

Book review: Behind the blue curtain

Police Street Powers and Criminal Justice: Regulation and Discretion in a Time of Change

by *Geoffrey Pearson and Michael Rowe*

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UK Policing appears immured in controversy and has been for some time. The cumulative effect on the service suggests it is not too unreasonable to argue the service is experiencing somewhat of a crisis in its legitimacy and identity. Given the complexity of modern day policing, identifying the causes for this malaise is proving to be elusive; however, it is possible to distil the “noise” around policing discourse to two salient themes: “culture” and legitimacy.

Fortunately, this publication is framed and keenly focused on those very themes. Perhaps more importantly, the book’s treatment of “culture” and legitimacy is established directly from the frontline interaction between the police and the policed. It is a work of, and from, the streets, the day-to-day reality of policing. From that vantage point, the book offers a contemporary UK perspective on Michael Lipsky’s street level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980). We see the limitations of the strategic policy intentions of senior leadership and the extent to which management policy is, or is not, delivered in practice. We see the workarounds, the short cuts, and the limits of corporate policy on the streets.

Though not obviously intentional, locating their work at the street level, Pearson and Rowe also revisit the principles of Moore’s Public Value theory: outcome achievement, trust and legitimacy, service delivery and efficiency (Moore, 1995) but now in the UK pre/post austerity era.

These features alone (street level bureaucracy and public value) are of course valuable but there is more. The book is located outside of the capital and is not therefore just the latest extension in the well-trodden path of analysis around the Metropolitan Police and the politics surrounding it. In a refreshing change, we see policing through the lens of less familiar police organisations. It is then a more universal look at policing uncontaminated by some of the complexities and unique characteristics of the Met which tend to be taken as the characteristics of all policing.

Pearson and Rowe are to be commended on the level of access and trust they have secured with their participants. No mean feat with a service known for its caution around such things, with its suspicions and its cynicism especially in a time where many officers feel under a siege of criticism and opprobrium by the “commentariat.” They are rewarded with a narrative that can only be achieved with this level of proximity. In other words, the reader can almost smell the back of the police van, the unique aroma of the cells in the early hours and visualise the detritus and clutter of the report writing room. We brush aside the broken pens, statement forms and takeaway boxes in the back of the patrol car and take our seat for the next shout.

It is effortlessly authentic and uncontrived; officers past and present would immediately recognise this scene. For everyone else, it is a glimpse behind the blue curtain.

Much has been written about so called “police culture,” indeed it remains the staple attribution for the malaise in the service. If column inches are an indication this hackneyed trope remains stubbornly potent in policing discourse. However, if they locate “culture” at all, and it does not appear that they do with any certainty, Pearson and Rowe find it to be a diluted, highly nuanced and context specific construct. Policy makers pinning their hopes on



the panacea of “culture change” need to read this book, especially if they see that change as capable of being driven through frontline supervision which we see is seldom to be found on the front line.

Perhaps the most cogent, and worrying, insight throughout the book is its clarity on where street powers are actually being exercised. “Street Powers” are predominantly being exercised on the streets inhabited by young people, young men in particular, and on the streets already blighted by the socio-economic factors that limit life opportunities, what we used to call deprived communities. Extrapolate this commentary and it becomes possible to chart the incubation of the sort of grievances that might characterise contemporary police–community relationships. There are no vignettes from leafy suburbia here.

Beyond the *who*, *where* and *what* of the use of street powers, Pearson and Rowe examine the *why*. Why do the police almost invariably favour arrest over the alternatives available to them? The book examines a less kinetic type of street interaction by reducing street arrests through voluntary attendance (VA) at a police station at a later time/date. This has merit but it is not new, (*in fairness the authors do not claim it is*) nor is it yet even common, and there is good reason for this. Whilst the book explores some of the inhibitors, it does not quite reflect the scale of change and investment that would be needed to make this routine practice.

Moreover, without a near seismic shift in operational practice, VA looks set to remain just one of the levers periodically pulled via performance league tables. The authors acknowledge the limitations of that type of approach elsewhere in the book and so having raised the alternative, further insight is still needed if its potential is to be realised.

Perhaps surprising for some, and certainly counter intuitive to the received wisdom on police failings this, albeit limited, account finds no evidence of racism, institutional or otherwise. Inappropriate or excessive use of police force was rarely if ever seen. Although both observations are of course appropriately and deftly caveated, the absence of these two pathologies and the absence of a tangible and obvious “police culture” suggests future policing research might consider orientating around different points of the compass. This book begins to chart such a course.

A final word for the participants, those frontline police officers serving in arguably *the* most arduous era of British policing. Their story here is one of a weary pragmatism and a sense, in their terms, of a “just” mission. Pearson and Rowe’s account is far from a hagiography, but neither is it cynical – something which the officers may have feared at the outset. There is a sense in these pages of a mutual respect between researcher and their participants.

Above all, the officers and the police have had a fair hearing and in the current polemic “industry” surrounding policing they might perhaps gladly take just that – a fair hearing.

Owen West

Department of Law, Criminology and Policing, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK

Reference

Lipsky, M. (1980), *Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, Russell Sage Foundation, New York.

Further reading

Pitt, D. (1997), “Creating public value - strategic management in government (m.h. Moore, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 402)”, *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, Vol. 5 No. 2, p. 124.