

A Review of *Policing Contingencies*

By

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Title: *Policing Contingencies*

Author: Peter K. Manning

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Policing Contingencies represents the latest product of Peter Manning's distinctive semiotic approach to the study of policing. Here the focus is on "dramaturgy"; Manning proposes that policing is public theater. "Rather than detailing the rather banal empirical questions that have driven criminological and criminal justice research in the last twenty years," Manning writes, "I seek to theorize policing as a dramatic performance" (p. ix). Manning does indeed make a good case for the importance of "the expressive and performative functions of police work" (p. 17).

Whereas in previous work (e.g., *Symbolic Communication*), Manning analyzed the semiotics of such everyday micro-phenomena as 911 calls, here his focus is broader, almost overreachingly so. In *Policing Contingencies*, Manning's subject is the public dramatization of police work. This is defined so broadly as to include in-car videotapes, international broadcasting of such "found" video as the film of the Rodney King beating, Internet chat discussions and cable TV talking heads commenting on the same, both television crime drama and "reality TV" shows such as *Cops*, and everything in between. Manning argues "that a fundamental change in policing in the last ten years and extending prior to that for more than twenty years is a result of the influence of the media" (p. 62). Media images are also "information," of course, and Manning seeks to relate them to the increasing importance of information technology (IT) in policing.

Manning highlights the growing importance of such (mostly) digital representations in shaping the citizenry's experience of policing. The public's perception of the police is now more likely to be shaped by media representations than by personal experience with the police, the experience of acquaintances, or neighborhood gossip: "it is through the 'mediation' of dramas of control, little and big, that we 'know about policing'" (p. 31). The police have responded accordingly, seeking to shape the media's representation of them.

Manning also draws attention to the nested and looping nature of such representations: the way in which they tend to produce long chains of representations of representations that eventually feed back on themselves. Unfortunately, Manning makes this point so emphatically that it makes for exhausting reading. Over and over and over again the reader is told that media representations of policing loop into one another, that the boundaries between reality and representation and news and drama are never clear, and that the authenticity of digital media representations is always questionable. Since Manning's subject is media representation of

policing (and, therefore, crime) in general – a vast subject matter -- he can never be much more specific than to state repeatedly, in different ways, that “Media images are constantly recycled, reproduced in a new context, and reexperienced” (p. 76).

This lack of specificity lends itself to broad and seemingly unnecessary generalizations. For instance, it is probably not necessary to state and give examples for the propositions that “Cartoons also portray police” (p. 90), or that police agencies have web sites that are “descriptive, mostly linked to the FBI, and self-promoting in their content” (p. 91), or that “Police training uses videotapes and audiotapes” (ibid.).

But, perhaps the more important criticism is that these points are hardly surprising. Under the barrage of examples of media loops and representations, one begins to wonder what their significance is. Given the nature of the society we live in and the technology we live with, could it be any other way? Is it surprising that cases like Rodney King and JonBenet Ramsey create media loops? Could police work be conveyed to us through any mechanisms other than media representations? This is not to be socially or technologically determinist: certainly there were some decision points along the way. The police, for example, could have remained media-shy, rather than creating new positions for media handlers. But, in our media-saturated society, it seems inevitable that we would view policing through media.

Manning also tends to attribute media as the cause of everything. Was media coverage of the Rodney King beating the cause of Daryl Gates’s resignation (101), or was it simply the scandal itself?

Again, the argument suffers from lack of specificity. Manning is so busy discussing the enormously broad phenomenon of media representations of policing, that he doesn’t stop to posit explanations for the developments that were probably *not* inevitable. The appearance of the early reality television show *Cops*, for example, is an interesting phenomenon in its own right, one for which a number of interesting explanations could be – and no doubt have been -- advanced. But Manning never gets to this level of specificity.

After all this rather general discussion of media, the reader may be surprised to suddenly find herself in an ethnographic description of the pseudonymous city of “Western” and the stalled introduction of community policing (CP) there. I must admit that the relationship between this material and the discussion of media that preceded it remains somewhat obscure. To be sure, local media played some role in influencing policing politics, but not in the grandiose, looping fashion emphasized earlier in the book. Manning offers some hint in the conclusion (called a “reprise”) when he calls CP “a crude and ill-formed technology” (p. 241). I suppose it is possible to treat CP as a “technology” to the extent that it is possible to treat pretty much anything as a technology. (But such practices tend to undermine any attempts to make coherent arguments about the impact of something called “technology.”) Perhaps Manning is using CP as an example of a technology that failed to transform police organization culture, whereas IT may succeed. But in general there seems to be a disconnect between these two sections of the book.

There are some minor errors in the book. The famous documentary filmmaker who made a film about policing in Kansas City spells his name Frederic Wiseman (p. 87). The former

football player who played “Hunter” was Fred Dryer (p. 93). And, surely Manning does not mean to call patrol activity a “fundament” (p. 215).

The discipline of policing studies is the richer for having Manning’s semiotic approach. His argument that policing may usefully be viewed as public theater is compelling. But one hopes that Manning’s promised follow-up book -- on the impact of increasing abstraction and rationalization on policing -- will be easier and more coherent reading than this one.