Policing: An Introduction to Concepts and Practice

by Alan Wright

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Reviewed by Andrew Willis

At the time of writing, the largely 'taken-for-granted' consensus about policing in the UK has become problematic. Senior police officers rail against the legal profession and the judiciary. Junior police officers reject what they see as a Home Office onslaught on pay and conditions of service. The Home Secretary promises less paperwork and more officers on the beat, but then sabotages his own initiative by requiring them to fill in time-consuming forms at every stop-and-search. And government plans to substitute traditional police officers with less well qualified, less well trained and less well paid non-police personnel in front-line duties, and to give them powers of detention. Private security professionals look on and wonder.

Although Wright does not address any of these issues directly, he certainly succeeds in making an important contribution to the current debate about the proper role of policing in early 21st-century society. The book should prove useful to police officers, security staff and academics, not necessarily because it gives 'answers' but because it offers a reasoned and reasonable approach to thinking through the role of policing in society.

The principal argument is that policing is a contested concept subject to multiple meanings, and that these need to be analysed in terms of police practice or conduct rather than of police roles or functions. Furthermore, what contemporary police officers do is best understood under the four headings of peacekeeping, crime investigation, the management of risk and the promotion of community justice (Chapter 2). This interesting model is elaborated in Chapters 3–6. Peacekeeping is examined in relation to policing protest and disorder, and Wright supports the conventional position that liberal democracy has to balance the right to protest with the right to enjoy security. Crime investigations are seen increasingly to require due process and respect for the rights of suspects. Crime prevention and community safety are viewed as new ways of dealing with risk, and Wright gently commends a partnership approach to problem-solving policing. Finally, the promotion of community justice through policing is argued as being dependent on high levels of reciprocity between agencies and individuals, pointing towards normative social controls and restorative justice rather than more disciplinary methods.

At one level the analysis is most useful. It offers a manageable dissection of police activities into different but cognate themes, and allows the reader who is unsure of what policing entails to get a reasonable grasp of the complexity of its contours. As the sub-title says, it offers an introduction to the concepts of policing.

As regards the practice of policing, the analysis is rather less compelling. The so-called 'cohesive account' is more apparent than real. Although Wright is sensitive to tensions within each of the four modalities of policing, he is much less aware of the tensions between these modes of practice. For example, the same unit of resource cannot be deployed for the purposes of public order peacekeeping and criminal investigations, any more than it can be used for crime risk management and promoting community justice. It is a bit of a liberal cop-out (sic) to endorse them all.

Generalised aspirations do not reflect the realities of late-modern policing, where there are harsh choices to be made between strongly competing demands and strictly limited resources. This is precisely what has caused much of the recent rethinking of police priorities. The failure to address costs and benefits (and making choices) precludes analysis of the changing balance between public policing and private security; and it is not good enough to assert that policing is a function of public authority rather than civil society (page 160). Although Wight's contribution does not drive towards a practical resolution of these problems, it does offer a thematic framework for thinking about settlement.

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