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POLICE

Police is the institution in charge of the protection of public order and the repression of crime, entitled to use physical force in order to meet these functions. Police institutions are the product of a long-term historical trend towards differentiation and specialization. Differentiation, since contemporary functions of policing (keeping peace and combating crime and disorder) were before the beginning of the 19th century in the hands of watchmen formed by households, or by family or tribal constables. This "private" policing was spread out in several areas (like China, main parts of Africa and South America) before the Europe-led colonization process. Autonomous, professional and permanent police forces have been settled, in the most cases locally, in the wake of urban growth and urban disorders, industrial disputes and riots, and crime fears. This institutionalization process accompanies a specialization process in the continental Europe countries where police encompassed an infinite and messy ensemble of norms, regulations and measures seeking at regulating the entire urban existence, from public hygiene to passport control, from milk inspection to libraries supervision, etc. If not in the hands of watchmen or private forces, like dock bosses' militia, the control of crime and disorder was only a small part of what was then comprised by the police. Police could specialize on these functions in continental Europe only during the 19th century, apart from administrative law and jurisdiction regulating all other aspects of social life (Napoli, 2003).

From a more theoretical point of view, police show two distinctive features. Police is, firstly, fully instrumental: it is meant to perform a definite task, linked to crime and disorder, under civil supervision (i.e. functional dimension of the police). Police is, secondly defined by its capacity to use physical force (i.e. substantive dimension of the police). A crucial dimension

of police relies therefore on its intimate relationship with the monopoly of physical force in which Max Weber sees the distinctive feature of the state. But this crucial dimension is at the same time oxymoronic, since (contrary to the military use of force), police force is expected to be legitimate, i.e. reasonable, proportionate and based on consent. Two terms are antagonistic per se: consent and force (Reiner, 2000). The police can use force either in the context of a local breach of order (contested arrest, unlawful strike, riot…) or in the context of a broader social or political breakdown consisting in a massive hostility to the regime in place… Police legitimacy relies on consent, but police occupation is a tainted occupation.

On a more sociological level, substantial affinity between force and police have been strongly questioned; empirical evidence clearly show that the actual use of force proves to be rather rare. Some police even never use physical force in the course of their occupational lifetime. On the other hand, trying to list and rationalize all the tasks ever performed by police officers proves to be quite impossible. Therefore, some theorists like Brodeur (2007) incline to define the police as the only public organization aimed at "doing everything". In order to do so, they use means that are illegal or unlawful if taken by ordinary citizens (from driving a one-way street the other way around to bug phone devices).

Nevertheless, physical force is a central figure in police organizations in the way that cases of abuse of force weaken the foundation of police's political legitimacy. The beating of the Black car driver Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1991 (and the acquittal of the White police officers one year later) lead to the most violent urban riots in the United States, the death of two minority youths in France in 2005 lead to a three-weeks long period of urban unrests, abusive arrests and stops-and-searches proceedings in London, Birmingham, Liverpool at the beginning of the 1980s also lead to frequent

urban riots in British cities from the end of the 1970s to the mid-1980s. It is difficult to assess if substantial changes occurred as a result of these episodes of scandal and protest. Certain is, nevertheless, that police organizations face a legitimation crisis in the course of the 70s, due both to the emergence of urban disorders and/or race riots (in the United States, England and France) on the one hand and to the rise of property crime in a time of mass private property on the other**, which lead to comparable waves of change across the countries and political regimes.**

Contemporary evolutions of police organizations contribute to stir up the empirical and theoretical dispute over the accurate definition of police. First, from the initial wave of modernization and professionalisation (from the early 1970s onwards) police institutions have known both an increased specialization and a commodification of the services they are supposed to deliver. Both phenomena are closely linked with a legitimation crisis that occurred during the 70s, An over-specialization has been implemented in order to cope with different aspects of crime and delinquency, leading police organizations to be an archipelago of diverse and isolated occupations (from drug squads to environmental crime enforcement, from juvenile delinquency units to transnational police experts…). The spread of surveillance devices and technologies have been playing a front role in this process. This evolution towards more segmentation into specialized operations and the increased importance of surveillance and proactive activities tend to make physical force a secondary if not purely metaphorical aspect of police work. Some analysts have underlined this phenomenon in stating that police are no violence workers, but “knowledge workers”, insisting on the massive amount of data and information they are expected to sort out and analyse in order to meet their tasks.

