

# Colliding views of police reality — science vs. politics of policing

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If social sciences have become increasingly interested in policing matters during the last three decades, there is little doubt that differences of opinion remain within the police forces about the usefulness of sociology. There has been undoubtedly an open-mindedness among police officers and police commissioners, but many actual examples show that there is no guarantee: in some countries, the cooperation between social sciences and police forces is now on the decline, while paradoxically more scholars are working on these topics. 'Law and order' orientated policing has become much more popular, and as a result policing is today more politicised and contested (Newburn, 2008). The prevailing view that focuses on efficiency and voluntarism tends to replace a more scientific approach.

Based mainly on the French case, this paper would like to shed some light on the persistence of mistrust and even fear of researchers among police forces, especially at the highest level. Our purpose is not to judge police chiefs and politicians in charge of policing, it is to try to understand why this gap still remains whereas sociology for the police and sociology of the police (Manning & Yursza Warfield, 2009) have produced a lot of results for years. That will lead us to examine the idea of the police officer considered as a 'knowledge worker' (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997).

To meet this challenge, it is essential to consider not only the police officers' point of view, but also the researchers'. The hardest challenge of the researcher

who has undertaken fieldwork within the police is the chiefs' reluctance to accept the results, especially when they point out issues that the chiefs don't want highlighted. Among the criticisms that these chiefs, and also the politicians who are in charge of policing and security matters, address to researchers, intellectualism is likely one of the most used. As for them, research is useless, researchers don't have a realistic representation of daily concrete problems that the police officers have to deal with. Scholars are said to be naïve and unrealistic (!), or their work is described as too complex to be useful for action. Sometimes, they are even suspected of being accomplices of offenders when they try to explain the reasons for crime and when they criticise the policies of law and order. Their empathy towards offenders is regarded as a form of complicity or weakness.

If it would be wrong to say that all researchers are far from being naïve or unrealistic, the total rejection of research in some crucial situations or in some police forces raises questions, especially when these researches are founded on field work. In regard to this point, I will try to explain why intellectuals are not welcome by the chiefs and politicians in charge of policing strategies and security policies. I want especially to shed light on the current idea of an opposition between the world of managers and practitioners who are supposed to live in reality and the world of social scientists, who are said to live among books and theories. This will lead

(!) For example, Nicolas Sarkozy, Minister of the Interior, in January 2006, two months after the French riots in the suburbs.

us to examine more carefully the question of tension between theory and practice inside police forces.

As was underlined in many works (Barrio Romero et al., 2009), there are two main different ways to face the question of police science and the 'science of policing a society'. The first can be called theoretical and top down, and the second is based on a pragmatic approach. These two ways divide both police chiefs and scholars. We will now examine what characterises each of these ways.

### **The police force as a homogenous organisation: the common myth**

The first way of speaking about police science and about policing a society refers to a general theory, which considers government and police administration as the source of power in the police force. Police forces are used to increase and maintain the state's strength (Weber, 1971). This way of thinking puts the stress on the homogenous character of police forces and it considers the police as a tool for the government. This top-down organisation is supposed to follow the rules and the orders set by the hierarchy. In this view, the top management of police forces is supposed to detain all information. Police chiefs are expected to elaborate general planning and strategies in order to solve the problems they have identified. In this kind of organisation, there is allegedly no place for a police officer's discretion: his first quality is to obey and to implement orders.

In this kind of organisation, elites are the ones who know how to solve problems (Mosca, 1884). When they use the police force to improve citizens' welfare and safety, they do it in a top-down way. Police officers are considered as simple performers who only have to implement the guidelines, which have been handed down by their chiefs. They are neither supposed to negotiate with the citizen nor to adapt themselves to the citizens' demands. In this technocracy, there is no place for a real exchange, a dialogue with the people or with society, because the principles of management of the police forces are based upon hierarchy and centralisation.

Our point is not to discuss whether this idealistic system really exists or not. The main point here is to put

the stress on the beliefs. We want to underline that, in countries like France, the senior officials and the police top management are the ones who are the most likely to believe in the efficiency of this kind of organisation. The structures of the police forces are based on this model, which puts the stress on the protection of the state more than on the security of the citizens (Monjardet, 1996).

