

The problem is not police training, police diversity, or police methods. The problem is the dramatic and unprecedented expansion and intensity of policing in the last forty years, a fundamental shift in the role of police in society. The problem is policing itself.

Alex S. Vitale

The End of Policing

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The Police Are Not Here to Protect You

The police exist to keep us safe, or so we are told by mainstream media and popular culture. TV shows exaggerate the amount of serious crime and the nature of what most police officers actually do all day. Crime control is a small part of policing, and it always has been.

Felony arrests of any kind are a rarity for uniformed officers, with most making no more than one a year. When a patrol officer actually apprehends a violent criminal in the act, it is a major moment in their career. The bulk of police officers work in patrol. They take reports, engage in random patrol, address parking and driving violations and noise complaints, issue tickets, and make misdemeanor arrests for drinking in public, possession of small amounts of drugs, or the vague “disorderly conduct.” Officers I’ve shadowed on patrol describe their days as “99 percent boredom and 1 percent sheer terror”—and even that 1 percent is a bit of an exaggeration for most officers.

Even detectives (who make up only about 15 percent of police forces) spend most of their time taking reports of crimes that they will never solve—and in many cases will never even investigate. There is no possible way for police to investigate every reported crime. Even homicide investigations can be brought to a quick conclusion if no clear suspect is identified within two days, as the television reality show *The First 48* emphasizes. Burglaries and larcenies are even less likely to be investigated thoroughly, or at all. Most crimes that are investigated are not solved.

The Liberal View of Policing

I grew up on shows like *Adam-12*, which portrayed police as dispassionate enforcers of the law. Hollywood, in the sixties and seventies, was helping the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) manufacture a professional image for itself in the wake of the 1965 Watts riots. Today, we are awash in police dramas and reality TV shows with a similar ethos and purpose. Some are more nuanced than others, but by and large these shows portray the police as struggling to fight crime in a complex and at times morally contradictory environment. Even when police are portrayed as engaging in corrupt or brutal behavior, as in *Dirty Harry* or *The Shield*, it is understood that their primary motivation is to get the bad guys.

It is largely a liberal fantasy that the police exist to protect us from the bad guys. As the veteran police scholar David Bayley argues,

The police do not prevent crime. This is one of the best kept secrets of modern life. Experts know it, the police know it, but the public does not know it. Yet the police pretend that they are society's best defense against crime and continually argue that if they are given more resources, especially personnel, they will be able to protect communities against crime. This is a myth.¹

Bayley goes on to point out that there is no correlation between the number of police and crime rates.

Liberals think of the police as the legitimate mechanism for using force in the interests of the whole society. For them, the state, through elections and other democratic processes, represents the general will of society as well as any system could; those who act against those interests, therefore, should face the police. The police must maintain their public legitimacy by acting in a way that the public respects and is in keeping with the rule of law. For liberals, police reform is always a question of taking steps to restore that legitimacy. That is what separates the police of a liberal democracy from those of a dictatorship.

This is not to say that liberals believe that US policing is without problems. They acknowledge that police sometimes violate their principles, but see this as an individual failing to be dealt with through disciplinary procedures or improvements to training and oversight. If entire police departments are discriminatory, abusive, or unprofessional, then they advocate efforts to stamp out bias and bad practices through training, changes in leadership, and a variety of oversight mechanisms until legitimacy is reestablished. They argue that racist and brutal cops can

be purged from the profession and an unbiased system of law enforcement reestablished in the interest of the whole society. They want the police to be better trained, more accountable, and less brutal and racist—laudable goals, but they leave intact the basic institutional functions of the police, which have never really been about public safety or crime control.

Political scientist Naomi Murakawa points out that this liberal misconception led to the inadequate police and criminal justice reforms of the past.² Liberals, according to Murakawa, want to ignore the profound legacy of racism. Rather than admit the central role of slavery and Jim Crow in both producing wealth for whites and denying basic life opportunities for blacks, they prefer to focus on using a few remedial programs—backed up by a robust criminal justice system to transform black people’s attitudes so that they will be better able to perform competitively in the labor market. The result, however, is that black Americans start from a diminished position that makes them more likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system and to be treated more harshly by it. What is missing from this liberal approach is any critical assessment of what problems the state is asking the police to solve and whether the police are really the best suited to solve them.

