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Academic Engagement of International Policing-Reform Assistance: Putting Foucauldian Genealogy to Practical Use¹

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Dans cet article, je développe une approche pour l'engagement normatif de la part des criminologues universitaires à partir de cas d'étude de la réforme de la police internationale. En examinant quelques-unes des controverses et difficultés associées avec la réforme de la police internationale, je démontre l'utilité pratique des analyses généalogiques inspirées par l'approche foucauldienne. J'argumente que les aperçus et capacités pour la pensée globale qui sont rendus possibles par cette approche sont applicables en empruntant à la vision de Jürgen Habermas d'institutionnaliser l'espace discursif et donc l'expérimentation démocratique.

Mots clés : réforme de la police internationale, économie politique, études de la police et processus policiers, Canada, Gendarmerie royale du Canada

In this paper, I develop an approach for normative engagement by academic criminologists through the test case of international policing-reform assistance. By examining some of the known controversies and difficulties associated with international policing-reform assistance, I illustrate the practical policy utility of Foucauldian genealogical analytic inquiry. I argue that the insights and capacities for lateral thinking opened up through this approach are usefully "brought to bear" by taking a page from Jürgen Habermas to institutionalize discursive space and thereby democratic experimentalism.

Keywords: international policing reform, political economy, policing studies, Canada, Royal Canadian Mounted Police

For the academic criminologist, practical engagement is a fraught enterprise. On the one hand, the real world is not a test tube, and seeking to shape social outcomes through evidence-based intervention can lead to all manner of unintended consequences, some of them socially negative. On the other hand, the postmodern turn in social theory renders it ever more difficult to find or support universal standards

upon which to judge the normative desirability of one approach to policy making over the other. And yet, the world is obviously beset by problems that cry out for policy responses. If these responses are not offered by academics who know something about the problem and who seek to better the lot of the marginalized, then who will offer them?

All of these themes are aptly highlighted through the empirical test case of international policing-reform assistance. Western states pay out hundreds of millions of dollars annually to support policing reform abroad, often times implementing models that seem to make little sense in foreign contexts and that can have deleterious, unintended outcomes for local populations. What should the academic do about that? I will argue that, while there are many instrumental abuses of authority² and structural economic problems that arise in foreign policing-reform adventures, these problems are epiphenomena of the deeper conceptual issues that revolve around the ways in which the West thinks about policing, markets, and society as a whole. In the discussion that follows, these conceptions are highlighted through a Foucauldian genealogy of the policing concept. The knowledge revealed through a genealogical analysis calls out for institutional engagement by any policing institution that seeks to think and act beyond the limits of the present. I reflect briefly on a new project to work with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to institutionalize a discursive space in which alternative ideas might be heard, debated, and possibly selected for use by those with a mandate to choose.

International policing-reform assistance: Yesterday and today

The industrialized West has, for a long time, been hyperactive in policing reform in “societies in transition.” Indeed, modern public policing itself has its origins in the colonies, where a canny Sir Robert Peel by-passed British opposition to the development of the public police by implementing the model first in a place where the population was seen as incapable of governing themselves through British liberties: the “first colony” of Ireland (see esp. Williams 2003; Brogden 1987).

From these beginnings, the overarching objectives of international policing reform have remained constant: securing the conditions abroad that are necessary for maintaining security “at home,” particularly, as I will later develop in detail, through maintaining productive

and growing capitalist markets. These initiatives also have much in common at the micro-level: We have consistently approached the question of policing reform in terms of “rational science,” where we have attempted to build and reform policing institutions on the basis of what are considered to be (but are rarely empirically demonstrated to be) “best practices” at home (Kempa 2007). Thus, the active donor states – the United States, the United Kingdom (Brogden 2005; Ellison 2007), Canada (Donais 2005; Desroches 2005), and Australia (Goldsmith and Dinnen 2007) – progressed from exporting militaristic gendarmeries (at the outset of the twentieth century and through to World War II), through developing “professionalized” policing services (the middle decades of the twentieth century), to (more latterly) adopting community-policing models that are intended to open the public police to working with the community in varying degrees.

It is estimated that the world spends approximately \$200 billion per year on policing; as part of this, approximately one third goes towards supporting the development of “democratic,” state-driven community-policing models throughout the transitional democracies (Bayley 2006: 206). Despite these sums, the results have been ambiguous at best. What little evidence we do have would seem to indicate that the policing-reform tail cannot wag the democracy-consolidation dog: Social, political, and economic transition must take place in concert with policing reform in a cycle of mutual reinforcement (Bayley 2006); and, further, development (in the sense of basic infrastructure, health services, and economic opportunity) must precede the implementation of indigenous democratic policing reform if the latter is to function well on such mundane policing matters as crime control and property protection (Goldsmith and Dinnen 2007). Policing reform is, thus, inherently political: It is fundamentally about maintaining a particular, defined collective order; in the present case, one of liberal democracy built upon capitalist market relations. And it is here that academics focus their biting critiques of international policing-reform assistance.

