

## Reinterpreting police-public relations in modern England

David Churchill

The relationship between the police and the public has long been a key subject in English social history. The formative work in this field was conducted between the 1970s and 1990s, but the past few years have witnessed something of a revival of research in the area. By focusing on new sources, new periods and new topics, recent work has led to new interpretations of an already well-researched topic.

Much early work in the social history of policing – loosely inspired by Marxist ideas of class relations – emphasised conflict between the police and the people. Robert Storch claimed that the newly-formed, professional police forces of the early Victorian period were met by a combination of derision and riotous resistance.<sup>1</sup> According to this view, ordinary people understood the police as ‘blue locusts’ – as parasites, sent by the ruling class to discipline working people. Some scholars supported Storch’s interpretation, yet over the years it increasingly drew criticism from others who felt that police-public relations were more complex and nuanced than this. By the 1990s, a consensus had developed among historians that encounters with the police were contingent and contradictory – sometimes good, sometimes bad, depending on the situation.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, most agreed with David Taylor that ordinary people became more accepting of the police over time, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>3</sup>

Some historians, however, have recently challenged the argument that popular perceptions of the police had improved considerably by the end of Victoria’s reign. The darker side of police-public relations – which saturated Storch’s work – has once again taken centre stage. One aspect of policing which stands out from recent research is violence. For example, in his book on Liverpool, John Archer devotes considerable space both to police violence and to violence against the police.<sup>4</sup> He suggests that policing remained distinctly unpopular with working people throughout the nineteenth century, even if overt hostility had mellowed somewhat by the 1890s. This kind of work is underpinned by the growth since the 1990s of historical research on violence more generally, a move which signals a reaction against the overriding preoccupation of early crime historians with property offences and their relation to the class system. Scholars are now concerned just as much with the importance of gender in attitudes towards violence in the past, and what violence therefore can tell us about ideas of appropriate conduct for men and women. These sophisticated approaches to violence have also informed my own work on policing in Leeds, which shows

that assaults on policemen still served as an expression of masculine independence and self-worth late into the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, by using police occurrence books – a previously neglected resource – this study reveals the abuse and insult encountered by constables on the street, and suggests that a vocal section of the public continued to hold the police in contempt. In these ways, recent research has cast some doubt on earlier claims that police-public relations improved considerably in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

As well as going over familiar material with a new eye, historians have unearthed forgotten sources of friction between the police and the populace. Over the past decade, several scholars have shifted the focus of their work from the Victorian era to the more recent past as, with the passage of time, an ever-greater portion of the twentieth century invites the attention of historians. Among others, John Carter Wood has drawn attention to a series of press scandals concerning the Metropolitan Police in the 1920s.<sup>6</sup> Revelations in this decade relating to police harassment, interrogation tactics and corruption threw public trust in the police into question. Furthermore, research on this previously under-studied era has exposed a political dimension to police-public relations, by highlighting the role of Labour and Liberal representatives in pursuing investigations into police abuses. Like new studies of the Victorian period – though from quite a different angle – this work raises doubts about public consent in policing.

Yet just because historians now conduct their research differently, it does not mean that all are agreed on a new interpretation of police-public relations. In fact, some recent work has supported the consensus of the 1990s, rather than undermined it, by demonstrating once again that police-public relations were complex and multi-faceted. This position is best represented by Joanne Klein’s study of policemen in Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham between 1900 and 1939.<sup>7</sup> Having delved deeper than her predecessors into the often fragmentary and unwieldy internal archives of police forces, Klein is able to document the great diversity of police encounters with the public. Her focus on topics such as gossiping between policemen and ordinary people, and the ambivalent approach constables took to working-class women, also reflect the current interests of social historians at large – whether in the minute details of everyday life in the past, or in gender relations, a subject often neglected in police history. Yet Klein’s work

shows that new perspectives and methods do not always conflict with established interpretations. In fact, her pioneering use of internal police sources lends much weight to a conclusion very similar to that previously reached by Taylor: popular attitudes towards the police were varied and volatile, yet they tended to improve with time.