The reality is that the police exist primarily as a system for managing and even producing inequality by suppressing social movements and tightly managing the behaviors of poor and nonwhite people: those on the losing end of economic and political arrangements. Bayley argues that policing emerged as new political and economic formations developed, producing social upheavals that could no longer be managed by existing private, communal, and informal processes.³ This can be seen in the earliest origins of policing, which were tied to three basic social arrangements of inequality in the eighteenth century: slavery, colonialism, and the control of a new industrial working class. This created what Allan Silver calls a “policed society,” in which state power was significantly expanded in the face of social upheavals and demands for justice.⁴ As Kristian Williams points out, “The police represent the point of contact between the coercive apparatus of the state and the lives of its citizens.”⁵ In the words of Mark Neocleous, police exist to “fabricate social order,” but that order rests on systems of exploitation—and when elites feel that this system is at risk, whether from slave revolts, general strikes, or crime

and rioting in the streets, they rely on the police to control those activities.⁶ When possible, the police aggressively and proactively prevent the formation of movements and public expressions of rage, but when necessary they will fall back on brute force. Therefore, while the specific forms that policing takes have changed as the nature of inequality and the forms of resistance to it have shifted over time, the basic function of managing the poor, foreign, and nonwhite on behalf of a system of economic and political inequality remains.

The Original Police Force

Most liberal and conservative academics attempt to counter this argument by pointing to the London Metropolitan Police, held up as the “original” police force. Created in 1829 by Sir Robert Peel, from whom the “Bobbies” get their name, this new force was more effective than the informal and unprofessional “watch” or the excessively violent and often hated militia and army. But even this noble endeavor had at its core not fighting crime, but managing disorder and protecting the propertied classes from the rabble. Peel developed his ideas while managing the British colonial occupation of Ireland and seeking new forms of social control that would allow for continued political and economic domination in the face of growing insurrections, riots, and political uprisings.⁷ For years, such “outrages” had been managed by the local militia and, if necessary, the British Army. However, colonial expansion and the Napoleonic Wars dramatically reduced the availability of these forces just as resistance to British occupation increased. Furthermore, armed troops had limited tools for dealing with riots and others forms of mass disorder. Too often they were called upon to open fire on crowds, creating martyrs and further inflaming Irish resistance. Peel was forced to develop a lower-cost and more legitimate form of policing: a “Peace Preservation Force,” made up of professional police who attempted to manage crowds by embedding themselves more fully in rebellious localities, then identifying and neutralizing troublemakers and ringleaders through threats and arrests. This led eventually to the creation of the Royal Irish Constabulary, which for about a century was the main rural police force in Ireland. It played a central role in maintaining British rule and an oppressive agricultural

system dominated by British loyalists, a system that produced widespread poverty, famine, and displacement.

The signal event that showed the need for a professional police force was the Peterloo Massacre of 1819. In the face of widespread poverty combined with the displacement of skilled work by industrialization, movements emerged across the country to call for political reforms. In August 1819, tens of thousands of people gathered in central Manchester, only to have the rally declared illegal. A cavalry charge with sabers killed a dozen protestors and injured several hundred more. In response, the British state developed a series of vagrancy laws designed to force people into “productive” work. What was needed was a force that could both maintain political control and help produce a new economic order of industrial capitalism.⁸ As home secretary, Peel created the London Metropolitan Police to do this. The main functions of the new police, despite their claims of political neutrality, were to protect property, quell riots, put down strikes and other industrial actions, and produce a disciplined industrial work force. This system was expanded throughout England, which was awash in movements against industrialization. Luddites resisted exploitation through workplace sabotage. Jacobins, inspired by the French Revolution, were a constant source of concern. The most threatening, however, were the Chartists, who called for fundamental democratic reforms on behalf of impoverished English workers. Local, nonprofessional constables and militias were unable to deal with these movements effectively or enforce the new vagrancy laws.⁹ At first they requested the services of the new London Police, who had proven quite capable of putting down disturbances and strikes with minimal force. That force, however, always had the patina of central government intervention, which often further inflamed movements, so eventually towns created their own full-time professional police departments, based on the London model.

