



# **POLICING IN AN AGE OF AUSTERITY**

**A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE**



**MIKE BROGDEN AND GRAHAM ELLISON**

# Policing in an Age of Austerity

*Policing in an Age of Austerity* uniquely examines the effects on one key public service: the state police of England and Wales. Focusing on the major cutbacks in its resources, both in material and in labour, it details the extent and effects of that drastic reduction in provision together with related matters in Scotland and Northern Ireland. This book also investigates the knock-on effect on other public agencies of diminished police contribution to public well-being.

The book argues that such a dramatic reduction in police services has occurred in an almost totally uncoordinated way, both between provincial police services, and also with regard to other public agencies. While there may have been marginal improvements in effectiveness in certain contexts, the British police have dramatically failed to seize the opportunity to modernize a police service that has never been reformed to suit modern exigencies since its date of origin in 1829. British policing remains a relic of the past despite the mythology by which it increasingly exports its practices and officers to (especially) transitional societies.

Operating at both historical and contemporary levels, this book furnishes a mine of current information. Critically, it also emphasizes the extent to which British policing has traditionally concentrated on the lowest socio-economic stratum of society, to the neglect of the policing of the more powerful. *Policing in an Age of Austerity* will be of interest to academics and professionals working in the fields of criminal justice, development studies, and transitional and conflicted societies, as well as those with an interest in the social schisms caused by the current financial crisis.

**Mike Brogden** is Honorary Professor in the Department of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Lancaster. He has served as an advisor to several governments on policing matters, and inter alia, served as EU Security Advisor for the first democratic election of 1994 in South Africa.

**Graham Ellison** is Senior Lecturer in Criminology, School of Law, Queen's University, Belfast. He has been a Senior International Expert to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Turkey in respect of the civilian oversight of the police there.



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Mike Brogden would like to dedicate the book to a deceased colleague and friend, Sergeant Paul Perks, whose integrity was too much for his job in the Merseyside Police. Graham Ellison would like to dedicate the book to his parents and to Caitlyn, Ethan, Lauren and Ben.



# Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
1 Introduction: turning over the pebble	1
2 The state of the police of the state	23
3 Smoke and mirrors: the cuts in policing and the technological fix	62
4 Commodifying state policing: the export of the 'UK Police plc' brand	85
5 Policing the Other through law	103
6 Policing the Other: continuity of practice from St Giles to Dale Farm	129
Epilogue: treading the thin blue line	148
<i>Endnote</i>	152
<i>Notes</i>	154
<i>Bibliography</i>	161
<i>Index</i>	180





# Illustrations

## Tables

1.1	A typology of policing	18
2.1	How not to keep the public informed: crime map data from a northern council estate	49
3.1	Central–local police funding 2010–11	66
3.2	The official demarcation of the frontline	69

## Boxes

1.1	Thatcher's shock doctrine	2
1.2	An anonymous Metropolitan Police officer's view of the process of police reform	5
1.3	A people's police force	14
1.4	One view on the <i>News of the World</i> 'hacking' case	20
2.1	Deaths in custody unrecorded	34
2.2	The criminal records of police officers	35
2.3	Supergrasses and police corruption	38
2.4	The contradictions in disablement and pensions	42
2.5	Chief officers and gross misconduct	44
2.6	Compensation payments 2010–11	44
2.7	Police pursuit	45
2.8	Early retirement to avoid disciplinary and criminal charges	46
2.9	Financial accountability and oversight	47
2.10	Policing-for-profit in transporting illegal immigrants	57
2.11	Multinationals enter the private policing sector	59
3.1	Curious expenditure	65
3.2	Winsor's primary proposals for cuts	67
3.3	A GMP example of functional distinction as a means of cost-cutting	71
3.4	Promoting privatization of forensic science	72
3.5	Police drone crashes into River Mersey	77
3.6	The case of Tasers	78

