

# **Policing is Political: The Empirical Evidence**

*Argument & Critique, 2021*

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## **Key Words**

Perspectives on Policing; Policing of Dissent; Policing as Social Harm; A Liminal Perspective on Policing; Political Repression; Policing the Edge.

*“This committee heard some of the most disturbing testimony that can be imagined in a free society. We heard evidence that for decades the institutions designed to enforce the laws and Constitution of our country have been engaging in conduct that violates the law and the Constitution.”* Chairman of the Church Committee (1973: 61).

## **Abstract**

The empirical evidence that policing is primarily political, that it is principally concerned with the imposition of social order, is extensive. The work of this paper is to adduce a representative selection of the relevant literature. The conclusion from an overview of this literature, is that policing is easily disconnected from the mandate granted in Liberal Democracies to secure the Liberty, Equality and Fraternity of citizens. Policing adheres to the imposition of the social, albeit a social that fails to meet the needs of the majority of citizens. The resultant harm caused to citizens and to democracy itself are matters deserving serious consideration.

## **Introduction**

The perspective taken in this paper is one that develops from the three perspectives on policing outlined by Reiner (2010) in *The Politics of the Police*, the orthodox, the revisionist and the post-revisionist points of view. The orthodox standpoint is now regarded as the ‘cop sided’ view of history. In the orthodox view, professional policing was created as a necessary response to crime for the purpose of protecting citizens. There is an underlying assumption of a functional social order that serves the universal benefit of all in society. In contrast, the revisionist perspective is influenced by Marxism, Anarchism and Abolitionism and argues that the police are a repressive force acting in the interests of the ruling classes. The post-revisionist standpoint builds on the revisionist critique of orthodoxy, by not accepting at face value, the march of progress view implicit in orthodoxy, but critiques revisionism for underestimating the extent to which the ideological apparatuses of the state engender an apparent legitimacy that appears to incorporate the interests of less privileged populations. Going beyond the three perspectives conceptualised by Reiner (2010), the liminal approach (Irvine, 2021a) is operationalised in the paper, which sees policing as primarily focused on the social edge, engaging with dissent, negotiating the contours of the social field and in this place, fragmenting into shards of political difference.

The political nature of policing is readily evidenced. Policing is used to monitor, surveil, deter and criminalise protest (Lubbers, 2012; Rawlinson, 2014). The history of extradition and deportation is politically laden (Pyle, 2001; Moloney, 2012; Preston, 1963). The Palmer raids which involved the deportation of the world-famous Anarcho-Feminist intellectual Emma Goldman are a notable example (Cohen, 2003; Hochschild, 2019; Levin, 2019; Pusey, 2015). The political nature of policing was also exposed in the *Mangrove Nine* trials, where the defendants successfully argued, that rather than they being guilty of creating disorder, it was the police who regularly disrupted Black lives. Being Black was constructed as a political act by police who equated political action with criminality (Waters, 2018). Vindication came later when a *Home Office* commissioned report from the *Community Relations Commission*

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“concluded that contrary to the police reports the violence was not initiated by the marchers but by the police.” (Hillel, R. & Iglkowski-Broad, V. 2015; Morris; 1970).

The history of the *Mangrove Nine* is told in the *Mangrove* film in the *Small Axe Anthology*, screened on *BBC1* in November 2020. This is one of a range of current docu-drama contributions to raising awareness of the role that policing has played in political repression. It is a welcome development that the entertainment industry is now performing more of an educational role in making populations aware of the political repression that has shaped our current political context. Given the importance of this material, some of the main contributions are outlined in the Filmography at the end of this paper.