This way of thinking led up to what was traditionally called 'scientific management' in the industry (Taylor, 1911). It underlines the division of labour between technocrats, who elaborate how to work, and the practitioners, who are supposed to follow the rules. In this view, a police officer's discretion (Black, 1980) is either ignored by the chiefs or is banished: law and departmental services spend a lot of time trying to limit or eliminate discretion, something common in every bureaucratic system (Crozier, 1963). Today, scientific management is essentially based on the development of technology. Through new technologies, like GPS, direct reporting, recorded interventions and CCTV, some public sector managers and political authorities are convinced that they have the power to better control police officers. In doing so they also think that they could now be able to better control the whole of society through these technologies, and that control over the police forces will help them to do so. The main principle of this peculiar view is that the police officer could be used as a tool for applying pressure on citizens. The main idea —temptation— is to control society through different mechanisms, such as laws, technology and police forces but without a real partnership between the civil servants and the public. One of the risks of the fascination for technology is that the citizens become less and less a partner, not even a client: they could simply be considered as a thing to be managed. In fact, through technology, the aim of some police authorities could be to reinforce a centralised and hierarchical approach that fits some elites (Nogala, 1995). This illusion of better control through technology has to be underlined, because it could lead to preventing police organisations from maintaining or developing their relationship with the public.

Even if this idea of control is based upon new technology, it must be underlined that it is not really a new strategy. Looking at the history of police forces, there are many examples of this belief in technology as

an illusory answer to all problems of control. Besides, technology is often used to reproduce old practices and to justify old habits (Manning, 2008). And as far as the bad practices are concerned, technology is one means that allows police officers to avoid contact and direct interaction with people if they don't want to be involved in logic of public service. CCTV is used to replace police patrols in the streets. Police files have replaced human contact to supply information. In the technocratic managers' eyes, whether they are top-level chiefs or politicians, this weakening of links between street police officers and the public reinforces the principle of hierarchy and their own power. In contrast, when the hierarchy allows police officers to manage direct contact with citizens, police priorities are set by the public and the police officer is accountable for them. But there is still a tension between top-down management and openness to public demand. In every bureaucracy, if the client — or the citizen — is the 'reason' that justified the existence of this bureaucracy, after a while the client becomes inconvenient, and a source of disturbance (Crozier, *ibid*). This is especially the case for police forces in a centralised system. From the managers' view, public demand often prevents police officers from following their own plans. Therefore anything that promotes internal logic and 'protects' the managers from unexpected events is welcomed. Technology is a useful tool for reinforcing this domination, but 'communication' is another.

In a bureaucratic organisation, communication is not an interaction or an exchange, it is a one-way communication used to convince people that the managers' view is the right one, even if reality is quite different. The goal is the same: to strengthen the top-down strategy and to avoid any perturbation that could weaken the managers' plans. In the case of police forces, communication has often played a part in the construction of a myth, that of an omniscient police force, able to control everything and to solve any problem (Brodeur, 1984). Technology, like CCTV and files, whatever their actual effectiveness, also participate in the construction of this myth. And the technocrats are the first to believe themselves in these myths they have participated in building. By contrast, street-level police officers, who have to cope with real problems, are less likely to believe this myth than the chiefs who are far from local concerns and looking

at the work from 'above'. And the more the police organisation is centralised, the more the chiefs are likely to have bureaucratic management strategies based on their belief in their omnipotent power. The paradox is that even if they say they have everything under control, they always need more troops, more laws and more technologies to reinforce this control. Hence they are always asking for more resources. Managers and politicians in charge of the police face a dilemma. On the one hand, they have to demonstrate the power of the police in order to fortify their own power. But on the other, they are permanently looking for more resources in order to better control the police, which leads them to realise that their power is in fact more symbolic than real, even if it is more or less efficient. But communication helps them to create a 'curtain' that prevents the public from discovering the truth: the king is often naked.

In reality, these types of senior officials are not the only one who believe in an omniscient and omnipotent police force. Many scholars have been convinced of the same belief. It was not only the case of conservative professors who wanted to preserve this image of the police, which is useful to maintain and establish order, but also, more surprisingly, the case of many leftist scientists.

### **Critical scholars and the power of the police: a critic that reinforces the myth**

Like police forces, scholars are far from being a homogeneous group. Some researchers, especially in such disciplines as law or political science, are likely to defend the pattern of a powerful police force, because they focus their attention on the legal and formal aspect of its work and of its organisation. But many scientists working in social sciences, in spite of their critical positions against the police, have also spoken of police forces based on this image of an omnipotent power. Their goal was to denounce it, but paradoxically the critics have participated in strengthening the myth.

