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Policing Urban Communities. The Times, they are A-Changing.

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1. The History of Policing – a History of „Just Ordinary Men“?

Policing is a diverse and pluralistic set of social acts. Police is part of society. Police stems from society. Police officers and their work reflect historical and current societal standards in terms of moral belief. If we look at the most recent situations in France and the U.S., we are confronted with extraordinary violence against and by the police. What are the reasons, what are the consequences for policing in the future? Policing inner cities is not a new topic, but one which is more important than ever. Police violence destroys trust in police and trust in democracy and leads to more aggression, to a vicious circle of violence, aggression, prejudice and mutual rejection. Under these circumstances, policing inner cities looks like a mission impossible. But is it? And if so, are there any solutions to break the vicious circle? We are facing the question of how to deal with social problems and the people our society leaves behind. The so called „terrorism“ is not a phenomenon that appeared out of the blue after 9/11. But the reason for these people not to recognize the state that they live in as their own, is not only some islamist brainwash. They become receptive to islamist propaganda, because they feel the lack of a fatherland in Europe. They developed deep hatred. But not only does the „wiping out“-idea not work; it also comes with many risks and side effects. One may question whether terrorism is connected to the refugee problems or the problem refugees are facing in their home countries, during their escape, and after arrival in the (not so safe) haven of Europe. In any case, we do have a new challenge: policing borders in Europe and facing the problems of migration without accepting and using the dictator in Turkey as a gatekeeper. Do we have a theory of policing European borders? I don't think so. But we need one soon.

2. Policing Inner Cities and Urban Communities

The everyday work of the police is rarely analysed empirically. Police activities, referred to as "low profile policing" (i.e. low-threshold interventions such as conflict mediation, assistance, traffic accidents or sanctioning of traffic offenses) get little attention, although they shape everyday policing and the shift work of police officers. Policing Inner Cities is a quite diverse job. In a study in five countries some years ago, we looked deeper into everyday policing. Policing is much more than maintaining law, order, and crime fighting. Many colleagues have argued that nothing works in policing. Police do not prevent crime, although they claim to "fight crime"; equipment, training, different strategies have no or only minor effects on crime – at least no effects that are sustainable. But nothing is "obvious" in science. Some studies have shown that police can effect crime rates. Already in 1986, Jock Young and others recommended that in urban areas the police should focus on controlling crimes with high social impact. What has been done since that time? The very common assumption that more police results in less crime is an assumption that nowadays is supported even by the Green Party in Germany. There is no relation between "police density" and clearing rate. Just more of the same is not working. There is also no relation between the number of crimes and police officers, if you look at comparisons for European countries. Some pieces of research might conclude that there is a negative association between numbers of police officers and property crimes (not violent crimes). A Swedish study says that a 10 per cent increase in officers will lead to a reduction in crime of around 3 per cent. I have calculated that for Northrhine-Westfalia to reduce the registered crime by 10%, you need 4.000 additional police officers, which will cost about 320 Mio. Euro per year. To prevent just one burglary case by more police will cost 60.000.- Euro. But why has the police nearly no impact on crime? There is not one police officer available for every 400 citizens, but effectively one for every 10.000 - if we take into account the shift system, training and education, holidays and so on. Having one officer more on the street would cost around 1.5 Mio. € - per year. The crime rate and the clearing rate are determined by other factors (such as the size of the city, social composition, poverty rate) than the size and density of the police.

3. Crime, Police, and Place

Since some years, research is focusing on the distribution of crime at lower levels of geography. The focus on micro geography is called the 'criminology of place'. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this approach, and what does it have to do with policing urban communities? If we look closer at street segments, we realize that crime is not distributed equally. That itself is nothing new. Place matters sounds familiar since Shaw and McKay's Social Disorganisation Theory in 1942, nearly 75 years ago. But what are the consequences for policing today's cities and what happens if we look closer into the data? What lies behind these places? Focuses – or better „melting pots“, because different social problems melt there and provide a melange that is usually discussed as a crime problem. From studies by David Weisburd and others we know, that about 5% of the city segments are responsible for 50% of all crimes. How can we explain these „crime concentrations“? And how can we include these insights into a theory of policing? Place matters. We know that since Shaw and McKay's Social Disorganisation Theory in 1942, nearly 75 years ago. But what has followed since then? The relation between police and the public is an important point. Promoting collective efficacy will require a shift from the short-sighted focus of crisis response to a open approach that allows space for community-building efforts at hot spots. Research indicates that a community prone to engaging in informal social control is less likely to need the police and is of more value to the police when crime does occur. The causes of crime and the foundations of order are located in the nature and dynamics of society, which are largely external to the authority of the police. Crime is ultimately driven by factors outside of the police's scope of control. However, the police often engage in othering, where the communities of interest are dehumanized in the eyes of police personnel, what results in worsening the situation. The communities become the objects of law enforcement and social control. We may call this "police frontierism" with the four "c": containment, confrontation, conversion and conquest. Hot spot policing can result in police frontierism and othering, if members of the resp. Communities are seen as causes of problems and objects of police interventions and need to be „whipped away“ by using the police Kärcher. Police often is forced by public opinion and politics to recover so called „lawless areas“ like streets or districts, where police is accused of retreating instead of being „brave enough“ to intervene. But police cannot conquest areas. If we measure the cohesion within a society (social cohesion) against the voter participation, what does it mean that one third of the society permanently refrains from voting? What we need is more social cohesion and a police, that is supporting this idea of social cohesion, and not destroying trust in democracy. Police must speak out loud about the social problems they realize by analysing the relation between place and crime.

4. A new Theory of Policing?

Long-term prevention is impossible if we do not address the social crime problems. Only changing the social situation may result in less crime. Police can and should act as a "litmus test" for crime and social problems and we must see police as "Catalytic Converter" of Social Problems. Police is only one of many actors in the field of security. Police is only one of the institutions responsible for causes of crime. Police work has to reflect this in the following ways: Scandalizing social problems, which are behind hot spots of crime. Refuse to be the „Kärcher“ of our nations. Policing means collecting information on the real background of crime. To fight alongside with those, who suffer and who have no voice to cry out loud. Instead of being (and being proud to be) „crime fighters“, police should be the „voice of the „left behinds“. Nobody else is closer to the real crime factors. It is the mission of the police to name these problems. This mission is NOT impossible!