This trend towards an over-specialization, specifically in the most diverse domains of crime fighting, have in no way stopped the decline of police efficiency. Therefore, police organizations have been called to communalise a certain amount of tasks, even if this policy proves not to be uniform among different national cultures. In the course of the last twenty years, there has been a trend toward a kind of “network policing”, in which the most diverse private and public institutions or agencies are brought together in order to elaborate joined preventive and sometimes repressive action against crime and urban disorder. Police are now civil servants confronted with private and public agents in different kinds of negotiation arenas. Several labels have been employed to describe these evolutions. The notion of “problem-solving policing” has been first introduced at the beginning of the 1980s in order to force or invite the police to tackle daily local problems like loitering or drinking in public spaces, domestic violence, noise disturbances etc. Police institutions were then asked not to focus solely on the most valued tasks, like car chases and forcible arrests, and to open their eyes to the broader social demand. Facing the difficulty to implement internal police reforms, local or (more rarely) central governments have developed programs like “community policing” or “neighborhood policing” aimed at integrating police organizations into larger institutional structures and, therefore, at resisting against the police’s tendency toward insularity and self-agenda. Moreover, the increasing pluralization of policing (growth of private security forces, informal policing like vigilantism, introduction of local police forces competing with municipal or state police forces, etc.) now threatens the monopoly of the police in the prevention and repression of disorder. Network policing programs (like community policing programs) open a window of opportunity for the police for getting back in the game and being at the node of those networks.

Other transformations have cropped up in the course of these evolutions. The first of them has been the introduction of regulations and guidelines issued from the new public management into police organisations during the 1990s, that is, in the wake of broader public policies reforms initiated by governments of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair. A major accent has been put on individual control over police officers, the stress of individual accountability and the diffusion of 'better with less' management policies. As a result, police managers devote a major part of their time to crime and activity statistics in order to comply with political and public expectancies. Such management systems, whose real ability to cope with crime and insecurity has been widely discussed, has been exported throughout the world and adopted by countries or cities in strongly differing manners. One effect of this management tool is the development of gaming strategies, as in other agencies, which lead to an increase in bureaucratic insularity of police organizations and to a further public concern with the ability of police organizations to cope with real crime.

The second trend is the rising importance of law and order policies in the political agenda of many Western. Proving one's ability to deal with the crime problem and lead police forces tends to be a major personal resource in the political game. The fights against terrorism or against international crime are vital to this trend. In combination with the gaming strategies developed within police organizations, this tendency sheds light on the fact that police have a symbolic, if not an entertaining function, that seems more and more important in today's political systems.

Police are in fact parts of the political system in which they help to consolidate political legitimacy and resources of the (local or national) government. One must here distinguish between regimes in which police organizations are centralized under the

direct command of the government (like in France) and countries in which police forces are essentially municipal (United States) or regional forces (Germany, Great-Britain), with some specialized forces devoted to federal issues (like organized crime, terrorism, intelligence). Contrary to a widespread assumption in the political science, the degree of centralization of forces is not correlated to the degree of corruption of the police by the political forces. The Napoleonic model in France offers a speaking example of police organizations heading up numerous and opulent political intelligence and anti-riot sections under the immediate leading of the Ministry of Interior, who can always be devoted to political tasks in order to repress protest, to prevent public disorders, to influence or shape the whole political competition. Municipal police systems in the US were characterized, on the other hand, by a high level of "lawlessness in law enforcement", since police forces were considered to be forces devoted to the personal use of the mayor and part of the local political system. The wave of reform of the police forces during the 1950s resulted in a high level of "professionalism", that is to say quasi military police departments with high standards of integrity, governed by a city manager rather by the mayor and disconnected from local community's asks and needs. As it appears, the nature of the political involvment of police organizations is strongly linked to the organization of the political system.

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See also: Legitimacy, Bureaucracy (street-level), network-model Governance, Institutionalization, Judiciary, New Public Management, Performance Management, Repression, Rights, Urban Governance, Violence

Further readings

Brodeur, J.-P. (2007), An encounter with Egon Bittner, Crime, Law and Social Change, 48, 3-5, p. 105-132.

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Napoli, P. (2003), Naissances de la police moderne. Pouvoirs, normes, sociétés. Paris : La Découverte.

Reiner, R. (2000), The Politics of the Police. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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One of the most spectacular examples of this trend has been the recent presidential race in France (2007) where one of the candidate, who was holding the Ministry of Interior and had the lead over the centralized civil forces of Police and of the military forces of Gendarmerie (ca. 200.000 servants), was able to maximize the effect of the 2005 riots mentioned above in order not only to gain a political profit from the collective fear they initiated but also from the aggressive if not martial operational leading of the police forces in the disadvantaged cities.