett and Kelling/Coles books share a common approach toward new practices in policing. The more carefully-reasoned and circumspect of the two, the Skogan/Hartnett volume assesses an ambitious recent effort to institute community policing in Chicago. The Chicago program included: a full-scale effort to organize numerous city agencies to address issues of disorder; the assignment of retrained officers to long-term beat assignments; overt attempts to increase police–community interaction; and an emphasis on crime analysis. The goals were thereby to increase police–community cooperation, to focus officer attention on solving particular problems of disorder and crime (with the assistance of other municipal agencies), and to liberate selected officers from the need to respond to emergency calls. The Chicago program established five ‘prototype’ districts to initially test and reformulate these reforms through trial and error.

Skogan and Hartnett’s assessment of these five experiments is cautiously optimistic. They note instances of successful police–community cooperation, an increase in inter-agency cooperation, and a reduction in some measures of fear and crime. But they also register a finding consistent with many community policing studies—that police and citizens struggle to communicate clearly. Officers often dominate discussions and focus on serious crime. Citizens, more typically interested in broader issues of neighborhood health, struggle to be heard. Even worse, those who are critical or wary of the police are marginalized. Latinos in Chicago, for example, participated hardly at all. Still, Skogan and Hartnett conclude: ‘It is hard to get community policing off the ground, but it can be made to work’ (p. 246).

The challenges of implementing community policing are apparent from this account. According to Skogan and Hartnett, it demands invoking municipal leadership to ensure inter-agency cooperation, retraining officers and supervisors, reallocating police resources, restructuring police approaches to the citizenry, and enabling even disenfranchised groups to work closely with officers. Given the difficulty of each of these alone, much less in combination, it is little wonder that so few evaluations of community policing report much change.

But Skogan and Hartnett are clearly optimistic about community policing’s chances to reduce disorder and crime. Given such an endorsement, it is little surprise to see an absence of critical commentary regarding the overall practice of community policing or just what it means for governance in contemporary society. One sees the messy politics involved in actually building trust between police and citizenry, but no contemplation about where this all might be headed. It reads more like a ‘how to’ book, a book of lessons for those who might emulate Chicago. This practical orientation is even more pronounced in the Kelling/Coles volume.

Kelling and Coles vociferously defend the aggressive, order-maintenance policing now most publicly on display in New York City. This is not surprising, given that Kelling helped design that very program. Unfortunately, their passion alone cannot obscure the epidemic of contradictions that plague this book. The most startling of these emerge when they discuss why disorder became a major municipal problem. The principal culprits, according to their account, were 'radical libertarians', whose political and legal machinations enabled de-institutionalization of troubled populations and decriminalization of their obnoxious behavior. The libertarian philosophy and its celebration of the individual regularly trumped a more 'communitarian' consensus that disorder was a social harm. They summarize:

The emphasis on individual rights tied to the culture of individualism helped spur an increase in deviant behavior on city streets, while changes in legal doctrine, especially in constitutional and criminal law, not only permitted such behavior to continue but safeguarded the rights of those behaving in a deviant fashion. (p. 42)

It is, of course, not that simple. It is hard from this perspective, for example, to understand the extensive and draconian criminalization of drug offenses in the United States, which has led to one of the highest rates of incarceration in the world. Their logic also flies in the face of the reality that it is individualistic explanations for crime that dominate public discussion, and an individualistic economic philosophy that has helped in recent years to justify a massive redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich. It also puts the 'communitarians' on the right side of the issue, even though many who might so define themselves would argue that it is social structural conditions (such as inequitable income distribution) that cause the problems of disorder and crime in the first place, and a lack of community spending that makes institutions so inhumane that the streets become a more palatable alternative.

It gets messier. Kelling and Coles simply assert a common definition of disorder across populations, and assume therefore that police and citizens will easily cooperate to wipe it out: 'The needs of the police and citizens are so congruent that they reach out to each other' (p. 95). In one deft sentence, police-community tensions evaporate. Rallied around the common and uncontested problem of disorder, cop and citizen harmoniously embrace. This is logically and empirically erroneous, as Skogan and Hartnett, among others, demonstrate. The Kelling/Coles stance is even more problematic because they are proudly touting an aggressive and interventionist police strategy; curbing disorder involves, after all, criminalizing as much of the behavior of the 'undesirables' as possible, and aggressively enforcing what criminal sanctions one can squeeze through the overly permissible courts. One wonders whether the Abner Louima case prompted Kelling and Coles to rethink their arguments.

The book also lacks any critical examination of citizen fear of disorder.