Especially during the 1960s and the 1970s, a vast majority of scholars were involved in diverse movements that protested against the political use of police forces. Although they were denouncing the politicians and police chiefs who were trying to control

society through their use of the police, they were sharing the same view: a powerful police force, able to impose its rules on the population. Of course, unlike the heads of the police forces, these intellectuals were not in favour of this type of society. These scientists had a different goal: they wanted to save democracy from this power, because they thought that the police were a threat to the rule of law. But by denouncing the use of the police and the strength of their actions in a Marxist or Foucauldian perspective, i.e. a tool used to maintain the power of the state and to preserve social order (Foucault, 1978), they unintentionally provided credibility to the image of a police force able to control the whole of society. In countries like France or Germany, many scientists, especially sociologists, have been involved in movements that reject the police. Paradoxically, whenever they have denounced the power of the government, based on their use of the police, they reinforced the politicians' and senior officials' views.

Why have all these leftist scientists been so naïve? It would be very interesting to develop this point, but it is not our main concern here. Many explanations could be taken into account. Ideologies were more important during these periods than today. Many scientists were involved in direct and concrete actions, such as demonstrations or street fights, where they were directly confronted with police officers. For example, the riots of May 1968 in France were a concrete illustration of this fight. The police force was on one side of the barricades and on the other side, social science students. For them, the police were a bad thing that they refused to study. It was a 'dirty' topic (Monjardet, 1996).

But one result at least is important to us: their political and ideological positions against the principle of a police force prevented them from properly studying police officers' work like they were studying the workers in big firms or other professions. In many European countries, no researchers even considered working in the police field for fear of rejection by peers. But, ironically, such attitudes were not a problem for the technocracy, which was fighting against these leftist movements, because at that time these discourses were not questioning common beliefs, i.e. their monopoly on police control. And even if these movements were violent and threatening, in fact these

scientists reinforced the image of the police as a tool for social control. Both parties, the technocracy and social scientists, were enemies, but they shared the same vision of a police force: powerful, homogenous and a pillar for the state.

### The scientific revolution of the 1980s

But things have changed. Inspired by scholarship in the United States and Great Britain, a more pragmatic approach was developed with the social sciences during the 1970s and especially during the 1980s in Western Europe (Ponsaers et al., 2009). By overcoming the traditional reluctance of social sciences, a growing number of scientists began to face these questions. Concrete fieldworks have discovered police practices, far from being so law-abiding than expected. They studied police organisation as a bureaucracy; with bureaucratic fragmentation, its own habits, formal hierarchy and use of street-level discretion. They understood that a police force is a system with its own rules, with conflicts inside and with practitioners who do not always respect official orders. Others social scientists focused their attention on the police's interaction with the public, observing that in many situations, the police officer on the street is bound to negotiate in order to maintain peace, to enforce the law or to preserve his/her own security. The main idea is that police officers have power, but not all the power. And that it is very hard to control their work.

Since the 1980s, the police force has been demythologised. For many social scientists, especially those involved in fieldwork, police forces are no more a mere subject of respect or hate, but a 'normal' topic for research in social sciences. As in some countries, this evolution may have produced a peaceful and fruitful situation, with rich interactions between police forces and researchers. But tensions often remain. Researchers are not always welcomed. The results of their studies are ignored or rejected, even if the street-level police officers and the operational level chiefs agree with the results, and even if some managers recognise their relevance. Sometimes, some governments even decide to forbid this kind of work. Thus, there currently (2012) is no fieldwork access for researchers.

When the researcher uses a pragmatic approach to reveal dysfunctions and pernicious effects, he/she is confronted by police managers, who consider policing to be their exclusive prerogative and area of expertise. They protect their prerogatives by keeping researchers away from policing matters. Patrol officers can also reject research outcomes, as it comes from 'outsiders' who are seen as non-specialist. For many, their view on their work is narrow-minded because they want to protect themselves: other people's expectations are not taken into account in their work, but they refuse to recognise it. As in other corporations, there are police officers who forget that they are not alone in society: they have to work for the people, and they have to work with the people. This proposal is more or less accepted among police officers. Even if many agree, some are reluctant to subscribe to this idea because they don't share the vision of the police as a public service that answers to — and is paid for by — the citizens, and because this 'intrusion' into their organisation is unbearable for them. But all police officers have to keep in mind that they are only one actor in a large system where the different types of population, with various views about the same environment, are also part of the system. When they forget this main point, they weaken their own power. Why? The police officers' efficiency relies not only on their own capabilities, but also on their ability to build a strategy in which many partners have a place. That is why a police officer needs new knowledge, especially in social sciences, in order to face complex societies. Real progress is not to consider the public as a thing to be managed, but as a partner (bad or good) with whom police officers must work in order to produce collective security. Otherwise, the lack of partnership produces collective insecurity. To avoid this drift, social sciences can be helpful. It is relatively easy to convince many police officers in the field that they can benefit from the results of research in order to improve their efficiency and facilitate their work.

