Police deviance

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POLICE DEVIANCE

      Concerns regarding police deviance have existed since the early days of the creation of an institutionalised force, with the 'Turf Frauds' of 1877 constituting the first major corruption scandal to hit what would become the London Metropolitan Police Service. Punch (2009: 30) defines police corruption or police deviance in the following way:

> It is the abuse of authority, of the oath of office, of trust (of fellow officers, the police organisation and the public) and of the rights of colleagues, suspects and citizens. It involves the misuse of police power and authority, utilising organisational position and resources largely to avoid preventing crime, to encourage crime by others, to engage in crime, to combat crime by illegal means or simply to exercise power for illicit ends.

Yet in keeping with the wider aims of this collection, this entry seeks to destabilise dominant and taken-for-granted notions regarding exactly what constitutes deviance. In doing so, we differentiate between police deviance on its own terms, violations of the laws, codes and regulations that govern police practice, and police practices considered deviant through the application of external norms and values (such as a conception of 'harm').

      Significantly, it is the special status of the police that converts 'ordinary crime' into corruption, given that law-breaking is committed by an individual whose *raison d'être* is to uphold those laws. A recent example of this involved a police officer being dismissed and imprisoned for having sex with a vulnerable woman after responding to a welfare call. Regarding police corruption on its own terms, there are a number of competing analytical definitions of the forms this might take. A key line of demarcation relates to whether the failure to uphold the law can be seen primarily as an individual failure, or an institutional one, relating to the organisational situation within which individual police officers are embedded.

      It is clear from studies of police deviance that the institutional features of policing are of considerable importance in understanding the existence and extent of this phenomenon. These in turn have 'organisational' and 'occupational' components. The former refers to the features inherent to policing that might promote deviant practices and includes issues relating to organisational oversight and individual autonomy. Numerous studies have revealed the extent to which policing is contingent upon the discretion of individual officers, acting as 'street-level bureaucrats', which considerably widens the scope for corrupt behaviour. Occupational deviance meanwhile refers to the 'culture of the police' and the ways in which this might promote deviance (both 'on its own terms' and by external criteria). Critical issues in this culture relate to the officers' 'sense of purpose', which may act as a justification for law-breaking, the expectation of 'solidarity' and a 'code of silence' amongst fellow officers, and cynicism accumulated from repeated exposure to the darker aspects of the human character.

      These structural components of the police officer's role in society can be seen to promote deviance in a variety of ways, as measured by official standards, regulations and laws. But police deviance can also be considered from a much more general perspective, as a component of deviant political cultures that promote inequality, restrict democratic processes and unfairly target particular groups. This relates to the 'dual purpose' of policing in class-dominated, hierarchal societies, what

Marenin (1983) referred to as 'parking tickets' and 'class repression', which is to say the police are mandated to preserve both general social order, but also to act as agents of class-control.

Such class-control is most evident in the designation of 'police property' (Lee, 1983), those at the marginal-end of societal power-structures, the poor, ethnic minorities, young people and those with non-conventional identities. Such individuals are 'disproportionately likely to be treated as suspects at each stage of the criminal justice process: stop-search, arrest, detention, charge and prosecution' (Reiner, 2010: 25). Tellingly, a recent study (Rigakos and Ergul, 2011) found an inverse correlation between trade union density and numbers of police per head of population, pointing to a link between equality, integration and the need for policing.

It is also the case that this class-repression function becomes more overt with the transition to neoliberal political economies. The social hurricane of un- and under-employment, rising inequalities and rolling back of welfare protections has necessitated a shift to a 'law and order' society, now explicitly endorsed in the UK by both major political parties. Highly unaccountable and partisan policing has characterised this period, most clearly evident in the policing of Northern Ireland and in the 1984 Miner's Strike, but also evidenced more recently in regards to the policing of and investigation in to the Hillsborough disaster, the use of violence by police officers at political protests and the infiltration of non-violent protest groups by police officers, some of whom had sexual and long term relationships resulting in families with individuals who were unaware of their true identity (sparking condemnation from a United Nations official).

Finally, it is worth noting some of the problems that exist in relation to measuring police deviance, and in holding the police to account. Reiner (2010) has noted that historically, journalists have been more likely to probe police malpractice than academics and it might be suggested that this is strongly connected to the sheer prevalence of 'embedded' police studies and the growing patronage of criminological research by the state and its agencies in terms of research funding.

We do know that in the last thirty years, the numbers of those who have died in police custody have increased; however, no police officer has ever been successfully prosecuted for these deaths, despite the existence of official investigative bodies such as the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) (Pemberton, 2005). A radical alternative would be the establishment of independent police monitoring groups (as described by Jefferson et al, 1988) to track instances of police deviance and hold up contemporary policing practices to democratic scrutiny. The recent creation of the Northern Police Monitoring Project and Tottenham Defence Campaign (the latter set up in the immediate aftermath of the August 2011 riots), allied with the existence of much longer standing groups such as the Newham Monitoring Project, indicate that spaces of resistance to police deviance continue to be found.

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