

Book Review

Alex S. Vitale, *The End of Policing* (Verso, 2017)

Micol Seigel*

A NUMBER OF ACADEMIC CROSSOVER BOOKS NOW OFFER NONSPECIALIZED readers key takeaways from the enormous scholarly corpus addressing criminal justice questions. Marie Gottschalk's encyclopedic *Caught* develops a precise picture of a broad range of prison-related issues, a resource for the scholar seeking context, research leads, or lecture content. Michelle Alexander's accessible *The New Jim Crow* translates activist insight to a tremendous popular audience. Combining elements of both, Alex Vitale's *The End of Policing* mines both recent and classic scholarship for a sweeping critique of police practice and reform. This grand synthesis will be particularly useful to activists seeking material for self-edification, reading groups, or popular education campaigns. Feeding the growing hunger for abolitionist analyses of policing, Vitale arms the reader with usable pasts and compelling insights, ably contributing to popular mobilization against police.

The End of Policing begins by explaining why current reforms, such as improved training, greater diversity in police ranks, accountability via prosecutorial independence, federal investigations, or that latest vogue, body cameras, are unlikely to diminish police violence and abuse. Perhaps disarming the police, as many other nations have, might help, Vitale offers, but what he really seeks to provoke is a metascale, transformative rethinking of the role of police in society. That role, at present, Vitale argues—and the rest of the book goes on to show—involves managing race and class inequality, waging a war on the poor, containing and punishing Black and Brown people, and feeding the revenge factory that is our criminal justice system. Joining the prison abolitionist chorus denouncing the use of criminal justice solutions for social problems of all sorts, Vitale weighs in with a rousing call for a robust and genuine democracy.

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In the body of the book, Vitale delves into a series of issues police are called to address. He begins with the question of crime, reminding readers that police deal only rarely with this phenomenon. Despite its common understanding as the police's exclusive focus and reason for being, crime is actually but a very small part of any officer's day. Instead, police engage in a whole host of seemingly extraneous activities: They patrol schools, intervene with people facing mental health challenges, remove poverty from public view, segregate sex work, manage addiction, enforce immigration policy, and advance the political agendas of prevailing groups. Vitale then explores these tasks in turn with a chapter devoted to each: the policing of schools, mental illness, poverty and homelessness, sex work, drugs, gangs, immigration, and politics.

Each chapter reviews reforms and then alternatives, pointing to the former with skepticism about their utility and to the latter with urgency regarding the need for more profound changes in the way we understand safety and security. The changes are many and wisely prescribed. We should not have cops in schools, their violence shielded by the misnomer School Resource Officers, but rather have the actual resources teachers and students need to make school less punitive and tangibly safer. We should not criminalize mental illness; people other than police should be the ones called to engage those who are going through it. We should address poverty through means such as income adjustment and housing for people without homes. We should police neither sex work nor sexuality, recognizing that doing so inflicts harm on the most vulnerable people within our society. Although ending the war on drugs would not be sufficient to end prison or policing crises, it is a necessary step along the way. We should bypass meager improvements in drug decriminalization and move decisively to full legalization, addressing the underlying issues of economic marginalization that drive many dealers and users. Community centers and after-school programs should replace the harsh policing of urban youth, alongside larger-scale improvements in education and economic opportunity that diminish their alienation. We should open our borders as the European Union has done to reap the same benefits in economic and social stability. We should curtail police roles in the political process.

Vitale's chapters are thought-provoking and thorough. The first one, "The Police Are Not Here to Protect You," does a great job of taking on the commonplace belief that police are essential to well-being. The backstory on US drug use and prohibition in chapter seven is particularly full and well contextualized in political currents. The final chapter on political policing

is quite interesting, beginning with the recognition that police have always been political. This is easy to see under dictatorial regimes, Vitale acknowledges, but he insists that the United States engages in similar practices, running through the Red Scare after the Russian Revolution, the Palmer Raids, COINTELPRO, and police spying in the twenty-first century. Although some readers will share Connor Woodman's disappointment with this chapter's failure to endorse riots, violence, and lawlessness as means of radical struggle,¹ I tend to think Vitale is simply aiming to reach an audience in the process of coming to these issues and arguments, rather than being suffused in them already, and so has taken a milder approach. Woodman makes a good point, however.

Vitale does not confine his analysis of police to policing; in his assessment, the consequences of over-policing include mass incarceration and all the reckless fallout of that obscene excess. With this useful intervention, he challenges the basis of policing. It is not just disproportionate, brutal, or illegitimate policing that concerns Vitale, but policing, period. Vitale has produced a real treasure in prose and a work that helps move us toward the world we want.

NOTE

1. Connor Woodman, "The End of Political Policing: Why Riots, the Far-Right and Shoplifting Shouldn't Be Policed," *Verso Blogs*, April 27, 2018, at www.versobooks.com/blogs/3769-the-end-of-political-policing-why-riots-the-far-right-and-shoplifting-shouldnt-be-policed.

