Book Review

Wood, Lesley J. 2014. *Crisis and Control: The Militarization of Protest Policing*. London: Pluto Press. 216pp. Paperback. US\$30.00. ISBN: 978-0745333885.

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Attentive observers of demonstrations in Western countries will have noticed a shift in protest policing. This shift is most palpable in regards to current police forces' highly technical riot gear that, given its dark colours, the extensive armour, arming, and technical equipment, evokes Robocop associations. The transformation also includes tactical approaches such as massive access control and kettling (of protestors or their addressees, e.g. at summits), the increase of preventative (information-based) operation concepts, public relations efforts, and an increased use of technologies (e.g. camcorders, water cannons, helicopters), including less lethal weapons (pepper spray, Taser). Researchers labelled this policing style 'strategic incapacitation' (Gillham and Noakes 2007). It highly differs from predecessor policing styles like 'escalating force' (strictly legalistic and hostile towards protest, especially between the 1950s and 1970s) and 'negotiated management' (communications based, starting somewhere in the 1980s).

Lesley Wood analyses this development in Canada and the US as a process of 'Militarization of Protest Policing,' epitomised in pre-emptive control, fortification, the escalation of coercive policing strategies, incoherent negotiation, indiscriminate information gathering (p.3f), and the portrayal of protest as a threat (p.6). The book's main argument is that these transformations are a genuine expression of the dominance of neo-liberalism. Wood, therefore, is concerned with the influence of the societal context, notably the economy, on police forces, without stylising police as a simple tool of capital. As intermediaries between the politico-economic macro-level and the micro-level of police practice, Wood recognises the police's inherent logic as an organisation, police culture, specific habitus, and especially knowledge about protesters ('knowledge' to be understood in the sociology of knowledge sense of the word).

The influence of neo-liberalism is discussed and analysed along six dimensions (p.6): new management styles, privatisation, deregulation, outsourcing, reliance on information technology and a police function of 'cleaning up' and 'securing a strong investment climate'. The discussion of conceptual and various substantial aspects is then developed over the course of nine chapters. The protests and protest policing strategies analysed mostly relate to the Global Justice Movements and the Occupy Movement.

The *first chapter* introduces the problem and the theoretical framework. Unlike competing approaches (Della Porta, Tilly), the author relies on Bourdieu and defines the object of investigation as a 'field' in which practices of adopting social transformations into the field take place—i.e. the field cannot entirely be controlled from outside. In this field (with a low-prestige occupation but big governmental support) the police struggle for legitimacy while new actors gain influence (e.g. professional organisations and commercial actors). Within these networks tactical as well as technological innovations diffuse, facilitated

Ullrich, Peter. 2017. Review of Wood's *Crisis and Control—The Militarization of Protest Policing*. *Surveillance & Society* 15(1): 184-186.

<http://library.queensu.ca/ojs/index.php/surveillance-and-society/index> | ISSN: 1477-7487

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by three conditions: perception of crisis, global cooperation, and a certain shared identity amongst actors in a field.

The *second chapter* explores these developments as reflected by different waves of protest. While most (contained) protests do not notice the tendencies of militarisation, they are experienced by those who are deemed as antagonistic, uncooperative or unpredictable—particularly the new, self-conscious actors that appeared most visibly in Seattle in 1999. They are increasingly confronted with less-lethal weapons (pepper spray, Tasers, long range acoustic devices, flash-bang grenades, rubber bullets) and barricades (perimeter fences, protest pens, kettling, pre-emptive arrests). Moreover, police responds with public relations campaigns, the development of militarised units and increased learning efforts (professionalisation of knowledge about the ‘other side’). According to Wood these approaches are implemented through consecutive stages of reflection, experimentation, assessment, promotion, and adoption.

The *third chapter* explores various background trends, like organisational processes of restructuring and the new paradigm of ‘best practices’. Best practices follow the ‘New Managerialism’, a customer-oriented approach for the administration and utilisation of new technologies for performance optimisation. *Chapter four* centres on how local patterns influence these trends. Local patterns, Wood concludes, are responsible for the still existing variance, since not every protest in every place is subjected to the same militarised policing styles.

