

Metropolitan Policing in Crisis

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Abstract: Ever since the killing of George Floyd in May 2020, there has been a growth in social movements resisting aspects of policing in the US and the UK. In the UK it has evolved in particular directions in response to various controversies in policing and a growing mood to resist increasingly authoritarian legislation emerging from government, in part to repress the very movements they are bringing forth. This paper was delivered as part of an ESRC-funded 'Festival of Social Science' run at Royal Holloway University of London in November 2023 under the theme 'Is it a crime to protest?' and reflects on these trends as well as reviewing the need for a more critical turn in Criminology and Sociology.

Keywords: Policing, black lives matter, authoritarianism, double-binds, hegemony, repression.

In Criminology, there was a famous book written in the early 1980s by John Lea and Jock Young called "What is to be done about Law and Order?" (Lea and Young 1984). It was written after the 1980s uprisings – at a time when there was a lot of controversy about the police. But for some reason, even though the authors themselves were quite left-wing, it ended up being seen as a kind of justification for the police. This jarred with public perceptions as it came out in 1984 – the year that the police were becoming more militarised and politicised as they carried out government orders in policing striking miners and their communities for almost a year. So I thought, given how many questions there are about the police these days we should be more critical. This motivated me to put together 'No Justice, No Police? The politics of protest and social change' which was published by Zero Books in May 2023. I believe the more practical question, 'what is to be done about the police?' has become increasingly important; that is, people are asking those fundamental questions about 'what do the police do?' We all know that the crime clear-up rate for the British police is appalling, certainly. For sexual offences and rape in particular, we are talking about one and a half per cent conviction rates of the cases people are coming forward to report (Hohl and Stanko 2022). And, of course, we know many, many people don't come forward, precisely because they don't want to relive the trauma that they've been through – and due to the fact they have very little faith in the police's ability to prosecute. A figure of one and a half per cent of the ones they have seen is just completely dysfunctional.

Actually, when you look at the police clear-up rate for other crimes they are pretty unimpressive as well –

appallingly low. And when you get those figures it's no wonder there are increasing questions being asked about how effective the police are. In fact, in some ways the police are even asking these questions themselves. About three months ago the Met came out with a statement that they were no longer going to be attending mental health emergencies. If somebody has a mental health emergency and it has been reported via the 999 system the first port of call has always been the police. That has often had disastrous outcomes: We have all read stories about people being tasered when they are in distress, and even worse outcomes for some people, including deaths in custody. But the fact that even the police themselves have said 'we are not going to get involved in this indicates that they are asking questions themselves about the nature of their job is as a force, an agency of social control. These were some of the reasons that it was important to be asking this question.

NO JUSTICE, NO POLICE?

I called the book 'No Justice, No Police?' obviously slightly as a play on words related to the 'No Justice, No Peace' slogan that is often used on civil right protests; but also because you could argue that if the police are involved does that mean that we are not going to see social justice being an outcome, and if that is the case what should policy makers do about it? And what about this debate that is going on about the police these days around should they be defunded? Should they be abolished altogether, if so, what do we mean by that? When we say they are not fit for purpose, if we do abolish the police, or if we do severely defund the police and reallocate funding into other channels, then how are those decisions going to be made? Which bodies are going to be involved? How is accountability going to work? How can the community – us – the people involved in these processes ensure that justice