3.7	How to improve police data – an older lesson revived	82
4.1	The New Scotland Yard brand	90
4.2	From the Northern Irish policing model to UK Police plc	93
4.3	The NIPM as a model for transitional and post-conflict states	95
4.4	A typology of international policing personnel	100
5.1	Where is this office?	105
5.2	The summary process of early street policing	111
5.3	Expanding summary justice in relation to the Other: current ASBOs	114
5.4	Mission creep (or how to expand the demand for state police services)	116
5.5	‘Prosecuting the messenger’	120
5.6	Framing the suspects: the 2011 riots	122
5.7	Kettling and the spread of police powers	124
5.8	Legalizing the illegal	127
6.1	Homogenizing the heterogeneous Other	130
6.2	Travellers as the Other	138
6.3	The Other resists	141
6.4	Traveller ‘invasion’ as moral panic	142
6.5	The voice of the Occident	144

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# 1 Introduction

## Turning over the pebble

U.K. policing has an enviably high worldwide reputation. . . . Our policing is regarded as ethical, professional and overwhelmingly free of corruption.

(Police Superintendents Association Submission  
to the Winsor Report, 2011, Part 1)

### **Introduction: crisis and opportunism**

In Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*, the author focuses on the 'fallout' from natural catastrophes, from earthquakes to tsunamis (Klein, 2007). She argues that in every recent case, while the population is traumatized (following Gramsci, 1971), conservative and free-market cadres emerge as entrepreneurs. Through their lobbies, political organizations, and private corporations, they seize the chance to construct profit-making programmes for social change. Ideologies of neoliberalism are legitimized as fabricators of transformative recovery programmes. Conservative 'think-tanks' lead the way under just such conditions, to mount an ascendancy of market intervention in the public sector.

Narratives of crisis have been an especially important weapon in what has in part been a neoliberal offensive in the UK. It is in times and places of crisis that new and conservative responses can gain traction. Desensitized, neoliberal economics 'seizes the day' to expand its doctrine of deregulation, of privatization (and the forked tongue discourse of 'outsourcing') of state utilities and partisan technological innovations. Natural disasters furnish the opportunity for the expansion of free market practices. 'Shock doctrine' uses that public disorientation to impose control by the use of economic shock therapy – physically manifest by the 'Taser on the Street'.

However, a caveat from Mike Davis in *Late Victorian Holocausts* challenges the assumption that many disasters are actually 'natural'. Davis explores the impact of colonialism and the introduction of capitalism and their relationship to disasters such as famines. Davis argues that 'Millions died not outside the "modern world system", but in the very process of being forcibly incorporated into its economic and political structures. They died in the golden age of Liberal Capitalism' (2002 p. 9).

**Box 1.1 Thatcher's shock doctrine**

Thatcher's shock doctrine was applied in the form of drastic cuts in benefits for the unemployed, the sick, and the elderly. Public services were slashed and the privatization of many services followed . . . Many in the workforce lost hope. Economic and social turmoil ensued. There were street riots in deprived inner-city areas suffering the brunt of Thatcherite policies, the most infamous in the south London neighbourhood of Brixton in 1981 . . . The experiment has failed, and it has failed repeatedly. It has generated deeper poverty and inequalities. It has led to high unemployment, low wages, and even lower benefits that are designed to force citizens to work. It is called competition and it is trumpeted because, in truth, it is good for company profits. The old mantra that corporate profits filter down to the lower rungs of society and benefit the poor remains as dubious today as it was thirty years ago.

Deepak Tripathi (2011)

The hurricanes of recent years may, for example, not be a supposedly natural phenomenon, but result from industrial commitment to fossil fuels and consequent global warming. History may repeat itself, but not always as farce. Crises frequently have human agency.

Both authors contribute to our understanding of seismic events: Klein seeks to explain the opportunism furnished by disasters while Davis furnishes an agency analysis of causation.