One problem when using this strategy is that politicians in charge of police matters and police chiefs may feel that they are in competition with the researchers, because the latter propose strategies, which are different from the top-down model. When the researcher provides analyses of society and the police officers' work from a different point of view than the chiefs, he/she could destroy their legitimacy. The

scientists often risk revealing their lack of real power. When we presented the results of our first study on the French Gendarmerie, some captains were really afraid of the discovery that they had no real power over their troops (Mouhanna, 2001).

That is why these chiefs have to learn how to use research to reinforce their legitimacy. History shows us that this dialectic between the top-down approach and the pragmatic one still persists. The pragmatic way is undoubtedly more efficient, but it means more disagreement with police forces, with the practitioners and especially the chiefs, because it asks them questions that they don't want to acknowledge. And from my own experience, the problem is not so much between researchers and practitioners, but rather between field researchers and technocrats.

One other problem created by this empirical way of doing research into police matters deals with the question of myths. We noted that one source of a police officer's power is based on the belief that the police have a lot of power, more than actually exists. As we have underlined, this myth was reinforced through ideological leftist discourses against the police. But research based on fieldwork has often destroyed this myth by telling the 'truth', or simply by describing the limits of police action.

### Why the barrier remains between research and managers

Therefore, even though social sciences have made a lot of progress in their knowledge of police work, police strategies and police efficiency, police chiefs' mistrust is still present. One argument often used to criticise academic work is based on the idea of an opposition between the world of the managers and practitioners, who are supposed to live in reality, and the world of the social scientists, who are said to live in their books and in theory. And it is obvious that they are right as far as some scholars' work is concerned. However, now research is often carried out differently. More and more scholars are doing fieldwork; they are trying to understand the organisation of police forces and the police officers' work from inside. Thus this kind of opposition between the intellectuals' view and the practitioners' (i.e. police officers) is less and less relevant.

By pointing out this opposition, some police force managers try to protect their position. They feel that they are in competition with the social scientists because the latter reveal a world that doesn't fit with their own paradigm and that could weaken their power. Let us examine the top-down managers' view and how they present things when they are interviewed for the first time about their organisation. When the researcher who enters this field asks the chiefs to describe their work, they praise the virtues of their own system. In their mind, it is characterised by a strong hierarchy and servants who obey. They claim that police officers are following the rules. They assert that the structures are efficient, even if the chiefs recognise that some of their officers are lazy people. There is good cooperation between police officers, whatever their positions. The goals of the organisation are clear, there are definite priorities. There is no problem of information among the members of the organisation.

The reality that social scientists discover while doing fieldwork within the police does not meet this idealised representation. The top-down logic is not always respected. Many police officers, especially when they are street-level officers, are not ready to obey or even to follow the rules, because they have to face concrete situations. Risks, fear, weariness and doubt oppose orders. Sometimes, the chiefs don't have enough experience to give good answers to the real problems that their subordinates are facing. The rules are not relevant at every moment, and are often inadequate. Police discretion is precisely based on a police officer's ability to adapt the rules to the reality. As far as cooperation is concerned, it is not rare to observe a lack of communication between police officers in the same police district, or even in the same police station. There are conflicts inside police organisations as there are everywhere else. In fact, the goals of the police forces are not as clear. Police officers have to deal with too many priorities: orders from the managers and chiefs, public demands and their own interests. And they take all these elements into account when they act. After all, things are far from the ideal described by the managers, especially when these managers have a 'political' interpretation of the police officer's role, and no experience based on the work.

Of course, all members of a police force know about these problems, even if they prefer to avoid speaking

about them in front of outsiders. In other words, they deny the reality. And they reject those who pretend to have a more accurate view, and especially when they have relevant analysis. That is why researchers are blamed and denigrated. As noted by D. Monjardet (Monjardet, 2008): 'researchers are criticised for being irresponsible, meaning "not under control". A researcher is free to criticise the institutions and this is an unbearable risk for people representing these institutions so they "protect" themselves from that risk by accusing researchers of being irresponsible.' Therefore the core issue is not about truth or reality (provided by research outcomes) but is about the control of information and the preservation of the myth (of a 'good functional police'). The more a researcher studies the real functioning of police forces the more he/she represents a (political) threat for the police hierarchy: more than if he/she only analyses the philosophy of the police, for instance. (Brodeur, 2001).

### Are police chiefs convinced by their myths?

Dealing with the question of reality, there is a crucial point: do police chiefs really believe in their official reports that describe an ideal organisation, from the point of view of the writer, or do they only pretend to describe reality? In other words, when the senior officials and the police chiefs react to researchers' analysis with aggressiveness, is it because these analyses are not compatible with their own view and generate a cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957)? Or conversely can police chiefs accept that the researchers reveal some of their 'strategies' that can be seen as some kind of manipulation?