Undercover police work has become a matter of significant public interest due to its particularly intrusive nature and long term harmful impacts in, for example, creating and breaking intimate relationships (Marx, 1988, 1992; Fijnaut, & Marx, 1995) even conceiving children (Lewis & Evans, 2013). Women have described these relationships based on deception as being ‘raped by the State’ (McCartney & Wortley, 2014). The Father who returns to the secrecy of his pre-undercover life, leaves his child fatherless and forced to cope with serious abandonment. Undercover police acting as *agents provocateurs* have raised serious concerns about entrapment, placing the public under greater risk of harm than they would otherwise have experienced. Numerous examples have been documented (Marx, 1974, Human Rights Watch 2014; Sherman, 2006; Laguardia, 2013; McAdams, 2005). The undercover policing of Trade Unionists, Green campaigners, anti-racism campaigners, Feminists, Animal Rights and anti-war groups, anti-corruption activists and other political activists has been documented in immense detail by the *Hearing on the Federal Bureau of Investigation* before the Church Committee on Intelligence Activities, in the US Senate (1976). The *Undercover Policing Inquiry*, chaired by Sir Christopher Pitchford and subsequently Sir John Mitting (2015) has reported on these types of activities in the UK.

COINTELPRO, the Counter Intelligence Program undertaken by the FBI from 1956 to 1971 was investigated by the Church committee. What has caused particular concern is that the FBI activities in COINTELPRO were not predicated on probable cause to believe that crimes were likely to be committed (Church committee, 1973:60) and that the aim was not centred on prosecution, but involved widespread covert activities to disrupt and subvert domestic American political organizations and the lives of politically active individuals. The Chairman expressed deep concern over the extensive violations of the law and the constitution that had been unearthed by committee. The techniques that were directed against political activity have been analysed in detail, with illustrative examples in Cunningham, & Noakes (2008).

The groups targeted included feminist organizations, anti-Vietnam War organizers, the civil rights movement, Black Power movements and the American Indian Movement (Church committee, 1973: 22, 93). Agents of the FBI were instructed to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize" Black Nationalist and New Left movements (Church committee, 1973: 6, 22). The entirely nonviolent Southern Christian Leadership Conference of Ministers, was targeted (Church committee, 1973: 12). Individuals who were targeted included the American Baptist Minister and Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., (1973: 63, 66) and the actresses Jean Seberg (Kramer, 1979; Rawls, 1979) and Jane Fonda (Church Committee, 1973: 814). The Jazz singer Billie Holiday also became a target of FBI persecution as part of the war on drugs, when she started singing the powerful anti-lynching anthem *Strange Fruit* (Hari, 2015a, b). Indeed there is strong evidence that the War on Drugs is in itself a racist project providing a thinly veiled pretext to criminalise Black and dissident minorities and in so

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doing, rendering them economically exploitable and politically disenfranchised (Alexander, 2010, 2012; Tarricone, 2020).

Dr. Martin Luther King's case was seen by the Church committee as “a classic example,” where all of the various techniques of the Bureau were used against an individual “in order to discredit him or embarrass him, and indeed destroy him.” (1973: 85). There were approximately 25 incidents taken against Dr King, that were described as having “no statutory basis or no basis of justification for the activity” (1973: 66). Attempts were made by the FBI to prevent him being awarded a doctorate by at least two universities, to prevent him from meeting with the Pope, to have him replaced by a leader more favoured by the FBI, and just before he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, to intimidate and demoralise him into committing suicide (Church Committee, 1973: 33, 43). Even after his death, attempts were made by the FBI to prevent his life being commemorated as a national holiday (1973: 32).

The committee points out however that Dr King was one of millions of Americans subjected to similar tactics (1973: 85, 62). Efforts were made “to neutralize people by breaking up their marriages or ruining their jobs” (1973: 6). Ruining a marriage was counted as a “result” (1973: 48). Decisions were made “to risk the death of suspect individuals (1973:6). The committee reported that some of the victims of COINTELPRO, “are high school students, some of them are high school teachers, college students, college teachers, broadcasters and journalists,” (1973: 85).

The comparison with the techniques of the East German Stasi is clear. The investigations were characterised by overbreadth. Every demonstration, every protest, “all information on race relations”, was to be reported to the Bureau. (1973: 5, 21-22). The Chairman was evidently shocked by the ubiquitous nature of the surveillance. He observed that, “Evidently, no meeting was too small, no group too insignificant to escape their attention. It did not seem to matter whether the politics of these Americans were legal or radical or whether the participants were well known or obscure.” Intimate and personal information was amassed by the FBI in indexes, “more commonly called enemy lists, of thousands of Americans.” It then “targeted many of the Americans on these lists for special harassment. Hundreds of thousands of Americans were victims of this surveillance program” (1973: 62).