It is a major leap from man-made famines to man-made crises in Western societies, but the metaphor and its implications are clear: from catastrophes to financial crises, agency, and especially neoliberal economics, frequently plays a key part, both in causation and in subsequent opportunism, as in the continuing capital crisis of 2008. In the police services of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, the latter had many elements, most obvious during a short period of the summer of 2011 (especially with the reappearance of 'the Other' – the legendary criminal class of Britain and its empire). The background canvas was the major and unique impact of the Western financial crisis on British policing. As detailed in Chapter 3, the coalition government determined on a 20 per cent reduction in state policing resources over a 4-year period (as it had, to differing degrees, on other public services). This determination was unique in Britain. There have been few precedents in the use of that guillotine in the transformation of policing (inter alia, the forced redundancy of many police officers in New York during the financial crisis of the mid-1970s).

This policing crisis was included with various other manifestations of serious malaise, including the culmination of a longstanding mobile phone 'hacking' case against the British press and Rupert Murdoch's News International empire, that

reached a crescendo when it revealed the ‘cosy’ relationship between media tycoons and an emerging elite of politicians and senior police officers at Scotland Yard (with the two most senior officers of the latter resigning). It involved practices of corruption of ‘bottom feeders’ amongst junior officers ‘selling’ prurient information to journalists. Coincidentally, the consumerist riots of a new ‘dangerous class’ in August 2011 revealed major failures in the system of British policing and serious disputes between senior police officers and Conservative governing politicians, a crack in the historical facade of unity between the police and the former party of law-and-order. This was typified by the populist attempt by the Conservative prime minister to impose the colourful American police officer, William Bratton, as an advisor on gang violence to the police in England and Wales. Bratton’s tenure was short-lived and he quickly resigned under a cloud of impropriety; and in any case his misjudged pronouncements about ‘gang violence’ in the UK context were both wrong and embarrassing. Aside from anything else, the UK does not have the fundamental problem with gang related violence that the US does (Churcher and Verkaik, 2011). Other problems illustrated the depth of that financial crisis impacting on the police. For the first time in 60 years, command officers (in Cleveland) were arrested, over allegations of fraud. The investigation conducted by Warwickshire Police cost £100,000 per month. Four similar command officers, formerly of Staffordshire, are under investigation. Among many other such incidents, six elite police officers of the Merseyside Police Matrix Serious Crime Squad were summarily dismissed over self-videoed property theft from ‘raid’ houses and the subsequent sale of such material on eBay, an incident made even more curious by the appointment of the chief officer who had founded that (alleged) career-boosting squad as the new commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. Furthermore, a new media transparency inquiry revealed, apparently typically, that the Metropolitan Police had only investigated one out of every nine reported burglaries in the previous year (although the new commissioner has declared himself in favour of more transparency).<sup>1</sup> Symbolically, from July 2011 the police have committed to the new single issue of publishing all traffic speeding prosecutions (see Chapter 5). Elsewhere, other manifestations included the death by unilateral police fire of Mark Duggan that precipitated the Tottenham riots in August 2011, after which three other males died in separate incidents over that month in police custody – with ‘nonlethal’ pepper and CS gas sprays used in the arrests.

There have been 333 such deaths over the previous 12 years in England and Wales, with no police convictions (Davies, 2010) – ‘one’ subsequent interpretation being that the police frequently arrest dying or self-harming people. Radical hyperbole – that instead of renaming police cells in managerial-speak as ‘custody suites’, they should instead be called ‘death chambers’ – should of course be arbitrarily dismissed as the vast majority of those arrested survive well, given the imprimatur of the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC).<sup>2</sup> The revelation that a gamekeeper-turned-poacher, an undercover police officer, had spent seven years as infiltrator, as resourcer, agent provocateur and apparent seducer of female activists (the function has a long lineage – see



#### 4 Introduction

Sergeant Popay of the Metropolitan Police in 1833) of a nonviolent protest organization, did not help (Evans and Lewis, 2011). The dismissal by the head of the Metropolitan Police's Antiterrorism Squad of the claim that the ultra-right-wing English Defence League was not a threat to social order and consequent police attention,<sup>3</sup> in the context of the anniversary of the Cable Street protest of 1936, was curious. Nor was the case assisted by further information that the most recent undercover agent and his colleagues had been supervised by a private non-accountable commercial organization, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO).