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be done? Michael Mansfield's contribution has been to emphasise that power does lie with the people essentially and that we can create bodies; we can construct systems that allow us, publically, to oversee a lot of these justice-related issues and maybe come up with more socially just outcomes than the ones that we tend to see when the police are involved (Mansfield 2023). The front cover of my book has a picture of a statue that was made of a protestor to sit on the plinth previously occupied by a statue of Edward Colston the Bristol slave trader. This was possibly the most powerful symbol, from the UK, of events that happened during the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests which echoed around the world in the wake of George Floyd's murder in May 2020. One of the themes explored in the book are the international dimensions of the BLM protests. Jen Reid, a protestor, had been photographed standing on the plinth, the sculptor made an enlarged model of her and put it up there. Of course it was done unofficially, because it was never going to be accepted by the authorities and it was removed within 24 hours, which was a real shame: Marvin Rees, the controversial Mayor of Bristol, decided it should be removed. However, it was certainly symbolic of how successful that protest was. The images of protestors dumping Colston's statue in the city dock went around the world. When Colston's statue was pulled down, one of the protestors held their elbow on the neck of the statue for eight minutes 46 seconds, the same amount of time that Derek Chauvin held George Floyd's neck when he killed him. The protest was trying to link two issues. The anti-slavery debate about Bristol's contribution to the slave trade and appropriate reparation and memorialisation of these historic events which has been controversial in the city for many years – coming together with the BLM movement into an active gesture, an active symbol of protest. That's why that is on the front cover and I think it ties into these debates and explains why the book came together. George Floyd's killing made me think I need to write something about this: Events in Bristol made me think I need to collect a lot of views and reactions to these events.

Of course, ever since then – we have seen so many more incidents that just reinforce its importance. Here we see a picture of one of the protestors at the vigil for Sarah Everard after she was killed by a serving police officer Wayne Couzens, and the marvellous policing operation carried out by the Met there in March 2021. It was absolutely shocking to see the way the officers behaved and I believe it really was the death knell for Cressida Dick. Even Boris Johnson, the PM at the time,

said that these were 'very disturbing images.' What he meant was it was very disturbing that they had been all over the media. It was not that he cared but he wanted to seem like he was in touch. Johnson told the police to hold hold an inquiry into how they policed this event. But unfortunately, the police came up smelling of roses: Cressida Dick was on the radio and the television saying 'I am so proud of my officers and the way that they policed the vigil that night,' she didn't even she didn't even have the humility, or the good sense to say 'we made a bit of a mistake, we ought to try and change our practice.' She could have just waffled in a meaningful way to sound as if she was concerned, but no, she came out and defended her officers to the hilt 'I cannot fault my gold commanders, I am so proud of how they policed the event' and maybe that was what that sealed her fate, namely her imminent departure as Metropolitan Police Commissioner.

Earlier that year, we had seen another policing operation not quite going to plan, on 6th January 2021 in the US, when Donald Trump told his supporters 'I want you to march down Pennsylvania Avenue' and attack the country's elected representatives in the Congress. Donald Trump the revolutionary, or rather the counter-revolutionary would probably be more accurate – whilst still in office, encouraging this example of mayhem which the US police were unable to control. We have seen so many examples of jobs which the police are supposedly able to do – to keep the peace - where they are having almost the opposite effect. Back in London, we have moved on from Cressida Dick now: The new Commissioner is Sir Mark Rowley, yet we are not really seeing an improvement. In fact, the bad news for the Met in particular and for UK policing in general has continued since 2021. So you have the situation where Chris Kaba was shot dead in Clapham by an armed officer, even though he wasn't even a suspect at the time according to the police information. It makes you wonder what happened with that operation, why the police needed to act in the way that they did. Since that occurred in 2022 we have had the reaction. One of the officers has been charged with murder and we have seen industrial action by the armed officers, because they are so worried about the implication that one of their officers can be held to account when somebody has been killed by them directly (Kersley 2024). They are so sure that the police should have a special set of rules where justice does not apply to them, whereas the public seem to applying an opposite pressure. That pressure has built to such an extent that the Met have made the relatively unusual call of actually naming the officer

who has been charged. We wait to see, of course, what the result of that is – if anybody ends up actually being charged and found guilty of Chris Kaba's murder. As a result the Met is in special measures, the sanction applied by the government inspectorate. We have also seen the scandal around school strip searches, in Hackney and elsewhere: It is notable the shock that people experienced on discovering how much of this had been going on. It was one thing to see the particularly horrendous example of Child Q in Hackney in 2022, a schoolgirl, and the way in which she was searched by the police; but various Freedom of Information requests eventually produced the figure that between 2019 and 2021, 5,279 children were strip searched by the force. 75% were from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic background (House of Commons Library 2022).