The instrumental, structural, and conceptual critiques of international policing-reform assistance

To begin with the simplest set of instrumentalist points, international policing-reform assistance is big business, where a limited number of players abuse their position to turn tidy profits. David Whyte (2007), for example, details the many ways in which successful security companies drive home their bids for massive government contracts by

exploiting their contacts with power holders in government – a cosy relationship that he calls the *corporatocracy*. Further, Graham Ellison (2007) traces the ways in which American public-policing practitioners with experience in Northern Ireland subsequently went on to the private sector, marketing themselves in South Africa on the basis of their Northern Irish experience and then seeking further fortune in Asia, principally on the strength of the credibility they gained through their experience in South Africa.

Structural conflict critiques are most relevant in helping to explain why the West abandons community-policing reforms after early frustrations and falls back upon repressive modalities for controlling populations. Structural conflict critics charge that state agencies must ultimately work towards upholding the interests of capital, for the reason that the entire state system has always been dependent upon the wealth of accumulated capital (Brogden 2005; Williams 2003).

Conceptual accounts run still deeper to suggest that Western thinking about what security is and how best to institutionalize and achieve it is inevitably preconditioned by deeply held liberal capitalist assumptions about what societies are, what markets are, and how best, therefore, societies must orient themselves towards markets so as to produce political benefits for all citizens. This is problematic, not only because we are exporting our values and frameworks around the planet through stealth and by force, but also because the political economy in question is increasingly considered by many to be an imperfect vehicle for achieving human well-being. Many consider that ever-expanding capitalist markets are no longer viable in a world with limited resources and a finite capacity to absorb the waste by-products of those same markets.

Social scientists who identify with certain streams of *multidisciplinary* (Dubber and Valverde 2006) – and, perhaps even more accurately, *pre-disciplinary* (Neocleous 2006) – studies of the origins, evolution, and exercise of the governmental notion of *police power* have made much progress in tracing the ways in which particular programs for policing both reflect and support programs for political economy. Such pre-disciplinary studies of policing power trace the genealogy of how states and other governing bodies conceive the nature and purposes of policing power and have thereby institutionalized its expression over time.

The very word *genealogy* signals the central import of Foucauldian approaches to this enterprise. Foucault and his interlocutors reveal

that, throughout much of Europe, *police* historically was synonymous with *policy*: the entire domain of what the government does, in terms of exercising all the forms of its power, to ensure (its understandings) of the polity and the well-being of the people (Foucault 2007: ch. 12). As we have seen shifts in ways of thinking about society, the economy, and the polity, our definition of *good policy* has changed, and with it understandings of what *police* is.

For Foucault, the rise of the *population* and the *economy* as measurable objects is critical for the evolution of the modern policing concept. The minute Western governments, armed with the statistical sciences, started thinking of populations and economies as observable things to be governed in the details of their measurable processes, our strategies for police/policy became much more complicated. With the development of the mercantilist- and later capitalist-funded state system, the concept of police came to mean “all activities undertaken by the government towards ensuring the maintenance of growing markets” (a view embodied in the early writings of Adam Smith, for example; see Smith [1763] 1964). The concept of police was understood in these terms because it was legitimately believed that permanently growing markets would eventually produce sufficient capital to permit an enlightened state to govern in the interests of the well-being of the population and, further, that a well-distributed abundance would eliminate the impetus for violence/crime between groups. We can see how this worldview made sense in the context of a colonial world with apparently infinite physical resources.

As we moved from an industrial mercantilist to a liberal capitalist economic system, the line between public and private was drawn more clearly in our laws, with the result that policing came to be understood as the public matter of enforcing the power of law and upholding citizens’ rights (in theory, at least), while market management moved principally to the private sphere (Gill 2002; Neocleous 1998). The foundational value of liberal political theory is the conviction that private property is the space for individual liberty (as a prime motivator to draw people into productive competitive relationships) and thus it is characterized by an overarching desire not to interfere in market space beyond the bare minimum: In consequence, police as a concept came to reflect the limited meaning of enforcing the law and upholding rights in public space (at least in the ideal case). From the late eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth century, all other policy that was directed towards controlling the private realm came to be known as *regulation* (Gill 2002; Neocleous 1998).

Despite the fact that policing and regulation have become separate in the minds and in the institutions of liberal capitalist society, action in one sphere has continued to have an impact on the other. In practice, various bureaus within policing organizations have always recognized the public impacts of private action and have thus maintained a finger in the financial crimes and regulation pie – a role that has been greatly expanded in recent decades.³ Nevertheless, our institutions and practices have built a society that *believes* that policing is exclusively a criminal justice matter involving men and women in uniform who enforce the law to produce *political peace*, something that is distinct and separate from either *economic* or *social peace*. When we export public policing models, we send with them all of these assumptions as to how best to achieve the well-being of the population.

