

## **THE POLICE: Background**

Any discussion of police work in America inevitably evokes ambivalent responses, touching, as it does, on our deeply rooted but not always shared notions of privacy and social responsibility, of individual freedom and the law, of order, of violence, and of the use and abuse of power. The role of the police has been as variously defined, historically, as our own responses, a history that has helped to shape the often frustrating and difficult roles in which policemen find themselves in this society.

During the late 1960s, when the Pittsburgh police films were made, Americans became increasingly aware of tensions and conflicts in their urban "asphalt jungles." The Vietnam war, student protests, and race riots in Detroit, Newark and other cities served to highlight these tensions and to focus attention on the figure of the urban policeman. Yet the conflicts and the antipathy toward the police were not new, nor were they to be resolved in the post-Vietnam war years. In May 1980, the worst racial and anti-police rioting in over a decade erupted in Miami, upon the acquittal of four white policemen accused in the fatal beating of a black man, Arthur McDuffy. Historically, long before the influx of blacks and Hispanic peoples into North American cities, the racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds of the police, the policed, and the police reformers played crucial roles in determining the nature and operation of the law-enforcement institution.

Towns and cities were self-policing in eighteenth-century America, following the English model. A force composed of elected, unpaid, rather unprestigious constables and night watchmen was charged with suppressing vice and debauchery, and promoting God's glory and the honor of the King. A more complex police force with mounted patrols existed only in southern cities with large slave populations, where white masters feared black uprising. In the 1830s, as cities grew rapidly, the problems of crime, vice, and disorder intensified. The flood of immigrants from Europe at this time not only increased population, but created a more complex ethnic, religious and cultural mixture in the cities. Poor Irish Catholic immigrants now shared neighborhoods with middle-class established Protestants, and in 1830 de Tocqueville noted racial tensions even in the cities of the North. Riots broke out repeatedly in the 1830s and 1840s (against immigrants, blacks, and abolitionists) in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and other major cities. The first organized American city police forces were established in the 1840s, modeled on the London police force that was created, also in response to riots, in 1829.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the distinguishing characteristic of the American police force was its close connection to the political machine. Whether Tammany Hall in New York, or the machines in Chicago, Kansas City, and elsewhere, the political patronage system provided jobs and promotions while the police delivered votes. If the ruling party was defeated, the police might have also lose their jobs. On the other hand, this system offered mobility, if not stability, to poor immigrants with few options. Often lacking education, capital and skills, newcomers welcomed these jobs, for which the primary qualification was steadfast devotion to the local political machine. By 1890 between one-half and one-third of the policemen in Chicago, Boston, Pittsburgh, and other cities were born abroad. The largest single

group consisted of Irish-Americans, who comprised one-fifth of the force in Pittsburgh, one-fourth in Chicago, and one-third in New York. The overriding criterion of political allegiance also meant that some recruits were overweight, undersize, illiterate, alcoholic, syphilitic, and even, in a Kansas City instance, wooden-legged.

Born out of the disorder and heterogeneity of the early American cities, the new police force paradoxically came to be dominated by the very immigrants upon whom the established inhabitants had wished to impose order and homogeneity. In part this arose because the upper-middle class Americans disdained the job of policeman, yet they continued to resent what they considered the immorality, drunkenness, and poverty of the immigrants who sought to join the force. Provoked by this resentment, a series of police probes and commissions in the 1890s in New York, Atlantic City, Philadelphia, and most other major cities marked the beginning of several generations of police reform movements. These early investigations found the forces not only poorly qualified, but corrupt and incompetent as well. A 1904 survey, for example, claimed that the Chicago police spent most of their time not on the streets, but in saloons, barbershops, bowling alleys, pool halls, and bootblack stands. Moreover what they chose to act upon was clearly discretionary; some gambling houses might be raided, while others ignored; some voters protected, others harassed; some civilians assisted, others clobbered; some riots suppressed, others supported.

Two issues emerge in these early probes: the problem of discretionary enforcement and of ambiguous police function. Both are related to an underlying argument about morality and values, and both have roots in the development of the police institution. The ambiguous, "catchall", responsive function of the police developed in the absence of other specialized bureaucracies in the nineteenth century. The police did not merely attempt to curb crime, but they also cleaned streets, inspected boilers, distributed supplies to the poor, accommodated the homeless, inspected vegetable markets, and operated ambulances in various cities. The idea of the policeman as an all-purpose social worker as well as law-enforcer meant that police roles, and the limit on these roles, were nowhere clearly defined. It also allowed the individual policeman great discretion to impose his own interpretations of the law and his own morality upon the public.

The immigrant Irish Catholic police morality was not, however, the same as the upper-middle and upper-class Protestant morality of the commercial and financial elites of the nation. The latter—realtors, bankers, merchants, and ministers—were the main spokesmen for police reform in the first few decades of this century. The reformers shared a resentment of the immigrants' use of public service to enhance personal mobility on the new land. They also shared an abhorrence of self-indulgence and deviance. The elimination of gambling, drinking and prostitution from their own neighborhoods was not enough; they demanded the eradication of such activities from the ethnic ghettos as well. Yet many policemen came from these ethnic neighborhoods, where such "victimless crimes" were not only accepted but often constituted part of the local culture. By demanding uniform application of the law, the reformers were at the same time seeking to impose their particular morality upon heterogeneous America.