The sheer scale of the operation they carried out cannot possibly be justified in terms of any outcomes, any charges or anything like that. It begs more questions about the functionality of the police and what they think they are doing in situations like this, let alone the Whatapp group that was mentioned earlier containing terrible racist slurs and sexist comments that were being shared amongst officers at Charing Cross station (BBC 2022). It makes you wonder in the long term what is going to happen with Whatsapp groups, because clearly for people in positions of power, who genuinely thought their contents would never come to light because of encryption – and now in some cases they are coming out, and when they do it is just awful what we are hearing. It is always worse than you imagine, the language used, the level of comment that they come out with etc. These scandals have continued and then in 2023 we have seen the report from Baroness Casey. She is not a Baroness for nothing. She is an establishment figure who has led several public inquiries so she was trusted to do a report on the state of the Met (Casey 2023). Casey was never going to do a whitewash: She has produced a report which states that rather than just confirming the Met were institutionally racist - which a lot of people knew - she added that they are also institutionally sexist and institutionally homophobic, so the front of condemnation of the Met has been broadened. Casey has also talked a lot about the Met having a defensive bureaucratic mentality which means they are incapable of processing in a logical way the information that we, the public, are trying to give them about their problems. So it's not only that they're institutionally this, that and the other but also that they are hardwired to interpret these issues in the wrong way, quite often in an

aggressive way in terms of their reactions. So overall the dysfunctionality of the police has become more clear since the BLM movement reignited in the wake of George Floyd's killing.

THE POLITICS OF PROTEST AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The Police, Crime, Courts and Sentencing Bill has passed now. We also see growing evidence of the selectivity of policing. This highlights the issue of the under criminalisation of the crimes of the powerful (Vegh Weis 2018); we see so many examples occurring where rich and powerful people are breaking the law. Most notoriously when you get the prime minister breaking the covid laws with the 'party gate' revelations, it feels like the reason they are not being prosecuted is an example of corruption. I argue in my chapter that one of the reasons Cressida Dick kept her job when the first calls were being made for her resignation was because she agreed not to allow the Met to press charges about Johnson's role in the party gate scandal: There was a kind of corrupt *quid pro quo* going on there between the prime minister and the leader of Britain's largest police force. The criminality of the powerful seems to be a major issue, rather than the crimes of the relatively powerless which are the ones that are always focused on by the police themselves and indeed the media.

This leads to the question, do we need protest to muzzle the powerful and prevent the social harms that they are doing? We are seeing this even today with the Palestine crisis. The only weapon people have got it seems to me is more protest. I was heartened to see the protestors outside the US senate, protesting as the lawgivers voted \$14 billion extra military aid for Israel as they obviously believe they don't have enough weapons to completely finish the job. It's an obscenity. The woman who led the protests said 'we have polls that say that 66% of Americans want a ceasefire, and yet not one senator, not one congressman has stood up and said anything along those lines.' These politicians have all totally toed the line – more arms for Israel, and a blank cheque for murder, essentially. Therefore of course we need protest, because that is the only possible way to send a message to the world's leaders. Going back to the UK police the reality is that most UK forces are in special measures. There really is a crisis going on, and it is only by us keeping up the protest, keeping up the public pressure that we can see a change can occur. To quote a supreme court justice, Louis Brandeis from 1927, at the time leading up to the 1929 Wall Street Crash, just before recession came,

where he thought 'the greatest menace to freedom was an inert people'. If we are passive, if we allow these things to happen: If people are so cynical about politicians that they don't think it's important to become involved in these issues, then we end up being ourselves the menace to freedom because we are not prepared to put ourselves on the line, and therefore there isn't a force challenging the powerful and the lengths to which they are prepared to go.