Debate on the quality of police-public relations has clearly moved on substantially in the last few years, and the arguments of the previous generation of police historians are being scrutinised once again. What has led to these new interpretations and insights? First, the shifting focus of research from the nineteenth to the twentieth century has presented historians with new research opportunities. Second, the use of new sources – particularly internal

police records, like occurrence books – has allowed a more detailed exploration of public interactions with the police. And last, shifting interests within social history at large – for example in favour of gender relations, or violence – has sharpened concentration on particular aspects of police history. Such developments as these do not necessarily produce radically different interpretations from those which have gone before; sometimes refreshing and original research remains consonant with established viewpoints. Some historians, however, have begun to develop a more pessimistic account of police-public relations in England's past. No new consensus has yet to emerge, yet for that very reason the subject remains at present an exciting topic to research and to teach.

## Designing enquiries to help pupils think about changing interpretations of police-public relations in modern England

### Key Stage 3: 11 to 14 years

Histories are written in answer to questions and the problems that historians set out to explore often change as the present changes. Labour history and Marxist historians tended to focus on the problem of class and on 'social control'. History has diversified since the 1970s and new problems have arisen, driven by awareness of multiple dimensions of difference and by a focus on new issues (such as violence). Present students with the titles of a range of histories (works by Storch and Emsley, for example). Ask them to use a Venn diagram to organise the titles in terms of similarity and difference of focus. How far does focus change with time and what seem to be the continuities?

### A-level: 16 to 19 years

Interpretations change and develop as new questions arise, new sources are sought and found and the past itself continues to expand. Share the ICHCPJ archive and ask students to consider the uses and limitations of 'Occurrence Books' as historical sources. Next, examine the introductions, bibliographies and footnotes of histories of policing from different periods and ask students to use a quadrant diagram to consider similarities and differences in how their authors interrogated sources. How far were they asking the same questions and using the same sources?

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### Further reading

Archer, J.E. (2011) *The Monster Evil: policing and violence in Victorian Liverpool*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Emsley, C. (2009) *The Great British Bobby: a history of British policing from the 18th Century to the present*, London: Quercus.

International Centre for the History of Crime, Policing and Justice (ICHCPJ), *History from Police Archives: study courses and resource material for students of social history*: [www.open.ac.uk/Arts/history-from-police-archives/welcome.html](http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/history-from-police-archives/welcome.html)

Klein, J. (2010) *Invisible Men: the secret lives of police constables in Liverpool, Manchester, and Birmingham, 1900-1939*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Taylor, D. (1997) *The New Police in Nineteenth-Century England: crime, conflict and control*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

### REFERENCES

- 1 Storch, R.D. (1975) 'The Plague of Blue Locusts: police reform and popular resistance in northern England, 1840-57' in *International Review of Social History*, 20, pp. 61-90.
- 2 Emsley, C. (1996) *The English Police: a political and social history*, second edn, Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman.
- 3 Taylor, D. (1997) *The New Police in Nineteenth-Century England: crime, conflict and control*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- 4 Archer, J.E. (2011) *The Monster Evil: policing and violence in Victorian Liverpool*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- 5 Churchill, D. (2014) "'I am just the man for Upsetting you Bloody Bobbies': popular animosity towards the police in late nineteenth-century Leeds" in *Social History*, 39, pp. 248-266.
- 6 Wood, J.C. (2012) 'Press, Politics and the "Police and Public" Debates in Late 1920s Britain' in *Crime, Histoire et Sociétés/Crime, History and Societies*, 16, pp. 75-98.
- 7 Klein, J. (2010) *Invisible Men: the secret lives of police constables in Liverpool, Manchester, and Birmingham, 1900-1939*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

This edition's Polychronicon was compiled by Dr David Churchill, Research Fellow in Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Leeds

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