The London model was imported into Boston in 1838 and spread through Northern cities over the next few decades. That model had to adapt to the United States, where massive immigration and rapid industrialization created an even more socially and politically chaotic environment. Boston’s economic and political leaders needed a new police force to manage riots and the widespread social disorder associated with the working classes.¹⁰ In 1837, the Broad Street riots involved a mob of

15,000 attacking Irish immigrants. This was quelled only after a regiment of militia, including 800 cavalry, was called onto the streets. Following this, Mayor Samuel Elliot moved to create a professional civilian police force.

New York leapfrogged over Boston, creating an even larger and more formal police force in 1844. New York was exploding with new immigrants who were being chewed up by rapid and often cruel industrialization, producing social upheaval and immiseration that was expressed as crime, racial and ethnic strife, and labor unrest. White and black dockworkers went on strike and undertook destructive sabotage actions in 1802, 1825, and 1828. There were larger waves of strikes by skilled workers being displaced by mass production in 1809, 1822, and 1829. These culminated in the formation of the Workingmen's Party in 1829, which demanded a ten-hour day, and led to the founding of the General Trade Union in 1833. Rioting that was less obviously political was widespread during this period, sometimes occurring monthly. During the 1828 Christmas riot, four thousand workers marched on the wealthy districts, beating up blacks and looting stores along the way. The night watch assembled to block them, but gave way—to the horror of the city's elite, who watched events unfold from their mansions and a party at the City Hotel. In response, newspapers began calling for a major expansion and professionalization of the watch, which ended with the formation of the police.¹¹

Wealthy Protestant nativists feared and resented the new immigrants, who were often Catholic, uneducated, disorderly, politically militant, and prone to voting Democratic. They attempted to discipline and control this population by restricting drinking, gambling, and prostitution, as well as much more mundane behaviors like how women wore their hair, the lengths of bathing suits, and public kissing.¹² The formation of the Chicago police was directly tied to such efforts. Law and Order Party mayor Levi Boone established the first “special police” force following his election in 1855 with the express intent of enforcing a variety of nativist morality laws, including restrictions on drinking. In response to the arrest of several dozen saloonkeepers, a group comprised mostly of German workers attempted to free them, leading to the Lager Beer Riots. According to historian Sam Mitrani, local elites responded by holding a “Law and Order” meeting to demand an even larger and more professional

police body. The next week the City Council responded by creating the Chicago's first official police force.¹³

It was the creation of police that made widespread enforcement of vice laws and even the criminal code possible for the first time.¹⁴ These morality laws both gave the state greater power to intervene in the social lives of the new immigrants and opened the door to widespread corruption. Vice corruption was endemic in police departments across the country. While station house basements often housed the homeless, and officers managed a large population of orphaned youth, as Eric Monkkonen points out, these efforts were primarily designed to surveil and control this population rather than provide meaningful assistance.¹⁵

America's early urban police were both corrupt and incompetent. Officers were usually chosen based on political connections and bribery. There were no civil service exams or even formal training in most places. They were also used as a tool of political parties to suppress opposition voting and spy on and suppress workers' organizations, meetings, and strikes. If a local businessman had close ties to a local politician, he needed only to go to the station and a squad of police would be sent to threaten, beat, and arrest workers as needed. Payments from gamblers and, later, bootleggers were a major source of income for officers, with payments increasing up the chain of command. This system of being "on the take" remained standard procedure in many major departments until the 1970s, when resistance emerged in the form of whistleblowers like Frank Serpico. Corruption remains an issue, especially in relation to drugs and sex work, but tends to be more isolated, less systemic, and subject to some internal disciplinary controls, as liberal reformers have worked to shore up police legitimacy.

The primary jobs of early detectives were to spy on political radicals and other troublemakers and to replace private thief catchers, who recovered stolen goods for a reward. Interestingly, very few thieves ended up getting caught by the new police. In many instances they worked closely with thieves and pickpockets, taking a cut of their earnings and acting as fences by exchanging stolen merchandise for a reward rather than having to sell the goods on the black market at a heavy discount. Early detectives like Alexander "Clubber" Williams amassed significant fortunes in this trade.¹⁶

The extent of police corruption was so great that business leaders, journalists, and religious leaders banded together to expose corruption and inefficiency and demand that police both become more professional and more effectively crack down on crime, vice, and radical politics.¹⁷ In response to this and similar efforts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, policing was professionalized through the use of civil service exams and centralized hiring processes, training, and new technology. Overt corruption and brutality were reined in and management sciences were introduced. Reformers like August Vollmer developed police science courses and textbooks, utilized new transportation and communication technologies, and introduced fingerprinting and police labs. As we will see later, many of these ideas emerged from his experiences as part of the US occupation forces in the Philippines.