Protest and policing are bound together in so many ways. We have seen how the 'folk devil' of the black mugger was created in the 1970s (Hall *et al* 2013). It was part of a moral panic about crime to justify talk of 'crime waves'. Usually these moral panics are a short-term phenomenon: They blow up and everyone talks about them for a few weeks or a few months and then they disappear and people wonder what all the fuss was about. But clearly, in terms of the criminalization of black people, on the streets that has carried on for decades and decades in both Britain and America and many other countries as well. This kind of stigmatization and criminalization of certain sections of the population continues and by its nature justifies resistance. When we look at the figures for stop and search, the fact is that, relatively speaking, Theresa May did some praiseworthy things in terms of trying to challenge some of the priorities of policing when she was Home Secretary in the 2010s. She was the one who said to the police 'I want to see your figures change so that stop and search is no longer disproportionate, with documentation to back it up.' In the end, the police didn't like it, and ever since we have had politicians and future Home Secretaries who have guaranteed that the police will be allowed to carry on with their bad practice. I don't want to be uncritical of Theresa May: After all, she was the politician who came up with the phrase 'hostile environment' in the first place to describe how she believed migrants should be treated. Ordering vans to patrol multicultural areas emblazoned with a prominent message 'Go Home'. But reality things have got a lot worse since then. Stop and search is now even more racially disproportionate than it was in the past. In the year ending 31st March 2022, there were 27.2 stop and searches for every 1,000 black people, compared with 5.6 for every 1,000 white people (Stop and search 2024). We know about the police killings. What is a new development in the last three years is that we have had a couple of prosecutions of officers: George Floyd's killer in the US, Dalian Atkinson's killers in the UK serving jail time for what they've done as well as Sarah Everard's murderer Wayne Couzens. That is a

bit of a breakthrough, especially in the case of the first two where black people have finally seen police officers in jail. Of course it does not mean that we are going to see a sea change – that we are suddenly going to see many more police in the dock answering for their crimes; but it does show the signs and shifts within the culture. New Met Commissioner Mark Rowley keeps regularly announcing how many more officers he has got with charges pending. This will carry on and more bad news for the police is going to emerge in the future. Last week we had the case revealed of the police officer from South Wales, who had been blackmailing children with the threat of revenge porn (Lewis 2024). It is quite horrendous the lengths that some officers are prepared to go.

We must remember that at the height of the BLM movement in the US, over three months from May to August 2020 more people took to the streets to protest than in the year of mass protest in 1968 (Clement 2023). Look at the figures around the UK Palestine marches at the moment we are seeing historically high levels of social protest. Understandable in many ways because the crimes people are protesting against are so horrific, but also quite heartening because it shows there is a growing social movement out there. There are still people prepared to get involved and that's what we need. In the past, the reason why the British police in particular were seen as less bad than other police forces was because they arguably policed by consent; by which was meant that people generally accepted their rule. There were always lots of problems with this formulation. As Phil Scraton put it 'consent often meant a grudging acceptance of the police presence' (Scraton 1985, 48). It didn't mean that people were delighted to see them, it just meant they thought they would have to put up with it – people were used to it. But even then you can pose the question 'Are coercion and consent opposites?' Not really, they are on a continuum: There is a coercion of consent I think you can argue in many ways. Coercion is used through the media urge to conformity, through police threats and the like to coerce people into consenting – coerce people into acquiescing. Just ask yourselves, how many more people would there be on picket lines and on the streets if there weren't all this forest of laws threatening them in all sorts of different ways. People quite rightly fear the persecution that can come out of all of this. That is why we are being coerced into this position by using these laws. Institutional racism, the label, originated in the Black Power movement: The first person to talk about institutional racism was Stokely Carmichael as he was called at the time when he wrote

the book 'Black Power' with Charles Hamilton – where he defines institutional racism and talks about it as a concept. He was very much linking it with the struggle to uproot the racist institutions that dominate our societies. He was looking a lot more broadly than just at the police when he talked about this.

