

# Do we need the police?

Professor Leslie Thomas KC



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# The situation before modern policing

- At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century England had a fragmented system of law enforcement – parish constables and watchmen, the City Marshal, the Bow Street Runners
- Many offences were punishable by death (the “Bloody Code”) and brutal public executions were used as a deterrent
- Troops were sometimes used, e.g. the Peterloo Massacre of 1819



# The creation of police forces

- Metropolitan Police created in 1829
- Some boroughs required to create police forces by Municipal Corporations Act 1835
- Counties permitted to create police forces by County Police Act 1839, and required to do so by County and Borough Police Act 1856
- Reform of the Bloody Code – number of capital offences fell to five by 1861
- Brutality of punishment replaced with certainty of punishment
- The “Peelian Principles” and policing by consent: reality or myth?
- UK exported a more militarised model of policing to Ireland (the Royal Irish Constabulary) and its colonial territories



# The US perspective

- First municipal police department created in Boston in 1838
- All major US cities had police departments by 1880s
- In the South, an earlier form of policing was the slave patrol, first created in the Carolina colonies in 1704
- Municipal policing intertwined with the development of industrial capitalism, and allowed the ruling class to control protest and dissent





# Policing and race

- Cosy public image of the police in the 1960s and 70s – “bobby on the beat”, “Dixon of Dock Green”
- But reality was very different for Black people, e.g. killing of David Oluwale in 1969
- Institutional racism revealed by 1999 Macpherson report into murder of Stephen Lawrence
- Massive race disparities remain in arrests and stop and searches
- Recent Casey Review found major problems with Metropolitan Police culture, including racism

# Policing and political dissent

- Special Branch, originally Special Irish Branch, emerged in 1880s to combat Irish nationalism
- In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it targeted suffragettes, communists, anti-colonialists, anti-war activists etc.
- “Special Operations Squad”, later “Special Demonstration Squad”, founded in 1968 in response to Vietnam War protests – later engaged in undercover operations, with officers assuming identities of deceased children and forming sexual relationships with activists
- More recent crackdown on protests, with Public Order Act 2023, and arrest of republican protestors at Coronation



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# “Community policing?”

- Friendly neighbourhood police officer?
- UK policing often wrongly romanticised in comparison with US policing
- Similarly, the Japanese *koban* system is often romanticised and its differences from Western policing are exaggerated
- As long as the role of the police is to criminalise a wide range of behaviours, they will always have an adversarial relationship with parts of the public
- Who are the “community”? Community meetings tend to be dominated by homeowners, business owners, landlords



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# “Defunding the police?”

- Redirecting resources away from policing to e.g. housing, employment, healthcare and education
- Demands vary from reformist to abolitionist
- Advocates point out that when New York police held a work slowdown in 2014-15 reports of major crime actually dropped
- Creation of alternatives e.g. Albuquerque Community Safety which responds to emergency calls relating to mental health and homelessness
- But in the UK police funding is a tiny fraction of public spending (£17 billion as against £1.1 trillion) – so defunding the police in itself won't give other public services the resources they need



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# Policing in non-capitalist societies

- “Militsiya” of the Soviet Union was not really a citizens’ militia, but a professional police force
- Rojava has been praised for its decentralised political system, and the Peace and Consensus Committees which resolve disputes at the neighbourhood level – but it still has police (the Asayish) and prisons
- The Zapatista communities of Chiapas have a radically decentralised system – communities elect local police who are neither armed, uniformed, nor professional
- But are decentralisation and deprofessionalisation always good? Local communities can be oppressive too





# Conclusion

- Policing in US and UK grew up alongside industrial capitalism and serves the interests of the ruling class
- Police often used to repress political dissent, and often racist
- But if we abolished the police now and put nothing in their place, would the power vacuum be filled by self-appointed vigilantes and private security forces which would be worse?
- A polity can't sustain itself without a monopoly on violence, so full abolition may not be realistic
- But abolitionists are right that we should invest less in policing, and more on reducing poverty and inequality, and empowering communities economically and socially



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