

From Enforcers to Guardians: University of Orange Reading Group
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Part 1: Distorted Policing and Its Origins

One of the most important contributions of the book is its anchoring the abuses of police power in the history of England's dominance of Ireland. Slave patrols during the course of slavery in the United States certainly provide a rich point of departure for understanding police violence directed against Black communities in modern times. But Chapter One of *From Enforcers to Guardians* makes a point of showcasing how much the use of a police force is fundamental to the effective exercise of power over dominant populations.

The race/ethnicity of those who are dominated is of marginal importance. England in the Middle Ages provides the ideal example. The English conquest of Ireland in the 12th century provided that nation with access to a land rich with potential. The exploitation of those riches was only possible through the subjugation of the people from whom the land had been stolen. Over the course of centuries of domination, the English rulers of Ireland engaged in extraordinary efforts to maintain control over the subjugated. As the authors note:

English Protestants were encouraged to move to Ireland and seize control of Irish Catholics' land, property that had sustained them for centuries. Over time, vast tracts of land were transferred from Irish Catholics to English Protestants: in 1641, Irish Catholics held five-eighths of all profitable land in Ireland; by the mid-1700s, this fraction had fallen to one-sixteenth.

Justification for these acts against the people of Ireland was based in the assertion that the Irish were less than human and not worthy of compassion. The rape and murder of an Irish Catholic, for example, was not considered a crime worthy of concern or punishment. Teaching Irish Catholics to read was prohibited and an extraordinary collection of laws, regulations, and traditions assured that Irish Catholics would never threaten the power of their English rulers.

The parallels with US slavery and the subjugation of African peoples are astonishing. Not surprisingly, the creation of a permanent, well-armed force to maintain a boot on the neck of the subjugated was inevitable. Resistance to oppression is a fundamental human trait and Ireland's resistance throughout the centuries of English dominations neatly mirrors the manner in which the enslaved people in the US and their efforts to be free occasioned the rise of an armed force to keep them in chains.

As was the case with the Irish, the evil genius of US slavery was its ability to deny the humanity of those who were enslaved. The creation of racial hierarchies in which God created creatures less worthy than whites provided the perfect justification for the commodification of human beings as beasts of burden. The evolution of slave patrols to control the activities and movement of slaves emerges, thus, as a function of US capitalism. As the authors note: *During the 161 years that slave patrols existed, they played an instrumental role in the state's formation*

of this extreme racialization, protecting White supremacy in the face of continuous and sometimes violent resistance by enslaved people.

The resistance of the Irish Catholics to the suppression by their English rulers is also neatly mirrored in the resistance that enslaved people mounted against their bondage. As an economic system, slavery in the South of the United States before the civil war was far less than perfect. Plantations and farms often failed economically. As a result, enslaved people survived a less than perfect agrarian economy by systems of barter and independent farming of crops on land that they were granted. Although enslaved people had significant restrictions on their ability to travel, they managed to move about nonetheless and in so doing, maintained kinship and social ties with other enslaved communities. Under the yoke of oppression, these communities managed to create a spiritual life that both supported them and inspired them, on occasion, to rise up and throw off the chains of their bondage.

The economic growth that some of the southern states enjoyed during the Antebellum Period was made largely possible by increases in the size of the slave population. But with the growth of this population, fears that the brutal conditions of slavery would inspire revolts and the massacre of the whites grew. The revolt of enslaved people in Haiti and the massive loss of life over the course of that rebellion increased fears that similar uprisings would occur in the US. The motivation for the creation of an armed force, able to rapidly move to suppress such revolts provides the template upon which 20th and 21st century policing in this nation is based. As the authors note, the resemblance between slave patrols and the Peelers, the forces of law that maintained the control over the Irish for centuries are striking:

Like the Peelers, slave patrols were an instrument of the state that was charged with brutally marginalizing a population in order to shore up powerful interests. As with the Peelers, these patrols were crafted to match the nature of enslaved people's resistance.