Political economist Mark Neocleous (2008: 81–100) elaborates on these points in great detail, tracing the development of the concept of *national security* in 1940s post-war America directly back to the birth and rise of the concept of *social security* in 1930s Depression-era America. Roosevelt's New Deal was put into place with a view to emboldening the population to re-engage the arrested markets of the Depression so as to bring them back into a state of growth, which would be good for everybody's well-being and safety. It was then a short step to applying this domestic logic to foreign policy:

Just as the New Deal "brought Social Security" to the US, so "one world" of the family of nations would bring "political security" to the entire world. Aid to other nations would have the same effect as social welfare programs within the United States – it would achieve "security" for "all individual men and women and children in all nations..." [Thus] security politics ... becomes the basis of a distinctly liberal philosophy of global "intervention," fusing global issues of economic management with domestic policy formations in a vicious and frequently violent strategy (Neocleous 2008: 93–94).

Neocleous follows his genealogical line of analysis to focus, primarily, upon the hard face of liberal global policing intervention: The overt and covert violence that, with the foundational purpose of ensuring the continuance of the growth of free markets, has resulted in the wrongful deaths of millions of innocent persons around the planet (see esp. Neocleous 2008: 102–105). Equally, we can tilt the emphasis to understanding the type of society on offer through democratic policing-

reform assistance – where the notion that security can be achieved through the combination of ever-expanding markets in the private sphere and the enforcement of the law in the public sphere is literally embodied in the “impartial” public police institution. Criminologists of a multidisciplinary or pre-disciplinary bent might, therefore, turn to analysing policing assistance programs and the contests that swirl around them in terms of the questions, What kinds of ideas for the exercise of police power are in operation around the planet? And what kinds of alternative ideas for political economy are reflected in these programs and contests? Over the balance of this paper, I argue that such Foucauldian genealogies of alternative notions of policing and political economy are of tremendous practical use.

Foucauldian institutional reform: A deliberative politics of vitalism

Given the damning indictment of international policing-reform assistance that I have just presented, the question needs to be asked: Why would any socially conscious, diversity-respecting, and/or environmentalist academic get involved as either a patsy in the exportation of naked Western interests or as the ignored “fringe” voice of alternative approaches within the policing status quo?

One possible answer is that any alternative to engagement is too terrible to contemplate: carrying on with our current wantonly wasteful approach to policing reform in the service of a political economy that is destined to destroy the species. Selectively engaging with certain police agencies that demonstrate a willingness to attempt to answer their critics is a vital strategy and one that can be considered to be consistent with a Foucauldian politics of “vitalism” (Rose 1999: 283). As Foucault states,

I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life ... It would multiply not judgements but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes – all the better ... I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination (Foucault 1980/1997: 323)

And as Rose has opined on the applicability of such an approach for forging a progressive politics:

Rather than subordinate oneself in the name of an external code, truth, authority or goal, such a politics would operate under a different slogan: each person's life should be its own *telos* ... [I]t would embody a certain "vitalism." It would ... be in favour of ... the conditions that make possible the challenge to existing modes of life and the creation of new modes of existence ... *And diagnostic reason must try, in some way, to provide some conditions for evaluating this form of life, not judging it against a criterion of good and bad, but discerning the possibilities and the limits for ways of existing that it embodies.* (Rose 1999: 283; emphasis added)

As these excerpts would suggest, a politics of vitalism means engaging any institution that is willing to listen with the view to contributing the knowledge and tools that are necessary to enable that institution to make institutional life its own *telos*: to play ever more expansive and innovative games of power with its role and structures so as potentially to reinvent their purpose and impacts upon those around them.

This is precisely the basis of my current engagement with the RCMP. The simplest objective of this research project is to develop a measurement protocol to assess the successes and failures of international policing-reform assistance. In following the model of vitalism outlined here, the project was divided into three phases. First, a background phase of research was undertaken, involving focus groups, to debate the broad purposes of the study, addressing directly the instrumental, structural, and conceptual ties between policing and political economy. Thus, we worked together to come to understand the history of RCMP engagement in international policing-reform assistance, in terms of how the stated aims and priorities of this enterprise have shifted in keeping with broader shifts in organizational philosophy and relationships with government. With a clear snapshot of what the RCMP has understood international policing reform to be over time, we are now in a position to ask the question, What would we like it to be?