From the Philippines to Pennsylvania

In some cases, early police forces were created specifically for purposes of suppressing workers' movements. Pennsylvania was home to some of the most militant unionism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Local police were too few in number and were sometimes sympathetic to the workers, so mine and factory owners turned to the state to provide them with armed forces to control strikes and intimidate organizers. The state's initial response was to authorize a completely privatized police force called the Coal and Iron Police.¹⁸ Local employers had only to pay a commission fee of one dollar per person to deputize anyone of their choosing as an official officer of the law. These forces worked directly for the employer, often under the supervision of Pinkertons or other private security forces, and were typically used as strike breakers and were often implicated as agents provocateurs, fomenting violence as a way of breaking up workers' movements and justifying their continued paychecks. The Coal and Iron Police committed numerous atrocities, including the Latimer Massacre of 1897, in which they killed nineteen unarmed miners and wounded thirty-two others. The final straw was the Anthracite Coal Strike of 1902, a pitched battle that lasted five months and created national coal shortages.

In the aftermath, political leaders and employers decided that a new system of labor management paid for out of the public coffers would be cheaper for them and have greater public legitimacy and effectiveness. The result was the creation of the Pennsylvania State Police in 1905, the first state police force in the country. It was modeled after the Philippine Constabulary, used to maintain the US occupation there, which became a testing ground for new police techniques and technologies.¹⁹ The local population resented US occupation and developed anticolonial organizations and struggles. The national police force attempted to develop close ties to local communities to allow it to monitor subversive activities. The United States also moved quickly to erect telephone and telegraph wires, to allow quick communication of emerging intelligence. When demonstrations emerged, the police, through a huge network of informants, could anticipate them and place spies and agents provocateurs among them to sow dissent and allow leaders and other agitators to be quickly arrested and neutralized.

In Pennsylvania, this new paramilitary force represented an important shift of power away from local communities. This shift unambiguously favored the interests of large employers, who had significantly more influence over state level politicians. While putatively under civilian political control, the reality was that the state police remained a major force in putting down strikes, though often with less violence and greater legal and political authority. The consequences, however, were largely the same, as they participated in strikebreaking and the killing of miners, such as in the Westmoreland County Coal Strike of 1910 and 1911. Their frequent attacks led Slovak miners to give them the nickname “Pennsylvania Cossacks” and prompted Socialist state legislator James H. Maurer to solicit, compile, and publish a huge amount of correspondence describing their heavy-handed tactics under the title *The American Cossack*.²⁰ Interestingly, many of the letters point out that the new state police routinely showed no interest in crime control, serving strictly as publicly financed strikebreakers. In 1915, the State Commission on Industrial Relations described them as

an extremely efficient force for crushing strikes, but ... not successful in preventing violence in connection with strikes, in maintaining legal and civil rights of the parties to the dispute, nor in protecting of the public. On the contrary, violence seems to increase

rather than diminish when the constabulary is brought into an industrial dispute, the legal and civil rights of the workers have on numerous occasions been violated.²¹

Jesse Garwood, a major figure in the US occupation forces in the Philippines, brought the methods of militarized espionage and political suppression to bear on Pennsylvania miners and factory workers.

These practices then fed back into domestic American policing. The most important police leader of the twentieth century, August Vollmer, after serving in the Philippines, became chief of police in Berkeley, California, and wrote the most influential textbook of modern policing. Vollmer went on to pioneer the use of radio patrol cars, fingerprinting, and other techniques now considered standard practice. Marine General Smedley Butler, who created the Haitian police and played a major role in the US occupation of Nicaragua, served as police chief of Philadelphia in 1924, ushering in a wave of technological modernization and militarized police tactics. He was removed from office after a public outcry over his repressive methods.²²

The US went on to set up additional colonial police forces in Central America and the Caribbean in the early twentieth century. Jeremy Kuzmarov documents US involvement in creating repressive police forces in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua.²³ These forces were designed to be part of a Progressive Era program of modernization and nation-building, but were quickly turned into forces of brutal repression in the service of US-backed regimes. These US-trained security forces went on to commit horrific human rights abuses, including torture, extortion, kidnapping, and mass murder.