Post the slavery era, slave patrols evolved into other forces dedicated to maintaining White Supremacy; the Ku Klux Klan and their modern equivalents in neo-Nazi movements and in other expressions of the need to exercise dominant power over 'lesser races...' Modern day police are the heritors of this tradition. Changing the history that drives modern day policing must begin with an understanding that the abuses of today have roots whose origins that are deep and powerful....

As pointed out in Chapters two and three, modern policing in the 21st century continues to be a force to maintain social control over a potentially rebellious population. The rise of urban America, it was noted, follows the end of the Civil War and the creation of a US economy that was driven by industrialization. Factories and work in urban settings slowly but surely replaced the farm as the center of economic growth in the nation. As the Post-Reconstruction era ended, African Americans found themselves as the object of increasing oppression and increasing efforts to control their lives and the fruits of their labor. The industrial growth of the North

offered opportunities to escape repression and profit from the economic growth that a new era of industrialization was creating.

The Great Migration, the mass movement of African American out of the agrarian South to settle in the urban enclaves of the industrialize North, changed the face of the nation. Between 1916 and 1932, the majority of the nation's Africa American citizens found their way to life in the city. But the traditions of segregation and Jim Crow followed them as they were only able to find housing in racially segregated communities. They lived separate and apart and, as the authors note, were routinely denied the fundamental benefits of US citizenship. *This spatial segregation formed the basis for policies—like redlining—that funneled resources preferentially to wealthy White areas and away from poorer minority areas. American apartheid, which followed on the heels of the defeat of Reconstruction, became a defining feature of American capitalism.*

One of the most important assertions made by the authors at this point is that US capitalism is fundamentally a system that *“siphons resources toward a small cadre of wealthy elites and that creates and reinforces racial/ethnic divisions to suppress resistance by the whole working class. This is the central dynamic of American social, economic, and political life and therefore determines the nature of the country's policing.”*

Much of the history of the 20th century, the authors point out, was driven by the needs of this system to exist in a world with other economic powers and to maintain control over the resources that the US economy must have to maintain the power of these wealthy elites. Military spending in the US throughout much of the 20th century was driven by a need to control international markets and to compete with foreign powers – the Soviet Union being a major competitor – for the hearts and souls of the nations from which it took resources. That a quarter of the US government's budget goes to military spending highlights how much economic power is often imposed at the end of a gun barrel.

But it also signals how much the domestic economy in the nation is controlled by military spending and by the need to assure that military might is never sacrificed to support the health and welfare of the citizens whose labor and whose taxes keep the system afloat. When the system of industry collapsed throughout the 1970s, the African Americans found themselves in cities that no longer provided them with gainful employment. Under urban renewal, an effort to make cities in the US centers for economic growth after World War II, brought about the collapse of the neighborhoods and communities that African Americans had struggled to create after the move north. Residents found themselves without the resources to maintain community life.

The creation of an underground economy that was fueled by the sale and use of drugs was the inevitable result of the nation's inability to provide community residents with the resources to survive. *Rates of violent crime rose sharply in major American cities, including Rust*

Belt and Sun Belt cities. During this time, homicide became a major cause of death among young African American men. The combination of the growth of an underground economy and a violence epidemic marked a massive shift from the social organization of earlier periods. Furthermore, the police response shifted.

With as many as one US police officer in five being an armed forces veteran, the national policy to make “war on drugs” brought with it the violent repression of crime in poor communities of color. The War on Drugs became the genesis of mass incarceration and the maintenance of apartheid policies that rendered anyone with a history of incarceration virtually unable to find jobs, housing, or education upon their return to the community. The failure of the Reagan administration to confront the problems of deindustrialization by efforts to rebuild and strengthen urban economies is a lasting national tragedy. What has been built instead are carceral colonies, that is, communities that through police action, feed a system of incarceration that has resulted in the United States, a nation with less than 5 percent of the world’s population, being home to 25% of the incarcerated persons in on the planet. That this carceral population is more than 60 percent composed of Black and Latinx persons and is perhaps the quintessential representation of distorted policing. Replacing distorted policing and the fiscal resources that support it has become, at this point in history, the rallying cry of DEFUND THE POLICE...an effort to use the resources that support policing to mend and repair the communities that policing has so profoundly damaged.



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