The coalition government had earlier stoked latent combustibles with its proposal to legislate for a new breed of local crime and policing commissioners (see Chapter 6) at a cost, in the middle of policing cuts, of some £100 million. Conversely, a new breed of policing entrepreneurs has challenged certain shibboleths of British policing from within, and there are currently plans to disband the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) that provides training to police in the UK.<sup>4</sup>

The crisis in British policing is hardly the fault of individual police officers (though the impoverished showing of senior Metropolitan officers before a Parliamentary Select Committee in the News International revelations hardly avoids some responsibility), or of individual politicians. The Police Federation frequently indulges in personalized rhetoric (such as bizarrely accusing the Conservative home secretary of 'revenge' against the police, see Reiner, 2011), and it occasionally touches the keystone in accusing the coalition government of having a hidden agenda in using the crisis to deregulate the state and its public service employees in the interest of market economics. According to the chair of the Police Federation:

They have and will continue to spew out that much-abused *mantra* that we have to be more effective and efficient, but don't be fooled by this insincere, nihilist, smoke and mirrors, slash and burn policy, for it is in large parts economics and in greater part ideology.

(BBC News, 2011b)

Critically, the crisis has two relevant if disparate components. Western police institutions are one of the major public services threatened by the turmoil in Western capitalism. But police scholars had, however inadvertently, laid the way for such downsizing by providing the justification in varied texts of a process of pluralist policing (e.g. Johnston and Shearing, 2003) in which the state police would increasingly be complemented by profit-making institutions and (optimistically, in practice) voluntary agencies. In the name of more theoretically profound police reform, scholars imbued with a curious sense of history were beneficiaries of a market economy ideology that was about to collapse around the financial citadels of Western societies. Academic theorizing encountered a welcoming economic climate, through the curious rubric of the police extended family.

### **Box 1.2 An anonymous Metropolitan Police officer's view of the process of police reform**

We spend so much time reinventing the wheel – or in this case the truncheon. We used to have Bobbies on the beat, close to communities, who would ‘cuff’ the odd ragamuffin to stop, what would now be called, antisocial behaviour. Police came from the community they policed and knew who was up to what and when, now called ‘intelligence’. Then came the Sweeney and police corruption. Tough hard-boiled coppers chasing dangerous and violent criminals. Stereotypes no doubt, but it feels as if we have been trying to reinvent the Dixon of Dock Green model of policing ever since. And it is still what most people who live in my area want to see. Along came zero-tolerance policing from NY where equal priority was given to small and big crime. There has been success. Police were slaves to nationally set targets, based on good research but focused on the serious and violent end of the crime spectrum. I remember endless conversations trying to get police time spent investigating crime outside the national crime indicators. Yes, they understood that graffiti etc was important to local people, but their success was not judged by catching what, when they want. No more ignoring antisocial behaviour. It works. Local communities re-engage with the police because they are doing something about low-level crime and known troublemakers. This, in turn, leads to better community intelligence on more serious crime and is a deterrent to a culture of ‘anything goes’. Cuts in police numbers have not helped, but the Met in London is still following zero-tolerance policing regardless of resource levels. So, do we know what popular policing looks like? Apparently not. Nick Herbert is off to Rotterdam where the community is allocated 20 hours of police time to spend [on tackling problems on their behalf].

(Letter from anonymous police officer (*Local Government Chronicle*, 2012))

## **Police reform**

This text is not the first to focus on crises as a source of change in policing. Several highly competent texts (e.g. McLaughlin, 2007; Morgan and Newburn, 1997; Savage, 2007) similarly direct attention to such events – from the Brixton riots to the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence – as sources of major reform in policing in the UK (including the proposals of the Independent Commission on Policing in Northern Ireland, see Mulcahy, 2006).<sup>5</sup> Generally, the message of those scholars has been that those policing conjunctures produce positive results. For example, the collapse of neo-Keynesian economics in the late 1970s and early 1980s contributed to the events that resulted in the inner-city anti-police riots of the 1980s. Out of the ashes of Brixton and Toxteth arose the Scarman Report (1982)

and (later) the Macpherson Report (1999), resulting in institutional changes in the policing of diversity. Specific events such as the (lesser-recalled) Roger Graef television documentary on police interviews of rape victims impacted on the male police approach to such victims.<sup>6</sup> Such scholars, like the new policing pluralists, recognized that crises created opportunities for reform – as in the Stephen Lawrence case and the resultant Macpherson Report on institutionalized police racism.