The US continued to set up police forces as part of its foreign policy objectives throughout the postwar period. Japan, South Korea, and South Vietnam all had US-created police forces whose primary purposes were intelligence and counterinsurgency. Postwar police reformer O.W. Wilson, a colonel in the military police during World War II, was involved in the denazification of Germany following the war. Afterwards he went on to teach police science at Berkeley and was appointed Commissioner of Police in Chicago in 1960 and influenced a generation of police executives with his ideas of preventative policing.

The Texas Rangers

The US also had its own domestic version of colonial policing: the Texas Rangers. Initially a loose band of irregulars, the Rangers were hired to protect the interests of newly arriving white colonists, first under the Mexican government, later under an independent Republic of Texas, and finally as part of the state of Texas. Their main work was to hunt down native populations accused of attacking white settlers, as well as investigating crimes like cattle rustling.

The Rangers also frequently acted as vigilantes on behalf of whites in disputes with the Spanish and Mexican populations. For more than a century they were a major force for white colonial expansion pushing out Mexicans through violence, intimidation, and political interference. In some cases, whites would raid cattle from Mexican ranches and then, when Mexican *vaqueros* tried to take them back, call in the Rangers to retrieve their “stolen property.” Mexicans and Native Americans who resisted Ranger authority could be killed, beaten, arrested, or intimidated. Mike Cox describes this as nothing short of an extermination campaign in which almost the entire indigenous population was killed or driven out of the territory.²⁴

Carrigan and Webb’s *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848–1928*,²⁵ is part of an effort involving families, academics, and the larger Tejano community to uncover this hidden history that culminated in an exhibit at the Bullock State History Museum, entitled “Life and Death on the Border,” which chronicled the many abuses of Texans of Mexican heritage, who were pushed out by white settlers with the help of the Texas Rangers.²⁶ This includes the horrific 1918 massacre at Porvenir, in which Rangers killed fifteen unarmed locals and drove the remaining community into Mexico for fear of further violence. This led to a series of state legislative hearings in 1919 about extrajudicial killings and racially motivated brutality on behalf of white ranchers. Those hearings resulted in no formal changes; the graphic records of abuse were sealed for the next fifty years to avoid any stain on the Rangers’ “heroic” record.

This intense violence was in part driven by separatists among the Mexican population of Texas who were tired of the constant usurpation of

their lands, segregationist policies, and exclusion from the political process, all of which was enforced by the Rangers and local police. This movement of *sediciosos* engendered a horrific backlash that was celebrated by local newspapers: “The known bandits and outlaws are being hunted like coyotes and one by one are being killed ... The war of extermination will be carried on until every man known to have been involved with the uprising will have been wiped out.”²⁷

In the sixties and seventies, local and state elites used Rangers to suppress the political and economic rights of Mexican Americans and played a central role in subverting farmworker movements by shutting down meetings, intimidating supporters, and arresting and brutalizing picketers and union leaders.²⁸ They were also frequently called in to intimidate Mexican Americans out of voting in local elections. Most Latinos were subjected to a kind of “Juan Crow” in which they were denied the right to vote and barred from private and public accommodations such as hotels, restaurants, bus station waiting rooms, public pools, and bathrooms. The first direct assault on this system occurred in 1963 in the small farming town of Crystal City, in which Tejanos made up a majority of the population but had no political representation. The white political establishment enforced segregation, charged Latinos higher taxes, and provided them with substandard services. In 1962, local Mexican Americans began attempting to register to vote, only to be faced with harassment and intimidation from local police and employers. After an extended effort involving outside monitors, press attention, and lawsuits, they registered and, in 1963, ran a slate of candidates for the local city council. In response, the Texas Rangers undertook a program of intimidation. They tried to prevent voter rallies, threatened candidates and their supporters, and even engaged in physical attacks and arrests. In the end, because of extensive outside press attention, the Rangers had to back down and the slate swept the election, ushering in a period of greater civil rights for Mexican Americans.