Undoubtedly, much of this fear is rooted in troubling citizen encounters with erratic and threatening behavior. But clearly fears of disorder and crime emerge from many sources (Beckett, 1997), and thus perhaps citizens should be challenged to interrogate their fears. Further, such fears, whatever their source, might spur some societal response other than more extensive criminalization and incarceration.

In short, Kelling and Coles assume away much that demands explanation, and short circuit any critical assessment of police–community relations. People certainly should not be over-afraid to use their streets or subways, and police and citizens should work together to reduce such fears. But police–citizen cooperation is never easily forged, largely because metropolitan areas are populated with different communities with different histories and priorities. Ignoring this complicated politics is good for polemics, but bad for scholarship.

Substandard scholarship does not characterize the Ericson/Haggerty volume. Theirs is a theoretically and empirically exhaustive reappraisal of policing. They draw heavily on a growing literature that highlights the significance of risk and insurance in contemporary society (e.g. Beck, 1992). They suggest that the police are increasingly best understood in terms of their place in risk society; officers today are not so much intervening in the lives of citizens as they are responding to institutional demands for knowledge regarding risk. They cite as an illustrative example the innumerable forms an officer fills out following a traffic accident, forms which are mostly destined for various external institutions.

Understanding policing thus means understanding the precise ways these external institutions structure the police's knowledge requirements and communication formats. The 'truth' of an incident is determined not by autonomous officer assessment but by the classification schemes of the required forms. Policing is also more invested in wider patterns of surveillance to help monitor and reduce risk. Officers consult in architectural design, employ sophisticated monitoring systems, identify hot spots, engage in extensive inspections, and create neighborhood watch groups, all to help ameliorate risks. By compiling and sharing information concerning the risk profiles of individuals and groups, police officers help in the overall regulation of securities, careers and identities. The use of this information is both enabled and shaped by the growth of computer-based communications systems, whose reporting formats increasingly determine the epistemology of policing.

There is little question that this represents an interesting advance in police scholarship, and little question that Ericson and Haggerty's exhaustive set of interviews and observations of Canadian police provide substantial evidence for the trends they highlight. But one wonders whether they often overstate their argument and whether they fully investigate points of tension within this transformation. They at times seem to be of two minds about the move toward risk communications. On the one hand, they regularly suggest that officer discretion is taking a back seat to risk

communications formats; they argue, for example, that ‘walking the beat is now a matter of “walking” through the reporting process with a keyboard rather than nightstick in hand’ (p. 395). At other points, however, they discuss officers who regularly ignore all the necessary forms or who simply ignore their computers and their concomitant requirements. Similarly, Ericson and Haggerty often suggest that officers only understand incidents through the classification schemes of the ever-proliferating forms, but sometimes admit that risk logic often has no effect on officer action. They argue that policing is increasingly deterritorialized through the incorporation of a centralized institutional logic into decision-making, but acknowledge that policing still involves the control of individuals in space (see Herbert, 1997). This suggests both that their claims are necessarily more temperate than they sometimes indicate, and that important lines of inquiry remain yet to be explored, lines of inquiry that would investigate the tensions between older and newer forms of policing.

These books call attention to these tensions, because they argue that policing is undergoing marked change. They indicate that external institutions—city agencies, citizen groups, insurance companies—direct police resources in particular ways. But all three books also highlight the myriad ways in which departments resist these external demands, the various tactics officers use to subvert attempted reforms. We thus encounter one of the central contradictions within policing: demands do fall onto the police from outside agents, but individual officers retain discretionary power to handle incidents however they wish. Just how this contradiction is finessed varies from department to department, from officer to officer, from incident to incident.

Policing is also caught within two other principal contradictions. One contradiction lies between the competing drives of coercion and consent. Officers are inescapably agents of the state whose foundational coercive powers must always be balanced against the need to extract legitimate consent from the governed. The other contradiction lies between the desire to meet the particularized desires of individual citizens and groups, and the sometimes conflicting institutional demand to treat all equally under the law. The transformations of policing that these volumes describe, especially community policing, appear to represent a push toward more particularized strategies designed to win greater consent from the populace. However, the coercive core of the police cannot be whisked away by any public relations campaign or by greater demands from insurance agencies. And particularized strategies may end up, *a la* Abner Louima, prioritizing one group’s demands over another’s, and thus stimulate public demands for greater measures to ensure equal protection.

These contradictions leave police scholars perpetually tracking a moving target. Transformations of policing may in fact be occurring, as these authors argue. But the tensions the central contradictions of policing generate can only temporarily be assuaged, and thus the long-term viability of these various transformations remains an open empirical question.

Continued critical scrutiny of the police's role in society remains, therefore, both a challenge and a necessity.

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