We view that recent history differently. Scholars have correctly dispelled the traditional perception of the current structure of British policing as the product of a natural untroubled quasi-Reithian evolution (see Emsley, 1996). But many regard policy innovation events as leading inexorably to desirable administrative reform (for example, in the spurious prioritizing of that curious euphemism of incivilities).<sup>7</sup> Out of conflict comes policing progress. Conversely, this text challenges that fundamental assumption. The Scarman Report eventually led (assisted by North American imports) to the elevation of the false dawn of community policing and latterly Neighbourhood Policing as the way forward (Brogden and Nijhar, 2005). That venture in turn led to infinite resource demand and intensive mission creep in policing, based upon an historical misreading of relations between the state police and local ‘communities’. Community policing and its affiliates constituted an idiosyncratic waste of resources on varied useless practices, such as Neighbourhood Watch.<sup>8</sup> Innovations from a more conservative perspective – as by the Broken Windows and Zero Tolerance researchers – have much to answer for in lowering the threshold at which young people embark on inevitable criminal careers.<sup>9</sup>

Second, another strand in the research literature assumes that crises such as the current financial imbroglio necessarily lead to positive developments through the technological fix. The oxymoron of ‘police science’ and the application of a business model and market discipline to state policing<sup>10</sup> reflected in the main both technically incorrect and ideologically perverse assumptions about the public sector. As in Klein (above), police crises may also lead to the promotion of opportunistic snake-oil doctors (there are many examples – Brogden and Nijhar, 1998) with their promise of panaceas for structural deep-rooted problems arising from social and economic inequalities, transparently evident to the residents of the ‘mean streets’ surrounding grotesque displays of never-to-be attained gross consumerism. Such false prophets take as given that the primary prophylactic against major social schisms resulting in disorder (on the street but not curiously in the banks) problems is the intervention of an opportunistic policing research agenda. The latter frequently offers a kind of pseudoscience, lacking any of the impartiality of reliance on objective historical and comparative data (see Young, 2011, for a trenchant critique of so-called ‘scientific’ methodologies in criminology).<sup>11</sup> In the words of an unknown IT technician, ‘if you feed s— in, you get s— out’, as in the core of the natural sciences (reassurance in such matters has not been helped by recent police proposals to count incivilities!). In academic terms, it operates within a paradigm of police sociology rather than sociology of the police. It takes policing goals and functions as a given.<sup>12</sup> Inter alia, such proponents

rarely recognize the vacuity of police duties. The latter, in Anglo-American common law societies, were inherited from the Metropolitan Police Act of 1829, which emphasized discretion over practice and purpose for the foot-soldiers of the hierarchical New Police militaristic model without specifying police objectives. That contradiction was bolstered by an array of vaguely determined common law powers, still largely based on the character of the ‘Other’ on streets (the Town Police Clauses Act of 1848 mirrored the Bloody Code in the extent of its new police offences if not in its severity) as reinforced by a system of lay magistrates who invented an enabling criminal law ‘on the trot’, especially in the continuity of their frequent use of status rather than action as an offence. Police practice led criminal development, not statute (Dubber, 2005; Chapter 6).

Such administrative reformers, however, do not problematize the police ‘role’. Traditional police procedures are rightly questioned, but not police functions (whatever they are). In Manning’s words (2010; see also Emsley, 1996), weighed down by the sacrosanct mythology of the Office of Constable, consequent fixations on a quaint notion of locality and vagueness over the weasel social historical concept of democratic accountability constitute the major impediments to a more rational and equitable police structure and function. The lack of a statutory determination of police function meant that Sir Robert Peel and his juniors were misread by many, contributing to what Michael Ignatieff (1996) has termed ‘ideology as history’. This has constituted a miasma that has impeded the modernization of British policing, a situation that is further compounded by the current financial crisis.

