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Revisiting the classics: Robert Reiner: the politics of the police

**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation: Newburn, Tim (2016) *Revisiting the classics: Robert Reiner: the politics of the police*. [Policing and Society](#), 26 (7). pp. 841-849. ISSN 1043-9463
DOI: [10.1080/10439463.2016.1215619](https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2016.1215619)

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Available in LSE Research Online: November 2016

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Revisiting the Classics. Robert Reiner: *The Politics of the Police*

Tim Newburn

As a field of social science research, policing has been fortunate to have a number of influential academic researchers and a rich history of significant writing. This is something to be celebrated. Our Revisiting the Classics series aims to bring together leading commentators to review books that contribute to the core of police studies. There will always be debate about which books are seminal and which authors have had the greatest influence on the discipline. We hope this initiative will encourage readers to rediscover the value of work done by previous generations.

First published in 1985, Robert Reiner's *The Politics of the Police* is currently in its fourth edition and one can only hope that there will be more to come. It is quite simply *the* source for understanding both the history of British policing as well as the sociology of policing more generally. Its status as a 'classic' can be demonstrated in a number of ways but the most obvious is the continued frequency with which its arguments influence and frame contemporary work in the ever-expanding sub-field of policing – often unacknowledged and, one suspects in some cases, perhaps with little awareness of from where the ideas were drawn. In terms of the history and evolution of British policing, its legitimacy and public standing, and how police culture and its presentation within film, television and other media, *The Politics of the Police* has established the core elements of our understanding.

The immediate backdrop to the book is Reiner's PhD thesis on the Police Federation and its role in the politics of policing (Reiner, 1978), together with a series of articles that he had been asked to write for *New Society* and *Marxism Today* on the controversies surrounding policing in the early 1980s (see, *inter alia*, Reiner, 1978b; 1980, 1981; 1982; 1984). The timing of the first publication of *The Politics of the Police* in 1985 is important. The late 1970s had seen the election of the first Thatcher administration and the beginnings of the ratcheting up of the politics of law and order. The early 1980s witnessed unprecedented urban rioting (at least in the post-war era) and rising concerns about police powers that led eventually, via a Royal Commission, to the passage of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE). It had also seen the year-long miners' strike in 1984/85, the policing of which continues to be debated to this day. Each successive controversy had seen the temperature of the political debate rise, with the arguments becoming increasingly strident and ever more polarized. In short, British policing was under the microscope as never before, with many of the contributions exhibiting far more heat than light. It was a desire to challenge such divided opinions and to offer a different and more constructive perspective that was the primary impetus behind *The Politics of the Police*.

Simultaneously, in the two decades prior to the book's arrival the academic the study of policing had moved from a fairly small cottage industry among a select group of sociologists in the 1960s to what was soon to become, if it wasn't

already, the largest of the major sub-groupings within the rapidly expanding subject of criminology. How was one to make sense of it all? From 1985 onward all anyone had to do was turn to *The Politics of the Police* and they would have access to a definitive overview of the territory. In the preface to the first edition, Reiner says (in his usual modest fashion):

Despite the burgeoning monographic and polemical literature [on policing] I have found no single source that I could refer students to in order to discover conveniently what work has been done. I hope that the present volume might be a useful starting point. (1st ed, xii)

In the contemporary higher educational world the writing of 'textbooks' is deeply frowned upon. They are a devalued currency, treated as if they could never possibly be more than collections of simplified summaries or syntheses of the work of others, cobbled together to make life easier for students. And no doubt there are a great many textbooks that might reasonably be thought of in that way. And though it would be quite wrong to describe *The Politics of the Police* as a textbook, it has clearly been the cornerstone of policing courses for generations of criminology students. Crucially - and distinctively, for I can think of no other book that has achieved this feat in any field of criminology in the three decades since the publication of the first edition - *The Politics of the Police* shows that it is possible to combine high scholarly endeavor with the educative objectives of a general text. In my view this is something that is a much more difficult thing to accomplish than the writing of a monograph for the sole consumption of academic colleagues. *The Politics of the Police* is a book that combines the very highest standards of scholarship with prose style that is never less than accessible and entertaining - arguably, something to which we should all aspire.

In what follows I want to argue that *The Politics of the Police* has made at least four original and substantive contributions to our understanding of policing. In short, it has changed the way we understand: the history of policing; the idea of police legitimacy and the legitimization practices that surround the institution; the politics of policing; and, the portrayal of the police in the media. The book is divided into three sections: history; sociology; and, law and politics. Whilst this works neatly as a means of enabling the establishment of policing and the rise and fall of police legitimacy (history) to be separated from discussions of culture, research and media (sociology) and powers and accountability (law and politics), it is nevertheless a conceit and might, at a superficial reading at least, distract from the fact that this is first and foremost a sociological text. It is deeply informed by classical theory throughout, ranging from Marxist political economy, the central place given to the Durkheimian dualism of the sacred and the profane, and to a deft deployment of the ideas of the state and of bureaucracy much influenced by the work of Max Weber.