Armed with these principles, we are in a position to move to phase two of the research, where we will collaborate to develop measures that can best be used to assess the successes and failures of various reform programs in meeting commonly agreed, discursively developed objectives. Phase two will, therefore, lead to the development of a measurement protocol to be implemented in a pilot assessment of one international policing-reform assistance initiative: This assessment, consisting of field-work and focus group interviews involving stakeholders in

the host society to assist in interpretation of the findings, will result in adjustment to the measurement protocol prior to its being rolled out to other RCMP international policing-reform assistance programs, over a projected third phase of the research.

The effort here, from my point of view as participant-researcher, has three objectives. The first is to build deliberative space within the RCMP, where Foucauldian genealogies of policing can provide the tools to hear and understand alternative ideas, emanating from host societies, about the form and desired impacts of international policing-reform assistance. Creating this space will enable policing practitioners to determine whether or not they wish to take new objectives and approaches on board.

Second, the project seeks to encourage the RCMP to experiment with innovative measurement devices that reflect broader priorities for human security than merely enforcing the law and attempting to control conventional street and organized crime. The effort here will be to include some measures of successes in policing the types of predatory corporate behaviour – such as environmental degradation – that are known to take place in the regulatory vacuums that characterize transitional democracies. A key example would be measures for the reduction of pollutants (e.g., heavy metals) in the soil and water table associated with primary industries, such as mining.

Third, and perhaps most ambitiously, an interrogation of the role of the public police in supporting particular visions for political economy in a world in which political economies are hotly contested could lead to an organized set of principles as to how best the police ought to participate in democratic experimentalism; sometimes seeking to contribute their points of view for consideration by others and, at other times, acting as authoritative arbiter where contestations between groups are so pitched as to undermine fundamental order and personal and collective safety. When is there room for experimentalism? When is the (donor) state most justified in coming down hard in favour of the status quo? At what point does life as its own *telos* become so disruptive – and disruptive of what? – that authority must intervene (perhaps even to the point of domination) in a (fledgling) democratic society? Certainly, not everybody will agree with whatever principles the police articulate in response to such questions as the basis for their engagement in political economic upheaval and renewal. Nonetheless, articulated principles for how public policing *should* support political economy would provide a clear starting point for further

debate. We would simply be dragging the hidden ways in which policing *does* support particular approaches to political economy into the light of explicit evaluation.

Concluding comments

In this paper, I have argued that an engagement ethic of vitalism informed by Foucauldian genealogy and institutionalized through Habermasian deliberation⁴ is well suited to our strengths as academics and respectful of our institutional limitations. We are well equipped to undertake and disseminate the results of detailed historical and cross-cultural research that illuminates alternative ideas. Further, we are skilled in the development of methods and other organizational tools to equip practical actors with the capacity to shift their organizations in the manner that they deem fit. Equipping people with tools and enhancing their capacities to appreciate the perspective of the other, without telling anybody what to do, would also seem to be aligned with our limited democratic mandate as university employees. We are not justified in foisting any particular political economy upon anybody, merely in providing some perspective in a world where the future is apparently hotly contested, with most interlocutors speaking at cross-purposes. While it might be argued that Foucauldian scheming within organizations that are deeply set in their practical ways and cultural identities will lead to frustration, such scheming seems a better alternative than utopian dreaming that is “relevant to possible worlds that do not or cannot exist.” (Braithwaite 2000: 235)

Notes

- 1 The author wishes to acknowledge insightful comments received from two anonymous reviewers, which have helped not only with revisions to this short paper but also towards framing some important questions to guide this program of research as it continues to unfold. The members of the International Policy Branch of the RCMP are gratefully acknowledged for their participation in, and financial support of, the research described in this paper. Shortcomings of insight and errors of interpretation are the responsibility of the author.
- 2 *Instrumental*, here, refers to the type of abuse that would be revealed through an *instrumentalist* approach to analysis.
- 3 The RCMP, for example, has, since 2006, formally designated “economic integrity” as *one of six* of its *central strategic priorities* (Royal Canadian

Mounted Police 2006). Special reference is made to their efforts “to protect consumer and investor confidence in Canada as a safe and secure place to conduct business, invest and save money.”

- 4 Thus, the project institutionalizes a politics of vitalism through the Habermasian technology of attempting to build and ensure deliberative space in which opportunity for the fair exchange of ideas is ensured. Thus, the current Foucault-informed RCMP effort not only works towards identifying a breadth of alternative ideas but also seeks to enable multiple players to present and possibly negotiate around these ideas within the existing institution. Normative desirability is weighed by assessing the fairness of the communication situation that characterizes these deliberative spaces through ensuring the presence of such positive conditions as equal opportunity to be heard and taken seriously. Thus, *fair communication* leading to negotiated results around a broader range of alternatives serves as the small-‘u’ *universal* by which to judge the normative impact of the project – deeply aligned with Habermas’s notions of *discourse ethics* as a means to act normatively in a world lacking strong universal standards (see esp. Habermas 1996).

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