Third, the fiscal crisis in Western societies was a man-made event and provided opportunities for a more insidious agenda. Chaos in social and financial order frequently leads to exploitation by private and state elements with a quite different agenda, most typified by one that turns promotion of the public good into a commitment to the expansion of private profit. Initiated mainly in the Labour–Conservative consensus over law-and-order in the early 1990s, profit-making policing has been the major gainer in the age of austerity. While the primary cause of the 2011 crisis lies within the freebooting neoliberalism of Western banking, one major feature of the response to the resultant fiscal crisis has been the drive to privatize aspects of British public services. An ideological subtext permeates the coalition government’s response. Relocating the previously sacrosanct services committed to the public good – from the National Health Service to the fifty-two territorial police forces of Great Britain and Northern Ireland – to the arena of private profit constitutes one major thread throughout this text. Questions of the policing of inequality, of transparency, of training, and of accountability permeate the later discussion of these matters (Reiner, 2012; McLaughlin, 2007).

Fourth, sudden ruptures in the social and economic fabric – such as in the catastrophic consequence of promotion of neoliberal economics in the Western world and the virtual collapse of national economies from Ireland to Greece – expose the way the conflictual history and ad hoc development of modern social institutions has been sanitized (Young, 1999). Accustomed normality and institutional growth

are suddenly revealed as a facade over a crumbling, fractious edifice. Conjunctures and crises reveal the conflicting interests in the apparent stable institutions as they are threatened with meltdown. The old criminal class (conceived in this text as a component of the 'Other') rears its head. What have previously been regarded as cases of evolutionary tranquillity – a model for so-called transitional and post-conflict societies (see Chapter 4) – are now perceived as a medley of internal and external contradictions as each agency fights for a share of a diminished cake. A dialectical relation is revealed: an equation in which 'thesis' conflicts with 'antithesis'. A temporary synthesis emerges before dividing again into a thesis and antithesis – the state police and the periodically estranged 'Other'. The 'Other' and the state police are two sides of the same coin: the harmonious facade, such as the mythology of policing by consent, and the natural history of state institutions such as the state police is revealed as totemic, without substance.<sup>13</sup> The institution is, and always has been, driven by a power-play between the more resourceful parties whose interests are primarily affected. In the words of Jefferson and Grimshaw (1984) 'the history of the police (is) the successive outcome of struggles between classes, parties and groups, struggles which are necessarily constrained by the context within which they take place, even in the process of transforming that context' (p. 24). *Shock Doctrine* demonstrates how material changes can be conducted when the vox pop is so traumatized that it can passively accept changes that would otherwise have been inconceivable. The contradictory cuts in British policing turn the spotlight on socially illegitimate coalitions of powerful forces, like the close relationship between senior police officers and News International in delaying an inquiry on the latter's freebooting criminality. State policing has always been subject to (and sometimes succumbs to) pressures over practice and function, internal as well as external. Crisis opens the door to opportunism and unholy alliances between institutional and state interests on one side, and formerly critical scholars of policing, now bemused by conceptions of police governance and of 'private' nodes of security and risk.

Finally, in considering the state of the British police, we are aware of a fundamental theoretical void. It would be opportunistic and wrong, for example, to simply focus on isolated serious policing malpractices without reference to context. This, although a study of an institution, is not an institutional study. Events and trajectories, divorced from a context of political economy, have little meaning and can be reduced to isolated anecdotes. Context, structure and on occasion the acts of individual agents, are the key to analysis of British policing practice. Dramatic police failings do not, of themselves, demonstrate instability and serious limitations in the policing institution. The deaths of Jean Charles de Menezes, Ian Tomlinson and Mark Duggan as a result of police malpractice rightly make good newspaper copy and raise public concern. But Duggan's death is especially important not because of what it tells us of the characteristics of individual officers and their competence, but because it epitomizes a process of widening the gap between the priorities of the police and of the policed. Unless such events can be demonstrated to be part of a systemic process of police inefficiency at best, and casual brutality at worst (unlike the Stephen Lawrence