US anthropologist James C Scott talked about the means people without power employ to disguise their feelings about those who dominate them, stating 'the more menacing the power, the thicker the mask' (Scott 1990 3): He is reminding us that many people will veil their true feelings of hostility in the face of overwhelming oppression being exercised which they believe they cannot openly resist. So many academics occupy themselves with devising all manner of fancy theories that explain why people accept all the miseries that our rulers inflict upon us. Why don't we revolt every day of the week? Scott's book was pointing out that there was a lot of opposition, of resentment, which doesn't always come out; because sometimes it makes sense to people, if they fear the consequences of revolting openly to mask their opposition. The more menacing the people in power, the thicker the mask of acquiescence these people put in place in order to disguise their fury and frustration at the way that they're governed. He concludes, 'Even in the relatively stable industrial democracies in which the theories of hegemony were meant to apply, their strongest formulation simply does not allow for the degree of social conflict and process that actually occurs' (Scott 1990 78). The theories of hegemony argue that we all just accept the ruling justifications and formulae, that rulers are always in control. Even they do not explain the conflict that exists. So there is lots of opposition that goes on, and the way in which we are policed actually amplifies the protest. Again the examples we have heard about the kitting or corralling of protestors, particular measures that are used often force people into more militant protest because they are literally left with nowhere to go. They can't leave the demonstration, in the 2021 Bristol protests over the Police bill the police reaction was so heavy-handed it led to more protests.

That's what Stuart Hall and his colleagues termed the 'deviancy amplification spiral' 'it will tend to produce this increase in the form of a cluster or "crime wave"'. When the "crime wave" is then invoked to justify a "control campaign" it has become a "self-fulfilling prophecy" (Hall 2013, Clement 2023 43). The more protest has gone on, the more the government is trying to use repressive laws, the more we are forced into

believing that we have nowhere else to go than actually stand up and protest. Look at the situation of the Palestinians, it couldn't be more horrendous, so those of us who support them are thinking we have got nothing else left but to protest. We have got to tell our governments that they are going about this the wrong way and we have no choice due to the sheer savagery. Not only what the Israelis are doing, but also the way they are being backed by every western government. That's what we mean when we describe it as if people are trapped in a double-bind. The police and the protestors are locked in opposition: Precisely because of the way the police feel they have to police us we have no choice but to resist. The dangers of double-binds, for the people involved 'are difficult for them to overcome precisely because their own mentality comes to bear the mark of the threat, and contributes to its recurring reproduction' (Elias 2007 114).

CONCLUSION

Policing is in crisis, particularly in London. Trust in the police is seeping away compared to the halcyon days of the 1950s. Perhaps this is best illustrated by the Met's inability to come to terms with its own institutional racism, which it still denies, despite it being over twenty years since the enquiry into the death of black teenager Stephen Lawrence when the charge was first made by Lord Macpherson. In June 2024, four officers charged with corruption in their investigation of Stephen's murder by racists were told by the Crown Prosecution Service that: "There was insufficient evidence to prove that any alleged neglect of duty on the part of the suspects was willful. There was no evidence provided to prove that the suspects acted deliberately knowing what they were doing was wrong or with reckless indifference to whether the actions were wrong.

"There was no evidence of any nefarious or improper motive on the part of any of the suspects, such as corruption, prejudice, or indifference to their duty. The alleged neglect of duty could not reach the high threshold required for the criminal offence of misconduct in public office.

"What was alleged amounted to a series of mistakes on the part of the suspects. Mistakes, even serious ones, do not reach the threshold of seriousness required for the offence". Doreen Lawrence responded: "Today's decision by the CPS marks a new low in the way the criminal justice has treated me and my family. The decision of the CPS not to prosecute the senior officers who were involved in the investigation of my

son's case is unjustifiable. The reviewed decision, issued today, makes not a single mention of racism. The decision today means – as things stand – that not a single officer will ever be held responsible in any way, shape or form for the obvious and unforgivable failings in Stephen's case. I am bewildered, disappointed, and angry at the decision. I am sure the public will be too." (Dodd 2024) Because the policing of this case was so blatantly inadequate, London Mayor Sadiq Khan has stated that the Met are obliged to resolve this issue in a way that satisfies his grieving family. They are now on notice to do so. As Baroness Lawrence states the consequences of yet another injustice are simply unacceptable.

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Received on 14-06-2024

Accepted on 10-07-2024

Published on 01-08-2024

<https://doi.org/10.6000/1929-4409.2024.13.17>

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