In 1935 Walter Webb wrote a massive history of the Rangers called *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense* that unambiguously sang their praises and held them up as a model for American policing.²⁹ President Lyndon B. Johnson even wrote the foreword to a later edition.³⁰ Webb’s book inspired a generation of films and novels lionizing the

Rangers, culminating in the 1990s television series, *Walker, Texas Ranger*, starring right-wing martial-arts expert Chuck Norris.

The Role of Slavery

Slavery was another major force that shaped early US policing. Well before the London Metropolitan Police were formed, Southern cities like New Orleans, Savannah, and Charleston had paid full-time police who wore uniforms, were accountable to local civilian officials, and were connected to a broader criminal justice system. These early police forces were derived not from the informal watch system as happened in the Northeast, but instead from slave patrols, and developed to prevent revolts.³¹ They had the power to ride onto private property to ensure that slaves were not harboring weapons or fugitives, conducting meetings, or learning to read or write. They also played a major role in preventing slaves from escaping to the North, through regular patrols on rural roads.

While most slave patrols were rural and nonprofessional, urban patrols like the Charleston City Guard and Watch became professionalized as early as 1783. By 1831, the Charleston police had a hundred paid City Guards and sixty State Guards on duty twenty-four hours a day, including foot and mounted patrols. Enslaved people often worked away from their owners' property in warehouses, workshops, and other workplaces, as part of industrialization. This meant that large numbers of unaccompanied enslaved people could move about the city on their own as long as they had a proper pass. They could congregate with others, frequent illicit underground taverns, and even establish religious and benevolent associations, often in conjunction with free blacks which produced tremendous social anxiety among whites. Professional police were thus deemed essential. Richard Wade quotes a Charlestonian in 1845:

Over the sparsely populated country, where gangs of negroes are restricted within settled plantations under immediate control and discipline of their respective owners, slaves were not permitted to idle and roam about in pursuit of mischief. ... The mere occasional riding about and general supervision of a patrol may be sufficient. But, some more energetic and scrutinizing system is absolutely necessary in cities, where from the very denseness of population and closely contiguous settlements there must be need of closer and more careful circumspection.³²

The result, according to Wade, was “a persistent struggle to minimize Negro fraternizing and, more especially, to prevent the growth of an organized colored community.”³³ This was done through constant monitoring and inspection of the black population. The heavily armed police regularly inspected the passes of employed slaves and the papers of free blacks. Police waged a constant battle to close down underground bars, study groups, and religious gatherings. The only limit on police power was that enslaved people were someone else’s property; killing one could result in civil liability to the owner. In rural areas the transition from slave patrols to police was slower, but the basic functional connection was just as strong.³⁴

When slavery was abolished, the slave patrol system was too; small towns and rural areas developed new and more professional forms of policing to deal with the newly freed black population. The main concern of this period was not so much preventing rebellion as forcing newly freed blacks into subservient economic and political roles. New laws outlawing vagrancy were used extensively to force blacks to accept employment, mostly in the sharecropping system. Local police enforced poll taxes and other voter suppression efforts to ensure white control of the political system.

Anyone on the roads without proof of employment was quickly subjected to police action. Local police were the essential front door of the twin evils of convict leasing and prison farms. Local sheriffs would arrest free blacks on flimsy to nonexistent evidence, then drive them into a cruel and inhuman criminal justice system whose punishments often resulted in death. These same sheriffs and judges also received kickbacks and in some cases generated lists of fit and hardworking blacks to be incarcerated on behalf of employers, who would then lease them out to perform forced labor for profit. Douglas Blackmon chronicles the appalling conditions of mines and lumber camps where thousands perished.³⁵ By the Jim Crow era, policing had become a central tool of maintaining racial inequality throughout the South, supplemented by ad hoc vigilantes such as the Ku Klux Klan, which often worked closely with—and was populated by—local police.³⁶

Northern policing was also deeply affected by emancipation. Northern political leaders deeply feared the northern migration of newly freed rural

blacks, whom they often viewed as socially, if not racially, inferior, uneducated, and criminal. Ghettos were established in Northern cities to control this growing population, with police playing the role of both containment and pacification. Up until the 1960s, this was largely accomplished through the racially discriminatory enforcement of the law and widespread use of excessive force. Blacks knew very well what the behavioral and geographic limits were and the role that police played in maintaining them in both the Jim Crow South and the ghettoized North.

