



Police Brutality: A Study of Police Culture in the US

Steve Martinot, (Xlibris US, 2024), 358 pp., \$24.99 USD; e-book \$3.99 USD.

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BOOK REVIEW

Steve Martinot, *Police Brutality: A Study of Police Culture in the US* (Xlibris US, 2024), 358 pp., \$24.99 USD; e-book \$3.99 USD.

In *Police Brutality: A Study of Police Culture in the US*, Steve Martinot argues for a three-part nexus among policing, brutality, and racism, where each interactive aspect informs and reinforces the other two.

Structurally, this review proceeds in four paragraphs while mediating three overlapping concerns: *evidence*; *trinity nexus*; and *key theses*. Evidence and the tripartite nexus populate individual paragraphs in this review, while the key theses receive their articulation and argumentative weight in our passing through the nexus. The following four paragraphs articulate, in order of address: the evidentiary justification of using eyewitness accounts, from which are drawn critiques of the structures of police thinking; *followed by* the trinity *as*: policing as an institution; brutality as nonsacred perception; and racism as hierarchization of systemically-constructed categories. Martinot articulates key theses across this trinity, *which include*: the contradiction of police's *esprit de corps* with civil society's wellbeing; police-generation of criminalization leading to 'justifiable' brutality; performance of brutality for other officers as an *esprit de corps*; the relation between withholding autonomy from civilians and police demand for control; *and* mass scaling of racialized dehumanization through 'the War on Drugs.' This review concludes by reflecting on the book's implications and potential for further research.

Martinot's method of using eyewitness accounts critiques police thinking by sketching the motives and irrationality or illogic of ordinary police events. "This will not be an examination of patterns of criminalization or harassment, but rather of levels of approach to people and the types of logic and reasoning underlying their violence. By these means, police approaches will create situations in which deployment of violence becomes available" (xxv). He rejects police narratives because, "for the most part, police explanations represent how the police demand that the rest of society think about their actions. This essay will not be a non-partisan discussion... We shall

unapologetically assume the position of the communities affected" (ibid.). Martinot cites dozens of killings to expose police reasoning as obviously unethical abuses of power and deployments of brutality, while further articulating key theses demonstrated by each event as they relate especially to the trifecta of policing, brutality, and racism.

The first tripartite aspect involves policing as an institution, in three parts: police institutions are autonomous, independent, and hegemonic. Police are autonomous because they "constitute a culture ... As a culture, they differ from that of the US as a nation" (x). Since they constitute a culture which is autonomous and self-determining, they are independent. Police hegemony as a national institution, endemic in small towns everywhere, self-replicates *and* is independent, autonomous. Other police departments are within the set of hegemonies allowed to operate and therefore would not truly sanction any police department as severely as required by the logic of civil society — whose norms, demands, and standards of justice the police violate. The police are hegemonic because they are free from scrutiny and because most people believe their accounts, since the police are expected to protect civilians in good faith. 'Good' cops enable, and indeed benefit expeditiously from, the dehumanization and brutalization of civilians, especially racialized communities in drastic disproportion. Silent, 'innocent' cops stand by without intervening while racialized citizens are murdered in broad daylight. Police culture, their *esprit de corps*, relies on both individual impunity, with police-awareness that officers can abuse without facing repercussions, and institutional insularity, with departmental awareness that the unworthy public will never see the 'privileged investigations' and 'secret rituals' of the local 'Good Old Boys Club' (189). Police authoritarianism and contempt for civilian culture effectively necessitate and inaugurate civilian contempt for police oppression.

The second component of the enactment trifecta articulates relationships among brutality, dehumanization, and nonsacred perceptions. Brutalism happens to a citizen when they are no longer viewed as human and when their powers for being and self-determination are limited. For example, to handcuff someone is brutal in taking away their powers of mobility, but countless other instances could be summoned as part of a long, deflating parade demonstrating police impunity. Formatively, brutal actions depend upon and begin as perceptions which no longer allot sacredness to human life. Nonsacred perceptions lead to brutal actions, and sacred perceptions will not allow one to take a life when other survival strategies remain for the officer (other strategies which are always accessible, since police

officers have the authoritative power in any situation). Rather, police narratives and racialized fictionalizations — whereby police perform out of a militarized ‘self-defense’ and out of a certain social expectation for each other, an *esprit de corps* — allow officers to turn any situation, with any bystander, on any street, in any city, at any time of day, on any day of the year, into a plausibly deniable warzone where brutality and violence become permissible to deploy, indeed even become their standard operating procedure. Police are not incompetent, but rather they are culpable when their paranoid, racialized perceptions transform civilian self-respect and dignity into supposed, criminalized disobedience.

Martinot entangles dehumanization (i.e., *police-generated* brutality), as an essential structure of the policing institution, with historical powers of white supremacy and racialization at work in US civil society. Racism constructs ‘whiteness,’ white supremacy, and white performance for ‘white’ culture — a hegemonic hierarchy (macro) systematically inundated and (micro) interpersonally evangelized onto other cultures. Biased misattributions of white supremacy necessarily sustain any hierarchism which subordinates ‘other races’ as lesser — where race is constructed, systemic, and an intentional choice of prejudiced misattribution, by reductive, racist, nonsacred perceivers, i.e., ‘racializers.’ The interdependence of white supremacy with racialization articulates how hierarchism and nonsacred perceptions in policing disproportionately harm Black, Latine, and other racialized civilian populations. Brutal violence is distributed via nonsacred perceptions (e.g., *racially*-motivated and constructed biases) which lead to brutal actions (e.g., a willingness as well as a decision to take, i.e., kill, *that* ‘nonsacred’ life in particular). Brutalizing racialized communities enables police to normalize an expanding set of civilians they are willing to brutalize, implying bidirectional influences between racialization, racism, supremacy, hierarchism, policing, and brutality. Martinot’s critiques of US racism can be applied to other ethnonationalist regimes, such as the ethnic cleansing of and genocide against Palestinians by Israel; or such as the persecution of Muslims in India and in China; or such as any other, more specific, local hierarchy. What is common is the use of technology as a fascist tool of social control to reproduce the hegemony of ethnonationalist, mimetic forces — forces yet still lacking value, virtue, or substance. Thus, racism concludes the deadly trinity consisting of policing, brutality, and racism by articulating an ‘evergreen’ avenue of hierarchization by way of racialization.

Martinot’s book thoroughly sketches a critique of police thinking by articulating its structures and its preconditions. He states policing

can be transformed, but it cannot be reformed merely through training. However, what functional structures will follow to replace policing as an institution if we transform it through abolition? In my view, at best, hierarchical brutality and racialized dehumanization would be replaced by mutual aid, reciprocal responsibilities, and interpersonal commitments in decentralized networks of resistance and wellbeing; at worst, police brutality would lead to ethnonationalist, mimetic control through strict behavioral or normative hierarchies. Further research would link the trifecta of policing, brutality, and racialization with capitalism.

Dedication

This review is dedicated to my former partner, Margaret Kay-Alana Calhoun Turner, 04/22/1995 – 03/10/2023, who disappeared fleeing from the Harris County Sheriff's Office north of Houston, in Tomball, TX, and whose remains were left to be scattered by animals to destroy remaining evidence.

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