Stop Kidding Yourself: The Police Were Created to Control Working Class and Poor People

Posted on December 29, 2014 by Sam Mitrani

In most of the liberal discussions of the recent police killings of unarmed black men, there is an underlying assumption that the police are supposed to protect and serve the population. That is, after all, what they were created to do. If only the normal, decent relations between the police and the community could be re-established, this problem could be resolved. Poor people in general are more likely to be the victims of crime than anyone else, this reasoning goes, and in that way, they are in more need than anyone else of police protection. Maybe there are a few bad apples, but if only the police weren't so racist, or didn't carry out policies like stop-and-frisk, or weren't so afraid of black people, or shot fewer unarmed men, they could function as a useful service that we all need.

This liberal way of viewing the problem rests on a misunderstanding of the origins of the police and what they were created to do. The police were not created to

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protect and serve the population. They were not created to stop crime, at least not as most people understand it. And they were certainly not created to promote justice. They were created to protect the new form of wage-labor capitalism that emerged in the mid to late nineteenth century from the threat posed by that system's offspring, the working class.

This is a blunt way of stating a nuanced truth, but sometimes nuance just serves to obfuscate.

Slave patrol badge, 1858. Slave patrols to hunt down escaped slaves were the original police in the South.

Before the nineteenth century, there were no police forces that we would recognize as such anywhere in the world. In the Northern United States, there was a system of elected constables and sheriffs, much more responsible to the population in a very direct way than the police are today. In the South, the closest thing to a police force was the slave patrols. Then, as Northern cities grew and filled with mostly immigrant wage workers who were physically and socially separated from the ruling class, the wealthy elite who ran the various municipal governments hired hundreds and then thousands of armed men to impose order on the new working class neighborhoods.

Class conflict roiled late nineteenth century American cities like Chicago, which experienced major strikes and riots in 1867, 1877, 1886, and 1894. In each of these

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upheavals, the police attacked strikers with extreme violence, even if in 1877 and 1894 the U.S. Army played a bigger role in ultimately repressing the working class. In the aftermath of these movements, the police increasingly presented themselves as a thin blue line protecting civilization, by which they meant bourgeois civilization, from the disorder of the working class. This ideology of order that developed in the late nineteenth century echoes down to today – except that today, poor black and Latino people are the main threat, rather than immigrant workers.

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Chicago police cast themselves as the defenders of civilization for a society ordered by capitalist premises. After Haymarket in 1886, they contended that they stood between civilization and anarchy.

Of course, the ruling class did not get everything it wanted, and had to yield on many points to the immigrant workers it sought to control. This is why, for instance,

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municipal governments backed away from trying to stop Sunday drinking, and why they hired so many immigrant police officers, especially the Irish. But despite these concessions, businessmen organized themselves to make sure the police were increasingly isolated from democratic control, and established their own hierarchies, systems of governance, and rules of behavior. The police increasingly set themselves off from the population by donning uniforms, establishing their own rules for hiring, promotion, and firing, working to build a unique esprit des corps, and identifying themselves with order. And despite complaints about corruption and inefficiency, they gained more and more support from the ruling class, to the extent that in Chicago, for instance, businessmen donated money to buy the police rifles, artillery, Gatling guns, buildings, and money to establish a police pension out of their own pockets.

There was a never a time when the big city police neutrally enforced “the law,” or came anywhere close to that ideal (for that matter, the law itself has never been neutral). In the North, they mostly arrested people for the vaguely defined “crimes” of disorderly conduct and vagrancy throughout the nineteenth century. This meant that the police could arrest anyone they saw as a threat to “order.” In the post-bellum South, they enforced white supremacy and largely arrested black people on trumped-up charges in order to feed them into convict labor systems.

The violence the police carried out and their moral separation from those they patrolled were not the consequences of the brutality of individual officers, but were the consequences of careful policies designed to mold the police into a force that could use violence to deal with the social problems that accompanied the development of a wage-labor economy. For instance, in the short, sharp depression of the mid 1880s, Chicago was filled with prostitutes who worked the streets. Many policemen recognized that these prostitutes were generally impoverished women seeking a way to survive, and initially tolerated their behavior. But the police hierarchy insisted that the patrolmen do their duty whatever their feelings, and arrest these women, impose fines, and drive them off the streets and into brothels, where they could be ignored by some members of the elite and controlled by others. Similarly, in 1885, when Chicago began to experience a wave of strikes, some policemen sympathized with strikers. But once the police hierarchy and the mayor decided to break the strikes, policemen who refused to comply were fired. In these and a thousand similar ways, the police were molded into a force that would impose order on working class and poor people, whatever the individual feelings of the officers involved.

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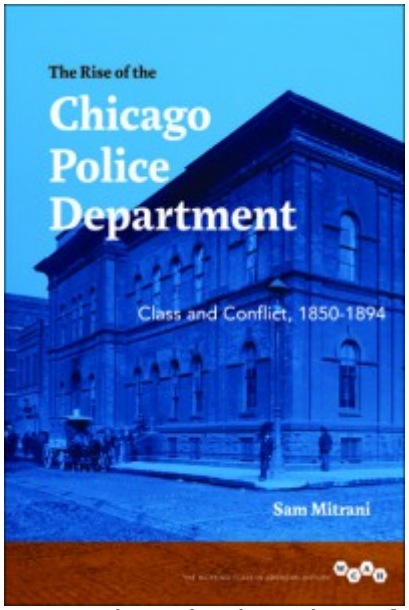
Though some patrolmen tried to be kind and others were openly brutal, police violence in the 1880s was not a case of a few bad apples – and neither is it today.

Much has changed since the creation of the police – most importantly the influx of black people into the Northern cities, the mid-twentieth century black movement, and the creation of the current system of mass incarceration in part as a response to that movement. But these changes did not lead to a fundamental shift in policing. They led to new policies designed to preserve fundamental continuities. The police were created to use violence to reconcile electoral democracy with industrial capitalism. Today, they are just one part of the "criminal justice" system which continues to play the same role. Their basic job is to enforce order among those with the most reason to resent the system – who in our society today are disproportionately poor black people.

A democratic police system is imaginable – one in which police are elected by and accountable to the people they patrol. But that is not what we have. And it's not what the current system of policing was created to be.



Sam Mitrani, The Rise of the Chicago Police Department, will be released in spring 2015 from University of Illinois Press

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Graffiti, location unknown.

If there is one positive lesson from the history of policing's origins, it is that when workers organized, refused to submit or cooperate, and caused problems for the city governments, they could back the police off from the most galling of their activities. Murdering individual police officers, as happened in in Chicago on May 3rd 1886 and more recently in New York on December 20th, 2014, only reinforced those calling for harsh repression – a reaction we are beginning to see already. But resistance on a mass scale could force the police to hesitate. This happened in Chicago during the early 1880s, when the police pulled back from breaking strikes, hired immigrant officers, and tried to re-establish some credibility among the working class after their role in brutally crushing the 1877 upheaval.

The police might be backed off again if the reaction against the killings of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and countless others continues. If they are, it will be a victory for those mobilizing today, and will save lives – though as long as this system that requires police violence to control a big share of its population survives, any change in police policy will be aimed at keeping the poor in line more effectively.

We shouldn't expect the police to be something they're not. As historians, we ought to know that origins matter, and the police were created by the ruling class to control working class and poor people, not help them. They've continued to play that role ever since.

Author

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