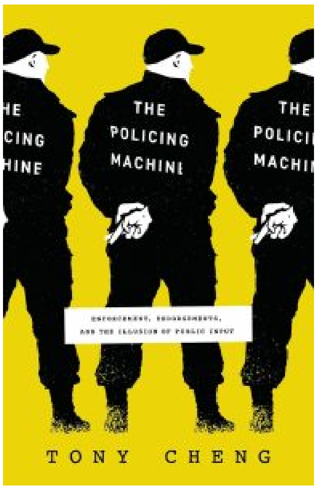
Pascual Cortés

October 23rd, 2024

The Policing Machine – review

*In **The Policing Machine**, **Tony Cheng** scrutinises the NYPD's Neighborhood Policing model, revealing how police use public input as a tool to maintain control and legitimacy. Based on in-depth ethnographic research in two Brooklyn precincts, Cheng's incisive study shows how such programmes reinforce existing power structures and impede meaningful police reform, writes **Pascual Cortés**.*

The Policing Machine: Enforcement, Endorsements, and the Illusion of Public Input. **Tony Cheng. The University of Chicago Press. 2024.**



There is an idealised vision of policing that posits a collaborative partnership between neighbourhood residents and law enforcement officers, working together to create safer communities. Reformists and international aid programmes embrace and promote blueprints for neighbourhood policing strategies as incarnations of a democratising agenda. Tony Cheng's *The Policing Machine*, launched at LSE on 21 May 2024, is an incisive attempt to dismantle the assumptions that often surround community policing programmes, examining closely the New York Police Department's (NYPD) Neighborhood Policing model.

> *Like a complex industrial process, the Policing Machine processes raw material, classifies, selects, discards, refines, and*

delivers outputs.

”

The most profound concern that animates the book is precisely the democratising promise of the Neighborhood Policing programme, established as a response to rising demands for police reform, especially, the book claims, after the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014 (34). The author's provocative response is that the public input that Neighborhood Policing claims to generate is, at best, an illusion and, at worst, a political manoeuvre to optimise police legitimacy in social spaces marked by significant class and racial frictions. The book's core argument is that the police-community relationships promoted by the NYPD 'are precisely what impede the potential for police transformation' (7).

The book is based on intensive ethnographic fieldwork in two Brooklyn precincts, mapping the connections between the NYPD, community councils and other local entities such as local churches and social justice organisations. Cheng employs the metaphor of the "Policing Machine" to structure his analysis of how Neighborhood Policing articulates these police-community relations. Like a complex industrial process, the Policing Machine processes raw material, classifies, selects, discards, refines, and delivers outputs. It also works in stages, which correspond with the book's structure.

In the first stage (Chapter One), the police "curate and transform" heterogenous community demands in such a way that "complaints about policing can be reframed as community, even grassroots demands for more policing" (36). Exercising a power comparable to that typically reserved for police elites to legitimately "name", diagnose, and classify social problems, the book argues that Neighborhood Coordination Officers (NCOs) decode all sorts of local issues as essentially policing problems that require strengthening and expanding the service. Continuing with the machinal metaphor, issues that cannot be processed in this way are diverted down another conveyor belt and conveniently discarded.

“

Cheng's book is a sharp and well-documented attempt to unveil the specific mechanisms by which the NYPD selects local input that is functional to its organisational purposes.

After ascribing problems as issues of police administration, the second stage (Chapter Two) consists of cultivating local constituents by empowering and amplifying sympathetic groups “as the authentic representatives of neighborhoods” (65). In this part of the process, the Policing Machine bypasses traditional accountability mechanisms by engaging with alternative local brokers at community councils. Another technique to cultivate constituents is coordinating access to established audiences, most notably the church, through clergy councils. These relationships are affirmed through information sharing, creating new participatory spaces, and excluding individuals and groups who do not align with the police’s official objectives.

