

BOOK REVIEW

The Limits of Community Policing: Civilian Power and Police Accountability in Black and Brown Los Angeles

by Luis Daniel Gascón and Aaron Roussell
(New York University Press, 2019)

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POLICE POWER IS NOT LIMITED TO STRONG-ARM STREET TACTICS. As this book reminds us, police departments also incessantly and quite effectively engage in public relations work. These efforts enhance their legitimacy and justify the power they exert on the ground, especially in poor Black and Brown communities. With a very Gramscian conception of power, Luis Daniel Gascón and Aaron Roussell argue convincingly against the criminological orthodoxy that community policing is part of some new era of enlightened law enforcement. Rather, they see it as the latest in a long line of reformist measures typically initiated following uprisings against racist brutality that offer the false promise of a truce. Promissory vows to work with the community are plentiful, but under that half-heartedly constructed veneer, hardline policing tactics accelerate in the streets.

The authors skillfully execute a fascinating paired ethnography in South Los Angeles, conducting their fieldwork in the years just before the rise of the Movement for Black Lives. The book in this way foreshadows debates in subsequent years. It provides an important critique of reformist policing just in time for a movement-initiated national conversation about police

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abolition and why simple reforms are never enough. In this way, *The Limits of Community Policing* makes a welcome contribution to popular debates as well as to a rapidly growing field of critical police studies.

One thread of this critical literature looks at racist policing and how it shapes people's lives. This is of course in addition to a robust public conversation about brutality and police accountability. The ways in which police manufacture consent are less often discussed, however, and academics and popular commentators who take this less traveled path talk about the widespread popularity of the police and their ability to propagate a seemingly impenetrable pro-police ideology (e.g., Loader 1997). This line of inquiry is important. Without it, we lack an understanding of why—even despite widespread protest—there still exists a lack of political will to make meaningful changes to policing in the United States.

What I think the authors of this book do especially well is bring these two lines of inquiry into conversation, demonstrating that street power and public relations power are intertwined. In rich detail they document how, even on patrol, the police are constantly engaged in “a public confidence-building project”(33). Gascón and Roussell use their impressive ethnographic data to provide insights into the day-to-day work of officers assigned to the legitimacy-enhancing beat. We learn about people like Captains Himura and Patton who have mastered the art of facilitating Community-Police Advisory Board (CPAB) meetings. Their craft involves engaging in police boosterism while at the same time managing—and mostly dismissing—citizen complaints. Despite their pro-community rhetoric, it turns out that the police only take on what they want to. It sounds like a delicate dance, but considering law enforcement's more or less unilateral control over who serves on CPAB, who occupies leadership positions, and generally over whose voices are heard, the police captains effortlessly stay in rhythm. Not much changes as a result of community input, in other words, but with the mere existence of CPAB, the LAPD comes off looking concerned, attentive, and engaged.

We see this also in community policing's responsabilization of the citizenry, a concept the authors borrow from David Garland (2001). You get the sense from their analysis that members of CPAB might as well identify as police apprentices. They go through police-esque rituals (e.g., a swearing in ceremony) and are continuously taught through their involvement with CPAB to “see like the state”(118). In a poor community already under close law enforcement surveillance, ordinary citizens like Vera Fisher become the “eyes and ears”(118) of the police force, going so far as to retrieve intel for

the cops. Beyond putting citizens to work, responsabilization also involves holding them to account when things do not go well. When crime is up, it is often citizens who are blamed and members of CPAB who are told to do more.

This all serves police public relations quite well. The force can now boast about having consulted the community even if all they have done is deputize a group of community leaders. This is especially true when they partner with Black CPAB members: it shows engagement with the Black community that the police can use to counter accusations of institutional racism without actually addressing them.

The book also gives a glimpse into the on-the-ground work of Senior Lead Officers (SLOs) who broker economic deals as if they are in the community development business. Again, kudos to the authors for making the important point that this, too, is policing. A chapter called “No Place for Mom-and-Pops” uses data from the ride-along portion of their ethnography to show how the police act on racialized preferences for “known” businesses, as opposed to (typically Black-owned) local mom-and-pop shops, which, to them, are reflective of disorder and economic insolvency.

On the beat, for example, officers hassle well-established Black-owned liquor stores. Any so-called undesirable Black folks hanging outside of the store are shooed away and the owners are viewed with suspicion. Meanwhile, LAPD officers throw their weight behind the opening of a 7-Eleven store. They regularly form such mutually beneficial partnerships with corporate businesses, seeing their presence in South LA as bucking the trend of economic decline. The hardcore street surveillance of poor Black communities serves as a complement to a larger economic imperative the LAPD pushes in cooperation with developers and their corporate clients.

In the book, these on-the-ground details at times jump off the page thanks to the probing historical work in earlier chapters. Their attention to the consequences of prior uprisings and their acknowledgement of economic and demographic shifts make you wonder how anyone can study the police without this kind of socio-historical foundation. By remaining attentive to the nuanced ways in which the LAPD exerts its power, Gascón and Roussell manage to tell a fresh story about race and policing without essentialism and add complexity to our understanding of how racialized policing actually plays out. We see this especially in the segregated community meetings. Mostly Black residents are on the official CPAB while their Hispanic counterparts attend separate so-called outreach meetings. Using tropes borrowed from reactionary whites, Black community leaders tended to place blame for com-

munity instability on recently arrived Latina/o residents, urging police to target illegal street vending, for example. Rather than facilitating harmony, community police officers let these divisions fester. They will not say this outright, but the LAPD must be aware of how this enables them to divide and conquer; indeed, the absence of racial solidarity severely curtails the potential for effective community pushback.

In mainstream discourse, community policing remains the gold standard. Thankfully, a close ethnographic examination like this casts major doubt on that narrative. We learn chiefly that, as an institution, the police are “much more self-protective than public protective” (208). We have known that this is true in the heat of the moment as officers, often lethally, overprioritize self-defense above community safety. The police also tend to adopt protectionism over justice when their colleagues face accountability. In this behind-the-scenes look at police-community interactions, we learn that perhaps the most cherished policing strategy ultimately benefits the cops and their unspoken mission of defending the racial and economic status quo.

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