Chapter five explores implementation dynamics based on the police use of pepper spray, an exemplary icon of the militarisation of protest policing. Originally introduced as a substitute for the use of guns, thus as an *exceptional* means of force (after all it is quite dangerous), it has been adopted as an ordinary tool for crowd management tasks over the years. This mechanism, an extreme example of a function creep (or ‘mission drift’, as Wood calls it, p.29), can be observed in other areas as well (e.g. video surveillance). According to Wood, this follows from the influence that various actors from the security sector have on the police, which have only weak lines of demarcation towards such actors (‘the thin blue line of police identity’, p. 94) and also see themselves in crisis (and are therefore in search of innovation). The adoption of tools and strategies is facilitated by certification processes by befriended institutions.

Chapter six explores the growing role of professional police organisations and a whole variety of trans-organisational forums such as security fairs and conventions, where the diffusion of ideas and strategies takes place. Due to privatisation tendencies and an increased self-responsibility of local police authorities, their informal importance is on the rise. Various examples show how ‘best practices’ are introduced and propagated among authorities and on the part of private actors. A particularly interesting case is the company, Taser International, Inc., which succeeded to generally enforce its electroshock weapon by explicitly targeting police authorities.

Chapter seven discusses the shifts in the police perception of protest, which has been increasingly classified as a matter of ‘security’ and ‘threat’ since the attacks on September 11, 2001. In particular, it is shown that ‘events’ of an entirely different nature (protest, sports events, terror attacks) are met with standardised routines that are increasingly based on risk assessments and preventative action (rather than reaction to deviance in the older policing paradigms). This contributes to the de-politicisation of protest and its framing as a threat in police knowledge. *Chapter eight* explores the role of police narratives about protest and the dangers it allegedly poses, in order to legitimise deployment strategies. The author draws particular attention to the narrative of urine attacks on police forces, which, despite the absence of verifiable evidence or criminal charges, police just keep retelling.

In the *ninth chapter*, Wood concludes that, because of the tendency of the police to react to criticism of their actions with expert knowledge from the networks of the private security sector, this overall

constellation must always be taken into consideration if attempts for democratisation and control are not to be in vain.

Sadly, the book does not provide information and reflections on its methodology. The reader only implicitly gets the impression that amongst the many sources, including press reports and a variety of documents, there are quite a few reports that capture the subjective experiences of the activist author. With sources neither categorised nor critically reflected, and their selection process left unexplained, the possible scope of the author's generalisations remains limited. And even though her clearly activist tenor is legitimate, it could have been a more explicit part of the discussion. For, among other things, it creates a partially asymmetrical view that dichotomises an emphasis on protest on the one side and police criticism on the other. Not only does this hinder a reconstruction of the inherent logic of social processes, but it might also cause a certain reductionism that addresses only morally problematic aspects in the analysis of policing.

The author's use of theory is similarly erratic. This can be partly explained by the prevailing subject matter orientation of the book, but it has relevant consequences in conjunction with the methodological deficiencies. Thus, the central argument (the causality of neoliberalism for the phenomena depicted) is not so much grounded in a substantive theory but rather narratively plausibilised. Given the global nature of the hypothesis, however, such a strict proof is hard to obtain, as it is hard to operationalise. At least, the reader would have hoped for a broader discussion of possible alternatives or additional explanatory factors (e.g. professionalisation, differentiation, transnationalisation, big data/information society, the culture of control, sociology of technology/STS approaches). Unconvincingly, subject-specific theories (e.g. on identity in social movements and the diffusion of protest claims) are simply transferred to the completely different subject matter of the police.

And yet, despite these flaws, it is a readable book, which provides important insights into the contextualisation of the transformations we see in protest policing. Many aspects can also be observed far beyond the examined North American context. This is true in regard to both police practices, including the excessive trend of militarisation, as well as its background (networks of security actors, privatisation, management strategies, etc.).

The conceptual problems, especially to find 'direct' proof for the specific influence of global transformations in the neo-liberal capitalist totality on dynamics at a (micro) field level are also difficulties faced by many scholars in critical theory. To partly fail facing them still seems better than to simply restrict research to middle range questions.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the German Research Council (DFG; GZ: UL 389/3-1).

* Review previously published in German (see <http://www.surveillance-studies.org/2016/01/crisis-and-control/>).

This text was translated into English by Bennet Etsiwah.

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