Erratum

Book review

Crime, Law and Social Change, 1993 (20:1), 76–77.

The second page of the book review was inadvertently omitted during printing. The complete version is printed below.

Les Johnston, *The Rebirth of Private Policing* (London: Routledge, 1992), 242 pp. Price £ 35.00 [hb], £ 11.99 [pb]. ISBN 0-415-05192-4/0-415-05193-2.

Despite an orgy of academic publishing on the police in the last decade, few studies have attempted to break the conceptual mould. Conventional accounts have largely accepted two central premises. There is a unilinear form of police development to the apex of those present forces that fall within the general Anglo-American parameters. Secondly, policing is *state* policing. Definitional problems have been ignored with a crude functionalism – policing is what people in blue (or whatever colour) uniforms do.

Few authors have followed Otwin Marenin's lead (*Contemporary Crisis*, 6, 1982) in attempting to theorise more widely about the key practices of *police-work* in the contemporary world, though certain debate has been generated from other sources. Legal anthropologists, for instance, have documented alternative forms of policework. Policing was not simply invented – as in South Africa, by the settler state – but contained its own indigenous legitimacy and practices prior to external impositions. Collectivities in the industrial West as in the Third World “did” policing long before the transplantation of some Rowan-and-Mayne model. Studies of colonial policing have laid bare the entrails of systems of policing that were de-legitimised by the institutions of the colonising state. Marenin's own most recent work (on Alaskan policing) is one of the few recent studies that informs a more theoretical approach.

One major but preliminary development was Shearing and Stenning's reconstruction of the debate over *private policing*. They recognised two trends in the contemporary world – the increased construction of policing practices by large corporations and, secondly, a movement to a do-it-yourself policing in everyday life. Crucial here was the recognition that many other personnel

than state police officers conduct key *ordering, problem-solving*, practices. Johnston's book resumes where Shearing and Stenning left off.

I originally approached this text with some cynicism – not another text on the growth of the private security industry! Although such a brief account is included here, the major contribution of this text is to extend the conceptual framework about policework. Johnston has the ability to make novel points on which, with hindsight, we can all say "I should have thought of that". One such nugget will suffice. He argues that the apparent success of nineteenth century police forces in contributing to a more orderly society, actually owed more to the self-disciplining mechanisms of lower-class neighbourhoods. The residents of those areas kept the state police at arms' length while conducting their own policing activities. Social order, then as now, is constructed not because of the activities of the state police but *despite* those intrusions. In practice, state police have very little to do – past and present – with order maintenance in residential districts. The South African case (under apartheid) provides an extreme example of this thesis but one that has parallels elsewhere – there, the white suburbs are patrolled largely by private security, the black townships by local comrades operating under the aegis of the Peoples' Courts. The state police were often irrelevant.

But Johnston goes much further in criticising conventional notions of the public-private divide. Several related critical points are central to his encyclopaedically-informed analysis. Police studies have concentrated on the visible front-line appearance of police – in effect, on the state police. Secondly, they have ignored informal policing. The wave of academic accounts of informalism with regard to judicial process failed to generate a similar discussion over informal policing.

These concerns allow Johnston to raise other core problematics in research on policework – the partial failure to devote as much attention to research on police command as to the rank-and-file; the dichotomy between structural approaches on the police institution and the infinitely-regressing micro-sociological emphases on the police culture and on street interaction; the failure in many texts to recognise that police service and control practices are interdependent – a false distinction has been created; the neglect of other models of policework than those of Anglo-American origins (such as Clive Emsley's work on a major alternative state model – the Continental *gendarmerie*); and the internationalization of policework. His major contribution with regard to private corporate policing is to transcend the Foucauldian position – with the emphasis on surveillance and control – to a wider understanding of the varied character of private security practices. Private security work is a diffuse area of interconnected activities and not simply reducible to a control function. Similarly, Johnston makes a historical contribution. He

documents a corrective to orthodox revisionist police history – that while grand theories of control through the New Police have their place, the reality of practice often produced something quite different on the ground.

This is an important book. To reiterate, a superficial reading might regard it as advocacy for the privatization of policing with all the horrors implied by that profit-based form of control. It is *not* that book. What Johnston provides, especially in his concluding chapters, is a theoretical (but accessible) informed re-direction of policework studies. It is a key book for both academics and those few state police officers prepared to seriously re-evaluate their practices and their relationships with local communities.

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