A well-known example can illustrate this point: police statistics. Many actors (the mass media, many politicians and some police chiefs) consider that these statistics describe reality. If that were the case, the question would be: what kind of reality do the statistics describe? They don't give relevant information about the reality of crime (Matelly & Mouhanna, 2007). Firstly, because many crimes are not reported to police forces. Secondly, statistics don't give good information about police activity, because police officers do many things that are not entered in the statistics files. As a social scientist, the most important question is to

consider the statistics as a social construction, to ask why an organisation produces these statistics and to understand who is responsible for their production <sup>(2)</sup>.

But the problem is then: are police managers and the police officers in charge of these statistics ready to question these official figures? It is very hard and very courageous to accept criticism. That is why many groups prefer not to allow researchers to study them. They don't want their view of the world to be upset. In order to act without too many ethical questions or too much complexity, managers often prefer to ignore the results or information that do not match their opinions. And it is easy to discredit researchers in order to avoid being held responsible. This concern, i.e. protecting their own view and their own practices, explains why there is such strong corporatism within police forces. Like others who belong to professions that fear public opinion, police officers often refuse to be confronted by certain realities, because it may oblige them to change their practices. For instance, statistics can be used to show that crime is decreasing, and that the clearance rate is increasing, even if people still feel afraid of crime. In France, in some poor suburbs, the crime rate was seen as decreasing because the local police station was closed at the beginning of the Sarkozy era (Matelly & Mouhanna, *ibid*). The police officers were happy because they disliked working in hostile areas and the government was happy because of the good statistics, which were shown to the mass media.

As a sociologist, when we tried to give more information about the police strategies and their pernicious effects in the poor suburbs, only a few police force managers were ready to hear the results of the research. In France, after the riots of 2005, the demand for more police presence and also for a different kind of policing in these poor areas was not heard by the top management. They preferred to refer to the good statistics and maintain satisfaction. And the hate against police officers is increasing, putting more pressure on local officers.

When social scientists try to help people to be more realistic, they are often rejected, because the cost is too heavy for the practitioner, who will need to do more work to answer all the questions raised by the scholar.

<sup>(2)</sup> This reservation should also apply to statistics compiled by social scientists.

For the managers, as we have already seen, things are worse, because their relevance is questioned. They mainly prefer to adopt a short-term view, and to leave the problem for the next manager. They are not ready to accept that their politics could cause pernicious effects, what could weaken them. Some of them have built their careers on their ability to announce a new policy, even if the concrete effects can be discussed.

That is why social sciences are often not accepted, especially when announcing the failure of a new policy. Following the old tradition, the messenger of bad news must be killed. The results of social sciences are often rejected, not because they are too complex or useless, but because they reveal things that nobody wants to hear.

Another important question refers to the relationship between policing and politics (L'Heuillet, 2001). Policing is not only a profession, or a science, it is also a main political issue. In some countries, the police has become a tool in politicians' hands. Security is used in order to win an election. The new problem is that the results of social science research could be in competition with official communications because of the gap between official policies and the concrete results of these policies (Monjardet & Ocqueteau, 2005). That is why in some countries, research on the police is not allowed.

But in this case, police officers and police managers are sometimes trapped by politics and of communication: When they are a tool for political strategies without real evaluation of the impact of the policies, they are also the first ones who have to face the real problem. For example, they have to deal with the consequences of a 'zero tolerance' policy, which generates a break in the link with the population and therefore makes them feel more rejected by the inhabitants of poor suburbs. Even if it is not easy to integrate the results of social sciences into police work, it is often fruitful for a long-term view. That is why police practitioners and police managers have to build knowledge with the help of social sciences, among others, in order to participate in a public debate, not only with a corporatist view, but with an expertise that integrates different points of view. To do so, police officers and police managers need an outside view, outside of their organisation, and outside of their own country.

The present paper refers mainly to the situation in France at the beginning of the 21st century. If it would be irrelevant to generalise from this peculiar situation, it has to be said that the tensions between the scientists doing fieldwork and the managers always remains, more or less among the different countries (Barrio Romero et al., 2009; Ponsaers & al., 2009). In many countries, the openness of police forces to research is still fragile and is possibly at stake if they feel threatened by the results. That is why building a

European network of researchers seems to be essential and the dissemination of knowledge should be organised. But the most important thing should be to create a 'European right to investigate', i.e. the right to carry out research inside police forces. Of course, some services have good reason to close their doors. But in some countries, the secrecy is more a tool used to protect the comfort of the corporation than a real need.

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