Political Policing in the Postwar Era

With the rise of the civil rights movement came more repressive policing. In the South police became the front line for suppressing the movement. They denied protest permits, threatened and beat demonstrators, made discriminatory arrests, and failed to protect demonstrators from angry mobs and vigilante actions, including beatings, disappearances, bombings, and assassinations. All of this occurred to preserve a system of formal racial discrimination and economic exploitation.

In Northern and Western cities the suppression of the movement sometimes took a more nuanced approach at first, but when that failed, overt violence soon followed. Many cities allowed a wide variety of protest actions to occur with only minor restrictions. Boycotts and pickets in support of Southern organizing were largely tolerated, as was protest aimed at local governments calling for jobs, education, and social services. As these movements grew and became more militant, however, they were subjected to ever more repressive tactics. New “Red Squads” were developed that gathered intelligence through informants, infiltrators, and even agents provocateurs, who actively worked to undermine groups like the Black Panthers and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Eventually local police, often working in cooperation with the FBI, undertook the overt suppression of these movements through targeted arrests on trumped-up charges and ultimately even assassinations of prominent leaders such as Fred Hampton, the Black Panther leader killed in a hail of gunfire in the middle of the night during a police raid of his Chicago apartment. The American Indian Movement and the Latino-based Brown Berets and Young Lords faced similar forms of repression.

These movements were suppressed in part based on counterinsurgency strategies that emerged out of the foreign policy of that era. From 1962 to 1974, the US government operated a major international police training initiative, staffed by experienced American police executives, called the Office of Public Safety (OPS). This agency worked closely with the CIA to train police in areas of Cold War conflict, including South Vietnam, Iran, Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil. According to internal documents, the training emphasized counterinsurgency, including espionage, bomb making, and interrogation techniques. In many parts of the world these officers were involved in human-rights abuses including torture, disappearance, and extrajudicial killings. Over \$200 million in firearms and equipment was distributed to foreign police departments and 1,500 US personnel were involved in training a million officers overseas. Even more troubling is that many of the trainers moved in large numbers into law enforcement, including the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), FBI, and numerous local and state police forces, bringing with them a more militarized vision of policing steeped in Cold War imperatives of suppressing social movements through counterintelligence, militarized riot-suppression techniques, and heavy-handed crime control.³⁷ They applied this counterinsurgency mindset to the political uprisings occurring at home.

OPS director Byron Engle testified before the Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders that “in working with the police in various countries we have acquired a great deal of experience in dealing with violence ranging from demonstrations and riots to guerrilla warfare. Much of this experience may be useful in the US.”³⁸ The result was a massive expansion of federal funding for the police under the Johnson administration. Under the guise of professionalizing the police, the federal government began spending hundreds of millions of dollars to provide police with more training and equipment with few strings attached. Unfortunately, and unsurprisingly, rather than reducing the burden of racialized policing, this new professionalization movement merely enhanced police power and led directly to the development of SWAT teams and mass incarceration.

Policing Today

The past few decades have seen a dramatic expansion in the scope and intensity of police activity. More police than ever before are engaged in more enforcement of more laws, resulting in astronomical levels of incarceration, economic exploitation, and abuse. This expansion mirrors the rise of mass incarceration. It began with the War on Crime rhetoric of the 1960s and continued to develop and intensify until today, with support from both political parties.

This increase in the power of police is tied to a set of economic and political crises. At the political level, politicians were anxious to find new ways to harness the support of white voters in the wake of the civil rights movement. As Michelle Alexander and others have pointed out, Nixon mobilized racial fears through the lens of “law and order” to convince Southern whites to vote Republican for the first time since Reconstruction. Following the disastrous defeat of Michael Dukakis in 1988 for being “soft on crime,” Democrats came to fully embrace this strategy as well, leading to disasters like Bill Clinton’s 1994 Crime Bill, which added tens of thousands of additional police and expanded the drug and crime wars.

