

Policing Protest

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Only a few days into the Olympic spectacle and much talk had turned to black blocs and a few broken insured Hudson Bay Company windows. Yet much of the discussion has been framed within a strange liberal duality of choices between militant demonstrations (said to be offensive to working class observers) and supposedly “peaceful” symbolic protests, like the march the night of the opening ceremonies (which is presented as more palatable to working class audiences). As if the actions of the demonstrators are the real question and determine the structure of events. Anyone who has ever been on a picket line might find this a bit strange —working class folks have never been involved in dust ups with the cops?— and it has me reflecting not so much on the specific actions in Vancouver as on the broader context for policing and protests.

For anarchists, policing of demonstrations provides a mechanism for economic and political elites to suppress attempts to re-distribute the wealth and resources they control. Policing of protests period, regardless of what activists are doing, provides a powerful agency for maintaining inequalities of wealth and power in class societies. Anarchists ask whose order is being maintained and what does this order look like in terms of inequality, liberty, freedom or exploitation? Policing of protests reinforces unequal class structures in society by focusing on activities predominantly of the poor and working class rather than the activities of elites, such as corporate crime, pollution, ecological destruction or workplace injustice. Use of police to break strikes also defines collective organizing and assembly by workers as a criminal, rather than economic or political, act.

It is not coincidental that historically the most aggressive policing has occurred during demonstrations organized by working class and poor people and racialized minorities, especially by indigenous people in the United States and Canada. Police have, since the earliest days of modern policing, regularly been deployed to disperse striking workers and break up picket lines. Much research shows that during the nineteenth century many of the gatherings against which police were deployed that were identified as “riots” were actually simply gatherings of striking workers. Targeting of such “riots” was clearly more than an issue of public order. Rather the suppression of strikes offered examples of policing to benefit economic elites. Police strikebreaking under the guise of riot control was an effort to defeat working class resistance to employers. Breaking a few windows hardly constitutes a riot yet that is how the black bloc action in Vancouver was described.

The first modern police forces in North America were developed in industrialized urban centres in the northeast. Their main emphasis was “maintaining urban order” in the face of class conflict as cities grew through waves of migrant workers seeking employment. Local business people have had influence, even control, over directing police against striking workers. The earliest forms of policing in the southern United States involved so-called “slave patrols” dating back to 1712 in South Carolina. The function of these patrols was to maintain discipline over slaves and prevent slave riots. Black people caught violating any laws were summarily punished.

State forces were formed to deal with striking workers. The Coal and Iron Police were created in Pennsylvania in 1866 to control striking coal and iron workers. In 1905 the state formed a state police agency for use in strikebreaking. These official state forces gave a legitimacy to strikebreaking that private security, which lacked state authorization as keepers of the public order, could not claim. Strikebreaking and union busting have also, of course, been functions of private police and security, most notably reflected in the history of the Pinkerton agency. And history shows again and again that working people have not had qualms about confronting police. In San Francisco in July 1934, striking longshore workers were involved in several engagements with police who attempted to break the strike. In response to the killing of two pickets by police, area unions initiated a general strike of all workers in the area. The result was the “Big Strike” of San Francisco. During the 1945 strike of United Auto Workers members against Ford in Windsor, Canada, pickets prevented police from dispersing the picket line to open the plant by surrounding the factory with parked cars, taxis and buses.

The extensive and often militant social and political struggles of the 1960s forced states to re-think methods of social control. The transformation of urban police forces from community forces managed at local levels in towns and cities in America to militarized forces organized along national lines and standards related to changes during the 1960s in which “law and order” became a matter of national politics. Much of the impetus for this change came from the visible social conflict and protests of the 1960s, beginning with civil rights marches and boycotts and followed by anti-war movements and student protests. The period of conflicts included the numerous urban uprisings and so-called “race riots” against racism in cities such as Detroit, Washington, D.C. and the Watts area of Los Angeles.

Policing of demonstrations reinforces existing unequal property rights and the limited political processes of parliamentary democracy as the preferred or privileged form of political expression. Forms of politics outside of such legitimized and hierarchical channels are treated as deviant, threatening or even criminal.

When they are, or risk being, effective, demonstrators are presented by police and media as dangerous individuals belonging to fringe groups or disaffected members of society who pose a threat to society’s “normal” way of life. In some cases, as in Vancouver, attempts are made to disparage organizers and participants and suggest they are not raising legitimate concerns but rather acting out of self-interest.

Focus on policing can serve to shift attention towards technical processes and tactics, rather than the pressing need to expand social justice and end inequalities. In the end police have the authority of the courts and criminal justice system and government to support their definitions of situations. A privilege that is not available to protesters, whether they prefer black blocs or friendly marches.

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