

BOOK REVIEW

Police reform from the bottom up

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Title: Police reform from the bottom up: officers and their unions as agents of change

Editors: Monique Marks and David Sklansky

Publisher: Routledge

Price: \$125

Pages: 176

Availability: Published

ISBN: 13:978-0-415-68679-2

The title of this volume, *Police reform from the bottom up*, is bound to create expectations amongst those concerned with the challenges confronting institutional change in public police agencies. It is an interest shared by police scholars and practitioners across the usual North-South divide. Few police agencies today can ignore the imperatives for ongoing adaptive 'reforms' in response to changes in the external environment. The notion of reform of course means different things in different contexts. For example, the demand for large scale restructuring of the police (rather than bits of reform here and there) is all the more pressing in the context of state overhaul triggered by processes of democratisation, as in post-conflict settings.

Over the past two decades the theories and strategies associated with institutional reform of the police as public agency have been a source of invigoration for policing studies. The application of reform ideas produced in the North has also given rise to a lucrative export industry where consultants and advisors descend on troubled destinations to assist in the re-engineering of the security sectors of new democracies. Such efforts

have tended to prioritise the development of top down interventions, i.e. of creating political buy-in and nurturing managerial skills and expertise as critical entry points to large scale institutional revamping. In such efforts the rank and file – under-trained, under-skilled and under-paid – are viewed with suspicion. They are not considered natural allies for changing the character of routine policing and often they are not allowed to organise into workplace associations along the lines of their colleagues in the North. In post-conflict settings democratisation of the institution is still to translate into democratic dividends for police as bearers of rights themselves. Given this state of affairs there is much novelty in the ideas developed by the contributors to this book.

A volume which seeks to explore the role of the rank and file and workplace associations as agents in reform in the North seems well poised to challenge conventional assumptions about the sources of institutional change. The introduction sets out the objectives of the monograph: namely to consider the role of the rank and file as well as police unions in reform of police organisations. The volume is organised into three sections. The first considers the role of rank and file as change agents; the second section looks more specifically at the relationship between police unions and police reform. The concluding section focuses on

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organisational and cultural aspects of police organisation which may facilitate or inhibit change. The team assembled for the three-pronged engagement includes internationally acclaimed policing scholars (David Bayley, Maurice Punch, Wesley Skogan, Jerome Skolnick, Hans Toch and Samuel Walker, to name but a few.) The contents of the inside cover further whet the appetite. Here there is reference to a 'pioneering volume', by 'an international, cross-disciplinary collection of scholars and police unionists' who 'address a range of neglected questions, both empirical and theoretical, about the place of police officers themselves in the process of reform.'

The first thing to note is that this publication grew out of the deliberations of a conference held at the University of California in Berkeley quite a while back, in 2006. The introduction notes that the discussions were 'wide ranging and spirited' and characterised by many 'areas of disagreement' (p5). A second observation is that this volume does little more than combine articles previously published in special issues of two international journals: *Police practice and research* and *Policing and society*. All the articles included in this volume are reprinted in their original form. It is only the introduction by Marks and Sklansky which has been expanded in an attempt to stitch the three broad themes lifted from the special editions together. The short section on police culture included here also cannot compare with the much more substantive treatment of the topic in O'Neill, Marks and Singh's edited volume on *Police occupational culture: new debates and directions* (2007). A third observation is that this publication draws a rather implicit assumption that 'rank and file' and 'police unions' are in some way similar, if not synonymous. This is a very dubious assumption. The connections between the two sections are not explored in the present volume and one is left with unresolved questions about the relationship between the two. However, the most critical shortcoming of this volume is that the three sections of the volume are not integrated in any explicit manner.

The lack of integration in this volume however does not mean that individual pieces are devoid of merit. The introduction to the volume by Marks and Sklansky goes some way toward framing the issues of theoretical and political interest regarding 'bottom-up' involvement in organisational change. Many of the issues, the editors aptly emphasise, remain contested. Much more research, on aspects of participatory management and the role and function of unions in different jurisdictions, is required so as to be able to engage with the issues in a more substantive manner.

David Bayley's reflections on critical innovations in American policing provide a very useful descriptive overview of key reforms in American policing. Most of the innovations, Bayley demonstrates, relied on external policy input by academics. In the implementation of new ideas few attempts were made to canvas the opinion of the rank and file or harness their street knowledge and skills in support of the reforms. This, Bayley intimates, is short-sighted. Senior leadership should make a concerted effort to bring foot soldiers squarely into the reform initiatives and in doing so harness 'craft knowledge' learnt on the street for adaptive reforms. Other contributors draw on experiments of participatory management in police departments to illustrate the scope for involving officers into attempts, for example, to reduce the use of excessive force (Hans Toch) or improving employee perceptions and attitudes (Steinheider & Wuestewald). Collaborative research networks, so argue Wood *et al.*, do hold some potential for boosting the capacity of police as 'change agents'. More research on the dynamics and challenges confronting front line police work, according to Thatcher, can deliver 'situated knowledge' of relevance to organisational reform endeavours.

In Section 2 of the volume Walker provides an overview of the literature on US police unions, which he declares is very inadequate, and outlines an agenda for research. Berry *et al.*, and Finnane bring comparative insights into the discussion: we learn that differences in political context and organisational culture of unions (in the UK,

Netherlands, New Zealand and Australia) impact on the role of unions *vis-à-vis* institutional change. Not exactly surprising. Even in the enlightened North unionisation remains differential and uneven. The right for police to organise and bargain, as Adams outlines, remains a sticky issue as unionisation evokes concerns about state security.

The third section of the book reintroduces more generic issues about police occupational culture and change. Wesley Skogan's sensible piece reiterates that 'police reform is risky and hard, and efforts to innovate in policing often fall short of expectations' whilst the 'sources of resistance' emanate from many diverse quarters (p144). This paper serves as a timely reminder that in the wider scheme of things the rank and file and their instruments of collective bargaining constitute but one source of inspiration for, or obstacle to, change.

A loose collection of articles hardly makes for a coherent book in which key thematic issues are explored in an integrated manner. The lack of integration means that readers interested in the substantive issues are advised to consult the special journal editions in which focus and coherence are better achieved than is the case of this volume. Be that as it may, a volume like this, framing issues of broader significance in ways not quite imaginable in other parts of the world, can serve as an inspiration to explore sub-cultural proclivities and workplace dynamics characteristic of street police operating under very different conditions. Only once we understand such dynamics should we be confident enough to draw research based conclusions about the 'rank and file' and their particular relationship to wider institutional change in pursuit of public safety.