No Justice, No Police? The Politics of Protest and Social Change. Edited by Matt Clement

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The one fact about the police is that some event or ‘crisis’ will be relied upon to introduce an article or book review, ensuring its content is tied to a recent case study. Images of the Metropolitan Police arresting people of colour at a protest for holding placards that compare politicians to coconuts - and actually confiscating coconuts being used as props - provides just that. It not only informs on the relevance of this book that centralises police to state power and public order. It also explains how cultural symbols of oppression and resistance including the coconut are criminalised by police, stretching from historical foundations contextualised to racism and Othering.

The 15 chapters provide different perspectives, including important histories that counter lingering orthodox and benign views of policing currently identified in some reformist arguments. Clement (chapter one) takes us back to the formation of the London Metropolitan Police with the 1829 Act whilst Rodino (chapter nine) provides similar understanding to the violent foundations of the US police. Prabha Unnithan (chapter twelve) brings this up to date by explaining the current process and pitfalls of police reform legislation at US federal and state level. Nyamwiza (chapter two), Olende (chapter six) and Richardson (chapter ten) focus on the interconnection of racism, criminal selectivity and processes of Othering by state institutions. Drawing on some of the cruellest examples of British policing experienced by ‘black’ communities, the latter two chapters in particular act as a rebuff to those still favourably comparing British police to their US counterparts.

One of the most powerful chapters is Ken Fero’s (chapter four) on the role of Migrant Media and the United Families and Friends Campaign (UFFC). This was set up in 1996 by those who lost loved ones to state police violence. Without resistant imagery and commitment of friends and families, even the names of those killed by police would be ‘invisibilised’. This stretches from 1971 and the death of David Oluwale following a sustained campaign of violence over years by two police officers. Two thousand people later, Fero examines the process that follows police killings through the re-targeting of a victim designed to obfuscate the state’s role. Using resistant imagery, it challenges and deconstructs ‘established narratives’ manufactured by the state that protects and endorses state killings by police. The power and impact of this is explained by Fero, who movingly writes: ‘The effect of this strategy in these cases is that everyone is killed twice’. In a similar manner to other recent books, this is not only deeply depressing but a celebration of the victims that comes through the voices of family and friends who won’t be silenced.

Importantly the book moves abolitionist arguments forward in providing responses to common arguments, including: ‘who will deal with serious violence if we don’t have the police?’ and ‘but how will it work?’ Whilst many chapters answer the first of these (the police themselves are some of the main instigators of serious and organised violence), McDowell *et al*. (chapter three) provide plenty of currently operational examples, albeit positioned in the US and massive police budgets but still relevant to British policing (see response from McElhone *et al*., 2023, to Fleetwood and Lea, 2021). These vary between state and non-state control, including increased removals of police officers from schools that counters part of the schools-to-prison pipeline, and non-police mobile teams providing crisis mental health support, some of which have operated since the 1960s. The sheer examples of non-policing solutions reinforce the spider’s web of policing embedded throughout society.

The book provides a variety of interlinking discussions. Havercroft (chapter five) examines the arrogance of political theorists who, reflecting on the riots in US cities during the 1960s, effectively silenced the voices of communities within the discipline by ‘delegitimising riots’. Monti’s (chapter seven) is a somewhat gentle but important chapter that takes a journey through BLM marches in white, middle-class America that sits alongside another powerful chapter (eleven) from Coyle and Young examining Appalachian support for BLM. This is positioned to their own treatment by state institutions including resource extraction and diminishing workers’ rights. The chapter demonstrates the diversity of voices drawn from many social movements in this unique part of America.

Baba Aye (chapter thirteen) and Tenorio Tagle & Scalia (chapter fourteen) provide powerful testimony to the violent legacy of colonialism embedded in the policing that remains in spaces previously occupied by colonisers. Both demonstrate how colonial policing became useful to states seeking to maintain similar structural inequalities for their own political and economic benefit. Baba Aye focuses on Nigeria and the special anti-robbery squad (SARS) that drew protests for its murderous campaigns in the same year as BLM protests became global. Violent policing held importance during and after colonisation, including extinguishing anti-resistance movements stretching from independence to workers’ rights in newly independent states. Tenorio Tagle and Scalia meanwhile examine cultural violence from the 1418 Spanish colonisation of Mexico including the role of the Church and military that would yield political implications for the criminal justice sector, Othering and ultimate social control. These chapters also demonstrate the embedded role policing holds to neo-liberalism, shaped to fit the political economy. Georgoulas & Papanicolaou (chapter fifteen) introduce us to violent Greek policing of space that again informs on state violence, political dissent and neoliberalism, but one that hopefully offers potential for considerable resistance.

Recent books have focused on alternatives to policing including abolitionism and defunding the police. Others have drawn on critical historiographies of the police alongside emerging capitalism, criminal selectivity and its colonial and slavery links. This book unites all under the central focus of public order and social control, making it a powerful book in reminding us of the original and continuing role and function of police. Whilst some chapters are very much introductory it is perfect as an entry point for students, activists or academics

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References

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