The following exchange is of note:

“The CHAIRMAN. How did they find any time to investigate crime?.

Mr. SCHWARZ. I don't know, Senator. I don't know. There is a lot of effort going into this stuff. There is a lot of effort going into it. There is paper after paper. We see tracks of informants and what does it all do? What is it worth?” (1973: 15).

From the extensive body of literature covering histories of political repression by police, a representative sample is covered here. The exposition of the COINTELPRO program by Churchill & Wall (1990, 2002), Churchill, (2004) and Blackstock (1975) is probably most well-known. Boykoff (2006) has conceptualised twelve modes of suppression of dissent which include Direct Violence; Public Prosecutions & Hearings; Employment Deprivation; Infiltration, “Badjacketing” & Agent Provocateurs and Extraordinary Laws or Rules. She has specifically focused on “difficult to detect Modes of Suppression,” deployed against the expression of dissent by Social Movements in the US. The mechanisms are Resource Depletion, Stigmatization, Divisive Disruption, Intimidation and Emulation (Boykoff, 2006: 11). The area is vitally important because as a result of the suppression of dissent, “democracy suffers” (Boykoff, 2006: 12).

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Christenson (1991) has explicated a fascinating range of clearly political trials going all the way back to antiquity, including the trial of the Knights Templar for sacrilege, Denmark Vessey for slave rebellion, John Scopes for teaching evolution, the Rosenbergs for espionage, Tom Paine for seditious libel for publishing *The Rights of Man*, Penguin for the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the Salem witchcraft trials, Nelson Mandela for incitement to strike and leaving South Africa illegally, Martin Luther for heresy and Galileo for heresy.

The specific focus on the Black Panthers is covered by Wilkins & Clark (1973) and their targeting in London is addressed by Angelo (2009). Churchill & Wall (1990) examine the role of the FBI in targeting the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement. The case by the People's Law Office concerning the assassination of the Leader of the Black Panthers is detailed with original documents in (People's Law Office, 2021 and Haas, 2011). The political suppression deployed against the Industrial Workers of the World has been widely covered in the literature, but a couple of examples include Strang (2019) and Churchill (2004). A very comprehensive coverage of the repression of labour and anti-war movements in the US from 1870 to 1976 is provided by Goldstein (2001). He concludes with the ominous realisation that one of the many serious consequences of this century long political repression is self-censorship and as a result, many problems simply cannot be solved because no-one dares speak of their diagnosis and name their solutions. In speaking of the contradictions in policing, Waddington (2002: 183) has become aware that, "the almost universal denial of the police role as the routine exercise of state authority is perhaps the most powerful influence conducive to malpractice." Waddington (2002: 183).

The newer transnational policing of contemporary protests is being analysed by (Peterson & Della Porta, 2016; Della Porta, 1998; Della Porta & Reiter, 1998). The policing of the Occupy Movement is covered by King (2017) and of environmentalists by King (2019) and Lewis & Evans (2013). Since the activities of the Pinkertons Detective Agency (Churchill, 2004), corporations have used private policing to spy on political activists and often the boundaries between public and private policing are blurred (Lubbers, 2012).

The first-hand experiences of those subjected to political repression as members of Labour, Black and anti-war movements, has been researched by Schultz & Schultz (2001). Case Studies cover the experiences of Congressman John Lewis, Stokely Carmichael, Abbie Hoffman, and Daniel Ellsberg. Contextual detail that clearly demonstrates the necessity of dissent is presented. When Labour Unions began forming in the US, it was a matter of life and death for workers. Thirty-six out of every hundred of the men and women who worked in the Textile Mills in Lawrence, Pennsylvania died before they reached the age of 25. At the Pressed Steel Car Co. in McKees Rock Pennsylvania, one man a day on average was killed by the newly designed production line. Yet as documented by filming of the event, when police violently attacked striking workers on South Chicago Memorial Day, ten workers were killed. (Schultz & Schultz, 2001:7). Testimonies include leaders of the Industrial Workers of the World, Southern Tenant Farmers Union, Women's Strike for Peace, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Berkeley's Free Speech Movement and the Hormel meatpackers' Local P-9.

