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### Policing, popular culture and political economy: Towards a social democratic criminology [Book review]

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## Reviews

***Policing, Popular Culture and Political Economy: Towards a Social Democratic Criminology*, Robert Reiner, Ashgate, Farnham, UK, 2011, 478 pages (ISBN 978-1-4094-2636-3)**

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This anthology brings together some of the best work from a leader in the critical scholarship concerning British policing and beyond. Robert Reiner, as the publisher's blurb suggests, 'has been one of the pioneers in the development of research on policing since the 1970s as well as a prolific writer on mass media and popular culture representations of crime and criminal justice'. Reiner's research career is richly represented in the thematic convergence that this collection sets out to achieve: the place of policing in popular culture; the manner in which contemporary cultures have been shaped through policing; the essential reliance in political economy on frames of social ordering; and the fragile fabric of contemporary policing and its role in the maintenance of political economies under challenge.

The volume brings together many of Reiner's most important essays on the police written over the last four decades, as well as selected essays on mass media and on the neo-liberal transformation of crime and criminal justice. As the publisher says of its binding thematic, all the work included in this important volume is underpinned by a framework of analysis in terms of political economy and a commitment to the ethics and politics of social democracy. The reader will agree that this is no self-indulgent festschrift. Nor is it an uncritical potpourri of policing research attached uncomfortably to wider considerations of political and economic ordering; or the pure, but problematic (and sometimes paradoxical), aspirations for policing social democracy. This would never be the outcome of a collection of Reiner's work on policing, because as each piece in the volume demonstrates, Reiner's 'take' on policing cannot be disentangled from the historical and social specifics of political economy. Whether he is unpacking the lives of chief constables, disentangling accountability, challenging law and order politics, or critiquing policing in light of a social democratic vision, Reiner is only interested in policing as a creature of culture and vice versa. Of his research, it could be said that Reiner's mission has been to socially embed criminology over decades when the more distracted ambit of the discipline has been to flagellate its theoretical foundations.

The anthology is in three parts, reflecting the major concerns of his work, as suggested in the title. After the reflective introduction, the following series of essays are found in Part I (Policing): 'The police, class and politics'; 'The police in the class structure'; 'Fuzzy thoughts: the police and law-and-order politics'; 'In the office of Chief Constable'; 'Policing a postmodern society'; 'From PC Dixon to Dixon plc: policing and police powers since 1954' (with T Newburn); 'Neophilia or back to basics? Policing research and the seductions of crime control'; and 'New theories of policing: a social democratic critique'.

Each of these essays builds on recurrent critical themes that are taken up in the contributions comprising the other two parts. Impossible as it is in reviewing essay collections to remove one's personal preferences, I was disappointed at the failure to include some of his work on accountability, and the more comparative research on policing models.

That said, for me his most prophetic work ‘Policing a postmodern society’ is centre-stage. The ubiquitous presence of the police in fumbling the control of the ‘cell-phone riots’ in the United Kingdom over summer 2011, and the misuse of the police in governing the ‘Occupy Movement’ in London and the student resistance to university fees, has revealed not only the fragile hold that British governance has over social division, but also the inimical role of policing in exacerbating, rather than eradicating this fragility. What does this say of the tolerance that is, at least theoretically, definitive of social democratic politics? Reiner foresees this control paradox from a deep historical grounding and an evocative cross-disciplinary appreciation of policing as governance.

Part II (Popular Culture and Crime) contains a slimmer, but no less robust set of offerings: ‘The new blue films’; ‘True lies: changing images of crime in British postwar cinema’ (with Jessica Allen and Sonia Livingstone); and ‘Media, crime, law and order’. Of necessity, Reiner has his own way of seeing popular culture and crime’s presence within it. Like David Garland, Reiner is as much fascinated by that application of culture as an analytical tool for understanding the social location of crime, its representation, and the manner in which control is constructed by forces that are inimical of culture itself.

Part III (Political Economy of Crime and Control: The state and British criminology) is where the collection is at its most elliptical. It is a big ‘ask’ to include sufficient work here to satisfactorily meet the demands of revealing the political economy of crime and control. Scholars such as Lacey (2008) have tried more modestly to achieve a similar project focusing on punishment. In the composition of this part — ‘Crime and control in Britain’; ‘Beyond risk: a lament for social democratic criminology’; ‘Law and order – a 20:20 vision’; ‘Neo-liberalism, crime and criminal justice’; ‘The law and order trap’; and ‘Citizenship, crime, criminalization: marshalling a social democratic perspective’ — Reiner exposes the tragic synergies between neo-liberal politics and the ‘catch-all’ criminal justice that was a feature of the Blair prime ministership and spelt the demise of frail hopes for community policing (the comforting aspirations of Alderson (1979) aside).

My two criticisms of this otherwise remarkable insight into the work of a writer who changed forever the understanding of policing studies (as Reiner well lays out in ‘Policing research and the seductions of crime control’ and in the discussion of police history paradigms in *The Politics of Police* (Reiner 2010)) relate to form and substance. While the publishers, Ashgate, are to be constantly commended for not giving up on the anthology as a principal publishing form, and particularly for their commitment to showcasing collections of great scholarship in socio-legal studies, it is a pity it did not risk beyond the library market on this and bring it out in paperback. That would have made the price much more affordable and, as a consequence, Reiner’s work would be accessible at least to a new student market, which perhaps was only exposed to police in school classroom visits when Reiner commenced his research scholarship in policing. This audience might now be confronting police in street protests or nightclub drug raids.

The second issue is more substantive. It takes two forms. The first is whether this collection sets out a convincing case for a ‘Social Democratic Criminology’. The aligned concern is whether such a case can or even should be made out. As Braithwaite (2008) is with capitalism, for Reiner it is all about getting policing *right*. This is not any naive commitment to policing at all costs, but rather, for Reiner, he is not willing to see criminology go where its Marxist forefathers would have taken it; as a fundamental challenge to the continuation of policing and to its complicity in the preservation of near defunct social democracy.

These reservations aside, as with Reiner, this anthology demands our profound debt to a scholar who made the critical exploration of policing studies not just a legitimate component of criminology, but who almost single-handedly, and in such a craftsman-like manner, made the critical appreciation of the place of police in our world a vital concern far beyond criminology.

A final observation is about the challenge that this anthology and that which Reiner's rich scholarship holds out to those who come after. A wider interdisciplinary interpretation of Reiner could be a project for the intersection between criminology and the sociology of law. Reiner's work cuts across many boundaries and as interesting as is the eclecticism of this collection, it should now stimulate a surge of interdisciplinary, cross-cultural contributions to the appreciation of policing — particularly beyond the limited protections of politics that claims social democracy.

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