America’s changing economic realities have played a central role in this process as well. Christian Parenti has shown how the federal government crashed the economy in the 1970s to stem the rise of workers’ power, leaving millions out of work and creating a new, mostly African American permanent underclass largely excluded from the formal economy.³⁹ In response, government mobilized at all levels to manage this new “surplus population” through intensive policing and mass incarceration. The policing of poor and nonwhite communities became much more intense. As unemployment, poverty, and homelessness increased, government, police, and prosecutors worked together to criminalize huge swaths of the population aided by ideologies like the broken-windows theory and the superpredator myth.

We cannot reduce all policing to the active suppression of social movements and the control of racial minorities. Today’s police are clearly concerned with matters of public safety and crime control, however misguided their methods are. The advent of Compstat and other management techniques are in fact designed to address serious crime problems, and significant resources go into these efforts. But this crime-fighting orientation is itself a form of social control. From Jonathan Simon’s *Governing Through Crime*⁴⁰ to Michelle Alexander’s *The New*

Jim Crow,⁴¹ there is extensive research to show that what counts as crime and what gets targeted for control is shaped by concerns about race and class inequality and the potential for social and political upheaval. As Jeffrey Reiman points out in the *Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison*, the criminal justice system excuses and ignores crimes of the rich that produce profound social harms while intensely criminalizing the behaviors of the poor and nonwhite, including those behaviors that produce few social harms.⁴² When the crimes of the rich *are* dealt with, it's generally through administrative controls and civil enforcement rather than aggressive policing, criminal prosecution, and incarceration, which are reserved largely for the poor and nonwhite. No bankers have been jailed for the 2008 financial crisis despite widespread fraud and the looting of the American economy, which resulted in mass unemployment, homelessness, and economic dislocation.

American crime control policy is structured around the use of punishment to manage the “dangerous classes,” masquerading as a system of justice. The police’s concern with crime makes their social control functions more palatable. The transition from the use of militias and military troops to civilian police was a process of engineering greater public acceptance of the social-control functions of the state, whether abroad or at home.

Today’s modern police are not that far removed from their colonialist forebears. They too enforce a system of laws designed to reproduce and maintain economic inequality, usually along racialized lines. As Michelle Alexander has put it,

We *need* an effective system of crime prevention and control in our communities, but that is not what the current system is. This system is better designed to create crime, and a perpetual class of people labeled criminals ... Saying mass incarceration is an abysmal failure makes sense, though only if one assumes that the criminal justice system is designed to prevent and control crime. But if mass incarceration is understood as a system of social control—specifically, racial control—then the system is a fantastic success.⁴³

The most damning example of this is the War on Drugs, in which millions of mostly black and brown people have been ground through the criminal justice system, their lives destroyed and their communities destabilized, without reduction in the use or availability of drugs.

Everyone wants to live in safe communities but when individuals and communities look to the police to solve their problems they are in essence mobilizing the machinery of their own oppression. While the police will often go through the motions of crime control—though not always—it is through a lens of class and race skepticism if not outright animus. While individual officers may not harbor deep biases—though many do—the institution’s ultimate purpose has always been one of managing the poor and non-white, rather than producing anything resembling true justice. It is understandable that people have come to look to the police to provide them with safety and security. Poor people in particular bear the brunt of street crime. After decades of neoliberal austerity, local governments have no will or ability to pursue the kinds of ameliorative social policies that might address crime and disorder without the use of armed police; as Simon points out, government has basically abandoned poor neighborhoods to market forces, backed up by a repressive criminal justice system. That system stays in power by creating a culture of fear that it claims to be uniquely suited to address.⁴⁴ As poverty deepens and housing prices rise, government support for affordable housing has evaporated, leaving in its wake a combination of homeless shelters and aggressive broken-windows-oriented policing. As mental health facilities close, police become the first responders to calls for assistance with mental health crises. As youth are left without adequate schools, jobs, or recreational facilities, they form gangs for mutual protection or participate in the black markets of stolen goods, drugs, and sex to survive and are ruthlessly criminalized. Modern policing is largely a war on the poor that does little to make people safer or communities stronger, and even when it does, this is accomplished through the most coercive forms of state power that destroy the lives of millions. Instead of asking the police to solve our problems we must organize for real justice. We need to produce a society designed to meet people’s human needs, rather than wallow in the pursuit of wealth at the expense of all else.

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