Book Review

Review of Whelan, Chad, and Adam Molnar. 2018. *Securing Mega-Events: Networks, Strategies, and Tensions*. London: Palgrave.

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James Sheptycki

York University, Canada
jshep@yorku.ca

Public order policing has never been more controversial than it is today. Mega-events are set-piece occasions for large-scale public-order policing. Occasions such as the Olympics, Commonwealth Games, and Pan-American Games as well as the geo-political summits of the G7, G8, or G20 are all examples of mega-events. These are planned security events, and police plan them well in advance. Documenting and describing these security operations offers lessons in police institutional thinking that are relevant beyond the specifics of the case studies in this book.

This book gives readers an inside view of policing at two mega-events: one in Toronto, Canada, in 2010 and the other in Brisbane, Australia, in 2014, with the latter described in considerable detail. It provides a comprehensive account of the police co-operation networks that are the organizational foundation for both planning such events and managing the police operations intended to secure them.

This impressively well-research book places the authors' empirical work squarely within the relevant academic literature. Readers are treated to a comprehensive scholarly empirical account of the internal working of these large-scale policing operations, which are also seen in light of the experiences of the public and spectators on the receiving end of police security practices.

The book is neatly laid out in seven chapters. The introduction explains the context and questions that arise regarding the interpretation of mega-events. The authors provide insights into the backstage areas of policework where the real institutional thinking gets done. The value in this approach is that they are able to expose the organizational tensions existing within the complex networks of security actors who co-operate in staging and policing mega-events.

The core five chapters provide inside accounts based on the authors' observations and interviews with relevant actors in Canada and Australia. The methodology underlying the research is clearly and concisely discussed and is a model to be followed. At issue are the conflicting conceptions of "security" held by people at different positions in the police division-of-labour. This gives rise to all of the complexities of operational planning. Different institutional providers of security organize in fluid networks in order to adapt to changing needs and circumstances and they speak different languages.

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For example, it was only after the G20 events in Toronto in 2010 resulted in significant disorder and large-scale mass arrests that the Toronto Police Services Board, the civilian governing body of the Toronto Police Service (TPS), understood the ramifications that a multi-agency transnational security operation had for local police accountability. The reputation of the Toronto Police Service was tarnished as a result of occurrences during this mega-event, but the TPS senior command was part-and-parcel of something much bigger and they were not fully in control of the operation. In fact, as chapter three of this book—titled “Organizing Security Actors: Designing New Nodes and Networks”—reveals, it was ad hoc specialized units of the G20 Taskforce that were more instrumental in shaping the action on the ground than TPS personnel.

What I find particularly valuable and interesting in this study is the discussion of information flows within these specific police networks. In public order situations, the flow of information and intelligence “in real time” streams out over a foundation of strategic planning and intelligence laid months in advance. Struggles to maintain a “single point of truth” in a dynamic intelligence-system—and thereby combat the risks of mixed messaging, back-channelling, miscommunicating, and simply misunderstanding all of these pathologies of the police intelligence division-of-labour and more—conspire for less than perfect organization. Even the “single point of truth” is organizationally difficult to pin down, especially when things go wrong.

The G20 events in Toronto left a bad taste in the mouths of police professionals in both Australia and Canada, and the networks of people involved in planning for the mega-event in Brisbane four years later were determined not to repeat the mistakes that created the flashpoints of conflict and protest that marred the security event in 2010.

It is true that the Brisbane G20 was, to use Willem de Lint’s and Alan Hall’s (2009) notion, “intelligent control.” As this study shows, the planners made a considered attempt at “negotiated management” *with* organized protesters. Pre-planning attempted to altogether avoid opportunities for conflict. In the event, the Brisbane G20 did not result in the mass arrests and explosive confrontations between police and public associated with the earlier Toronto version. The scorching hot Australian weather dictated that one of the most prevalent roles for police on the street was providing members of the public with drinking water. An example of police service instead of police force.

Inevitably, readers of the present age will filter their reading of this book through a different lens than the analysis through which it was originally conceived. There have been many police mega-events in the last few years. After the summer of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic panic that accompanied scenes of extreme civil unrest and hard police responses in too many jurisdictions to mention was at its most intense, the world seems altogether different than the one in which the cases described in this book took place.

However, one central lesson regarding the police intelligence division-of-labour as it is described in this book is that it is adaptable, fluid, and malleable. And, for better or for worse, it is always purposely pre-occupied with planning the next event. The glimpses of the institutional thinking going on inside the professional security networks traced in this careful study offer rare insights into the police *métier* that remain important to appreciate in more troubled times.

Whelan and Molnar’s empirical research provides insights concerning the tensions, latent and manifest, in strategic networks of police information and intelligence exchange of all kinds. Thinking about the politics of the police is thereby critically enriched through this thick descriptive and analytical exposition of the policework involved in securing mega-events.

References

- de Lint, Willem, and Alan Hall. 2009. *Intelligent Control: Developments in Public Order Policing in Canada*. Toronto, CA: University of Toronto Press.