Review


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One indicator of the depth and extent of transformation in South Africa could be our capacity to engage in peaceful mass action in support of political demands. Despite this being a legal right of the post-apartheid social order, it is a capacity which has not yet been realised. Mass action is still frequently marked by violence, not only by frustrated protestors but also by the police, in ways that are reminiscent of the brutality of the apartheid era. Does this mean that the South African Police Service (SAPS) has not undergone fundamental organisational change? This is the central question posed by sociologist Monique Marks in her study, *Transforming the Robocops*. To what extent are the police still mindless, brutal, and vicious; still automatons, what she terms ‘robocop functionaries with knee-jerk reactions and iron fists’ (2005:243).

She answers the question through an ethnographic exploration of a single unit of the SAPS, the Durban Public Order Police unit (POP). In a clearly argued account Marks demonstrates that the unit of 2001 was dramatically different from what it had been in its apartheid embodiments, the Riot Unit and the Internal Stability Division. The unit was far more representative, at least in terms of race (though not gender); there was a commitment to peaceful ‘crowd management’ as well as community-oriented policing so that police violence during protests and demonstrations had lessened and social relations and styles were less militarised. She argues that these changes resulted from changes in ‘the field’ or the structural conditions of policing. But at a cultural level, the level of values and norms embodied in
police culture, the change has been uneven. Marks reports that most POP members continued to regard crowd participants as irrational and provocative. For white members particularly, African townships remained ‘barbarous territory’ where human rights were not respected and there were times when ‘members of the unit fell back on old practices: dealing out beatings on mere suspicion of criminal intent, and wrecking property in forcefully entered homes’ (2005:245).

Marks herself witnessed some of these abuses and her account of how she immersed herself in the Durban POP unit during a four-year period from 1996-2001 is extremely readable. She engaged directly with POP members, accompanying them on a variety of operations including an all-night shift in KwaMashu when she was shown how to use an Uzi machine gun. On this occasion she ‘felt morally compromised in knowing that many of the responses of the platoon were brutal and completely disregarded the human rights framework that was supposed to guide police behaviour’ (2005:102). There are very honest and vivid extracts from a research diary in which she recorded her observations, conversations and reflections. Mark’s warm personality and open, friendly non-judgemental approach clearly helped her to gain access and the trust of her informants. Access was not difficult, probably because Marks could draw on a personal history, but ‘there was a constant need to renegotiate it and considerable effort and time had to be devoted to maintaining positive and collaborative working relationships at all levels’ (2005:94). Overall her research demanded high levels of both courage, energy, empathy and the sound judgement involved in ‘playing a number of different roles simultaneously – researcher, friend, adviser, expert’ (2005:103).

The rich insights obtained from participant observation are supported with material drawn from 50 more formal interviews and a survey Marks conducted with Durban POP members in 1999. This survey produced significant material such as the fact that three quarters of the officers in the unit had been in public order policing for more than five years. As Marks writes, ‘This meant that for the great majority of members their training had been in the old tactics of counter-insurgency and riot control and they were socialised into a sub-culture where excessive force and disregard of basic freedoms were considered normal and legitimate’ (2005:70). While she identifies ‘a distinct occupational ethos’, our understanding of these actors would have been deepened by some analysis of their understandings of their gender identity, and whether a militarised masculinity developed through
their operational activities.

Marks’ study is theoretically informed, drawing largely on Chan’s (1997) account of police culture as shared organisational knowledge including basic assumptions and beliefs, shaped by a specific context, which is deeply embedded and difficult (though not impossible) to change. Chan emphasises the interaction between what she calls the field (objective, historical relations or the structural conditions of police work) and the habitus (dispositions, established ways of perceiving and acting). Marks uses the Durban POP story to demonstrate ‘how difficult it is to effect change in the police habitus when there are deficits in the transformation of the field - poor dissemination of new policy, deep social cleavages (based on race and gender) within the police organisation, and limited capacity for mobilisation and contestation on the part of the communities themselves who are most affected by police wrongdoing’ (2005:27). Long-term, sustainable transformation requires change in both police habitus and field.

This argument is strongly supported by a range of empirical evidence from different secondary sources showing an impressive grasp of the scholarly literature on public order policing generally. Much of this literature documents the difficulties of police reform in transitional societies such as post-communist Russia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Brazil and Mozambique. One of the most impressive features of the book is Mark’s grounding of the issue of police reform in the global literature. As she writes, ‘The entire project of policing is undergoing dramatic changes as private policing and community-based policing enterprises expand....’ (2005:10). It would have been interesting to hear more about the tension between these two processes especially as priorities have shifted around the unstable and incoherent notion of ‘terrorism’.

The book is also historically grounded with an insightful account of the history of public order policing in South Africa from the initial establishment of the SAP in 1913, through to the programme initiated in 1995 for the transformation of the specialised public order policing unit, the aspect that interests Marks the most. She shows clearly how the SAP ‘were the most important institution for upholding the apartheid social order’ (2005:36) and helped to create what I would call ‘a terrorist state’ which relied on the spread of extreme fear to maintain its authority.

Marks’s book is a good example of ‘Public Sociology’, a form of social engagement which reaches out beyond the confines of the university to address important social issues. It should be read in conjunction with the
vivid portraits of individual police officers in Antony Altbeker’s *The Dirty Work of Democracy. A year on the streets with the SAPS.* (2005) This is a very different attempt ‘to understand policing ethnographically’, that is, ‘to describe the nature of the organisation, its culture and its attitudes by immersing myself in its day-to-day operations’ (2005:267).

The Durban POP unit is a microcosm of the transformation of the SAPS. If our central challenge in South Africa is to build a common society, and create institutions which unite rather than divide us, then the transformation of the SAPS and the defence force are among the most difficult tasks ahead. This thoughtful and highly readable book deepens our understanding of those difficulties as well as the possibilities of the change our ‘unfinished revolution’ demands.

**References**