Different economic and social structures generate different forms of social control (De Giorgi, 2006, 2007). This means that the forms of policing vary, depending on historical, social, economic, geographic and political context. In liberal democracies, the claim by the state to legitimacy in the use of force rests on a liberal, and now neoliberal, claimed democratic mandate. Police forces should be fundamentally accountable to the public and respect the

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inalienable rights of all Human beings. In principle, policing is not meant to act independently of the state from which it derives its authority, but to implement the will of the majority, or at its most sophisticated level, the consensus of all. In liberal capitalist democracies policing must be seen to conform to the stated ideals of free expression, accountable power structures, due process and equality before the law, amongst other values. The Church Committee demonstrated how easily policing can ‘slip it’s moorings’ and detach from the democratic mandate, and similar disengagements occurred in other ostensibly democratic countries (Fijnaut & Marx, 1995).

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### **Filmography**

*Battle in Seattle*, Directed by Stuart Townsend. Screenplay by Stuart Townsend. Produced by Stuart Townsend *et al.* Production Houses: Hyde Park Entertainment, Remstar Productions, Insight Film Studios.

*Bettie Page Reveals All*, Directed by Mark Mori. Screenplay by Mark Mori & Doug Miller. Produced by Mark Mori & Thorpe Mori. Production House: Single Spark Pictures.

*Chicago 7*, Directed by Aaron Sorkin. Screenplay by Aaron Sorkin. Produced by Stuart M. Besser *et al.* Production Houses: Paramount Pictures, DreamWorks Pictures, Cross Creek Pictures, Marc Platt Productions, ShivHans Pictures.

*Ferguson: A Report from Occupied Territory*, Directed by Orlando De Guzman, Production House: Fusion Media.

*Judas and the Black Messiah*, Directed by Shaka King. Screenplay by Shaka King & Will Berson. Produced by Shaka King, Ryan Coogler & Charles King. Production Houses: MACRO, Participant, Bron Creative, Proximity.

*Mangrove* film in the *Small Axe Anthology*, Directed by Steve McQueen. Screenplay by Steve McQueen and Alastair Siddons. Produced by Michael Elliott & Anita Overland, Turbine Studios & Lammas Park in association with Small Axe Films and Emu Films. Screened on BBC1 in November 2020.

*MLK/FBI*, Directed by Sam Pollard. Screenplay by Benjamin Hedin & Laura Tomasell. Production Houses: Benjamin Hedin, Depth of Vision, Tradecraft Films, Play/Action Pictures.

*Neruda*, Directed by Pablo Larrain. Screenplay by Guillermo Calderón. Produced by Renan Artukmac *et al.* Production Houses: AZ Films, Casting del Sur Fabula, Funny Balloons, Participant Media, Reborn Production, Stembro Cine and Televisión Federal.

*Peterloo*, Directed Mike Lee. Screenplay by Mike Leigh. Produced by Georgina Lowe. Production Houses: Film4 Productions; and Thin Man Films. Supported by a grant from the British Film Institute,

*Seberg*, Directed by Benedict Andrews. Screenplay by Joe Shrapnel and Anna Waterhouse. Produced by Marina Acton, *et al.* Production House: Universal Pictures.

*Stay Woke: The Black Lives Matter Movement documentary*, Directed by Laurens Grant. Produced by Jessie Williams. Production House: Far World.

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*Takeover*, Directed by Emma Francis-Snyder. Screenplay by Emma Francis-Snyder and Francisco Bella. Produced by Luis A. Miranda, Jr. Lynn Nottage and Tony Gerber, *et al.* Production House: Market Road Films. In association with Just Films| Ford Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Miranda Family Fund, The National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture, Gotham Independent Filmmaker Project New True Stories Initiative.

*The United States vs. Billie Holiday*, Directed by Lee Daniels. Screenplay by Suzan-Lori Parks. Produced by Lee Daniels *et al.* Production Houses: Lee Daniels Entertainment and New Slate Ventures.

*Z*, Directed by Costa-Gavras. Screenplay by Costa-Gavras, Jorge Semprin and based on a novel by Vassili Vassilikos. Produced by Jacques Perrin Ahmed Rachedi. Production Houses: Reggane Films and Valoria Film. Supported by the Office National pour le Commerce et l'Industrie Cinématographique,