This is, of course, still very much a problem in contemporary America, although the institution of the police has been considerably transformed. The political machines have largely collapsed, police administration is more centralized, more rigorous entrance requirements are upheld, and the common ideology is that police work provides public service rather than an avenue for individual advancement. However, the ambiguity of function persists. Policemen still spent about 80 percent of their time in non-criminal matters; domestic quarrels, traffic accidents, noisy parties, stray children, and so on. Descendants of Irish-American and other immigrant police from the early part of the century are now firmly entrenched in the forces in many cities; even in the 1960s a far greater proportion of Irish-Americans were found in the police force than in the general population. These police, however, have become part of the middle class, with values and lifestyles no longer so threatening to the older Protestant establishment. The issues of individual interpretation of laws and the imposition of morality have merely shifted, surfacing most dramatically around the millions of blacks and Hispanic people who moved to urban North America after World War II. Unlike the European immigrants of earlier decades, however, these recent immigrants have little opportunity to join the reformed police force.

The racial and ethnic composition of America's cities changed radically following the World War II. By 1965, blacks and Hispanics comprised over 25 percent of the population in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and a far greater percentage in Washington, D.C. Yet everywhere the police force remained white. In Pittsburgh, for example, blacks comprised only seven percent of the force in 1967. Until the World War II, blacks had been barred from joining the force in most southern cities, and in some northern ones as well. When blacks were later allowed to join, the reforms of the previous decades made their entry very difficult. Many were unable to meet the stiffer educational or "character" requirements, while abolition of a residency requirement meant that recruits might be sought anywhere but in the densely populated inner cities; at county fairs, at Boy Scout jamborees, on college campuses. Compounding these obstacles were feelings of resentment and rage due to a history of police harassment of blacks.

Indeed, a Los Angeles police officer told an investigating commission in the 1960s that most policemen simply did not view blacks as individuals, and so could not distinguish the law-abiding from the lawless. Exacerbating this was a shift in emphasis in the 1950s from responsive activity to crime prevention. The latter entailed new tactics such as stop-and-search, search-and-seizure, and other interventions that tread a narrow line between crime prevention and violation of civil liberties. Such tactics had severe impact in ghetto streets, where the distinction between "loitering" and socializing, for example, was thinly drawn at best. Here police discretion was most visible, most resented, and most inflammatory. In the attempt to smooth Americans into a single cultural style, the preventive posture was but another version of the earlier campaign for moral purification. Most police would bypass a rousing bingo game within the walls of an Irish or Italian club, while they would not tolerate a black teenage crap game on a side street.

The issues of police power and its limitations affect police relations with whites as well as blacks. As the Pittsburgh films show, the police can be intrusive in the lives, even in the living rooms, of arguing couples (*Three Domestic*s), or offering women advice on their boyfriends (*Vagrant Woman*). Or they may cajole a boy to inform on his companions (*The Informant*). Clearly the self-concepts of police officers and their conceptions of their roles affect the parts they choose to play in often intensely personal interactions. How are these conceptions shaped, and what do we know of their history?

It has been said that police experience a kind of "occupational paranoia." To some extent this may be inherent in their ambivalent role, at once protector and antagonist. Historically, police work was never highly esteemed in this country. Structurally, the demanding work schedule, the work itself, and the tendency for policemen to spend free time with other officers reinforce a social and spatial isolation from the community. Such isolation approaches alienation when the community culture is substantially different from one's own, and when one is not a respected local elder, for example, but a salaried stranger enforcing an abstract and perhaps resented code. The violence that sometimes arises from the encounter between the powerful uniformed stranger and the local resident often intensifies the stranger's sense of alienation, as well as rage and frustration. It is not surprising that in the mid-1960s an officer called policemen the "most downtrodden, oppressed, dislocated minority in America."

Ironically, this comment was made at a time when police were absorbed more than ever into the middle class. According to public opinion polls, police status began to rise after World War II. The shift in status reflected in the media. In the Keystone Cops films of the 1930s, police appear as lower or lower-middle-class, hefty Irish-Americans with thick brogues, living in immigrant neighborhoods and romancing with cooks and waitresses. The post-war Dagnet image, in contrast, shows accentless middle-class policemen in residential suburbs, with backyard swimming pools and college-educated wives. By the late sixties, we find Serpico, the good-hearted, intelligent cop with whom educated middle-class Americans sympathize or even identify as he struggles against a corrupt system. The same years produced a Chicago policeman's autobiography entitled *I.Pig*.

The contradictions in these images of policemen reflect ambivalences that not only affect the public's evaluation of the police, but also shape policemen's ideas about themselves. These contradictions and ambivalences undoubtedly will continue to have implications in urban streets and living rooms, as big-city police inevitably decide, in Robert Fogelson's words, "which laws to enforce, whose peace to keep, and which public to serve."

### **Bibliography:**

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