The third stage (Chapter Three) seeks a feedback effect: it empowers constituents and controls dissident voices by distributing public resources, regulatory leniency, and coercive force. Particularly interesting, as it is an aspect often overlooked in policing literature, is the attention given to the distributive aspects of police work. The chapter documents different concrete ways of providing assistance and transferring resources (eg, providing access to printers and copy machines, facilitating meeting spaces, coordinating rides for community council members), which uncovers a welfare function that goes hand in hand with coercive powers. It also illustrates how forbearance (e., choosing to exercise their authority over events permits) can have a profound distributive impact.

The fourth stage of the process (Chapter Four) generates the payoff: public endorsements. If previous steps work adequately, the book’s argument goes, empowered constituencies will manifest their public support to the police, either explicitly or implicitly. The police capitalise on those endorsements (not always unequivocal, but carefully interpreted in that sense by the police), publicising them on Twitter/X and citing them as the community’s voice in annual reports and budget hearings. Chapter Five, finally, adds detail around how The Policing Machine functions. It discusses strategies of resistance from some local groups (infusing resources with community significance, pursuing services from nonpolice providers, reestablishing democratic oversight, and forming nonstate protective services), underscoring a complicated reality, that is, “that disengagement can enable the Policing Machine, and that the Policing Machine can still deliver services that people need and deserve’” (180).

How does the NYPD relate to other political actors, and what concrete reform processes have been repelled by the *instrumentalisation of carefully selected and empowered neighbourhood constituencies?*

Cheng's book is a sharp and well-documented attempt to unveil the specific mechanisms by which the NYPD selects local input that is functional to its organisational purposes. However, the argument feels less straightforward when it transitions, one could say, from machine to *machination*, in the sense of not only engaging with *how* the Policing Machine works but also denouncing *why* it works this way.

There is an assumed strategy accounting for some of the mechanics of the Policing Machine. For instance, the book scrutinises how NCOs record local input during community meetings, making notes on a whiteboard and transferring them to official records. Police officers prioritise comments that favour their work and tend to ignore those that demand "institutional police reforms" (45). Over 80 per cent of verbal complaints on "police reform" registered by the author during his observations did not reach any official organisational record (44). The finding is tremendously interesting, but in which way is it a component of a larger project of resistance to change? A deeper discussion of the content of demands for reform and the officers' motivations for impeding them could have strengthened the argument.

Moreover, it leaves other questions hanging in the air: is all this surprising? Can we expect neighbourhood meetings coordinated by police officers to be spaces for political deliberation about the kind of policing we want and the democratic mechanisms that should govern it? The argument of political motivation reappears when insisting, towards the end of the book, on how the outcomes of the Policing Machine are "mobilised to resist change" (183). However, it is unclear where and how this process occurs, and it does not seem sufficient to point to the NYPD's proactive use of social media. How does the NYPD relate to other political actors, and what concrete reform processes have been repelled by the instrumentalisation of carefully selected and empowered neighbourhood constituencies? These questions remain, to some degree, open.

The book closes with a set of four proposals that not only serve as clear takeaways from this impressive work of research but also help to adjust the implications of the argument and even contain some of the concerns expressed above: police departments should not be in charge of granting permit events and exercising other regulatory powers for which other institutions are better suited; police departments should not have an active public presence on social media; cities must invest in infrastructure to collect and publicise data on community sentiments toward police, much as they do for crime rates; and, cities must distribute resources more equitably so that the organisational capacity of police is not so disproportionate to that of other community entities

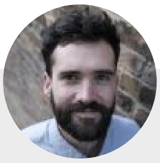
(193-199). These final calls are a courageous intellectual exercise connecting social research with the possibility of imagining concrete alternatives to how police institutions mediate our deepest fears and hopes.

Note: *This review gives the views of the author and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

Image: *Leonard Zhukovsky* on *Shutterstock.*

Enjoyed this post? Subscribe to our newsletter for a round-up of the latest reviews sent straight to your inbox every other Tuesday.

About the author



Pascual Cortés

Pascual Cortés is a Doctoral Researcher at the LSE Law School. His research explores how police institutions build their institutional identity and to what extent this process is connected to the construction and imagination of the nation-state, focusing on Chile as a case study.

Posted In: Book Reviews | Contributions from LSE Staff and Students | Law and Human Rights | LSE Event | Politics | USA and Canada

© LSE 2024