Reiner's standard analytical technique is to begin by identifying opposing camps, summarising their respective arguments by constructing ideal types, thus allowing both the shortcomings and the strengths of each to be identified. Straw men are always avoided and great respect is given to all of the positions

reviewed, perhaps especially so when they are views with which Reiner appears to agree the least. Having navigated a path between the two ideal types an alternative position and explanation can then be outlined, generally one that acknowledges and adopts the strengths of each whilst avoiding what are argued to be the weaknesses. Nowhere is this clearer than in the opening substantive chapter of the book in which Reiner takes the sizeable literature on the history of British policing and provides a careful summary, a sophisticated analysis of the differing available accounts, and an exposition of an alternative lens through which this complex history might be understood.

Scholarly histories of policing began, Reiner argues, with broadly functionalist, Whiggish accounts that saw the emergence of this new institution largely as a reaction to the growing problems consequent on a rapidly industrializing society. The old systems of communal, less obviously professional policing were either too inefficient and/or too corrupt to be trusted to deal with the crime and disorder that was found in the early nineteenth century. Peel's reforms, in this view, were simply a logical response to increasingly visible social need. But, if so, why the political and public resistance to the New Police? For this 'cop-sided view' or 'orthodox' history such opposition is to be seen as largely misguided or even reactionary and, anyway, as something that disappeared fairly quickly once the new arrangements began to bed in. More particularly, opposition died away as the beneficial impact of the police began to be felt and public orderliness improved. Authors in this mould felt that the impact of the New Police was to be found across all social strata, but with the poor and working class the particular beneficiaries. This remained the broadly accepted, received view of policing until well beyond the mid-twentieth century. The Willink Royal Commission, for example, which reported in 1962, could not have been more Whiggish if it had tried.

[Is there] a peculiar quality in the relationship between the police and public of this country [?] ...We believe that there is. It is attested by the foreign visitor whose favourable comments on our police are well-known, and it is demonstrated in the common every-day instances in which people instinctively consult a policeman when in difficulty or perplexity even of a minor kind... it is not generally disputed that there is a kind of relationship between the policeman and the man the street [sic] in this country which is of the greatest value. (Royal Commission, 1962: 99)

It was not really until the 1970s that radical scholars in both history and the social sciences began to reappraise policing, as they did all major social institutions. The new breed of critical scholar took a quite different standpoint from the orthodox historians. Here, although the exigencies of the emergent industrial society were again seen as the primary impetus behind the development of the new policing institutions, the main beneficiary was the property-owning bourgeoisie. In the accounts of what Reiner refers to as the 'revisionist historians' the police are 'domestic missionaries' sent to tame and discipline the working classes precisely so that capitalism might thrive. From this perspective, the conflict around the new professional state policing is

presented both as a logical reaction to the imposition of oppressive policing and as a lasting characteristic rather than a passing phase.

In some respects the radical reappraisals of policing that appeared in the 1970s and 1980s were no less functionalist than the Whiggish histories to which they were reacting. Indeed, the tendencies toward determinism and reductionism in such accounts lead Reiner to characterize these histories as 'lop-sided'. Though from his perspective they are not quite as problematic as the cop-sided histories they sought to displace, they nevertheless displayed many of the same failings, such that 'the revisionist view is in many respects merely an inversion of the traditional approach' (1st ed, 32), and a potentially dangerous inversion to boot (Weitzer, 1985).

Though appreciating the subtleties of the differing positions, and conveying sympathy with the differing political positions expressed or implied, Reiner then offers an account that moves considerably beyond either. In his hands, the story of the blues becomes one in which the conflict that surrounded the introduction of the police is acknowledged but not exaggerated, where the obviously political role of the police in facilitating the relatively smooth running of industrial capitalism is outlined as is the extent of working-class acceptance of this emergent institution by mid-century. This, for Reiner, was no mere false-consciousness. Rather, such a degree of legitimacy was achieved 'by a combination of specific strategies which did give the British police a unique character, implanting them firmly in national mythology' (1st ed, 47).

Though undoubtedly more sympathetic to the revisionist outlook, Reiner's own argument steers a careful path between the two broad positions. Indeed, he describes his approach as 'neo-Reithian' – a perspective that accords due respect to Peel, the first Commissioners Rowan and Mayne, and to other police reformers and the work they did in constructing a very particular set of policing arrangements and a unique British policing identity. But it is also a viewpoint that simultaneously recognises that policing inevitably occurs within a context of structured social inequality and conflict. It means understanding the reality that the policing of 'a divided social order may be more or less harmonious and consensual, or overtly oppressive, with important consequences' (1st ed, 47). In this regard British policing is unusual in the degree to which it eventually became perceived as broadly benign and, indeed, in the extent to which it became a symbol of British national identity (Loader and Mulcahy, 2003).

It is this reading of the history of policing that leads directly to another of the book's seminal contributions: its analysis of the legitimation project begun by the architects of the 'New Police' and seen through over the course of a century or more with extraordinary success. The analysis of the means by which a fundamentally political institution was depoliticised is one of the book's *pieces de resistance*. The key elements of this are by now well-known. A more or less deliberate emphasis placed on a variety of policies – bureaucratic organisation; subjection to the rule of law; the use of minimal force; the impression of non-partisanship; the prioritization of preventive patrolling; and the creation of the appearance of effectiveness – individually and collectively laid the groundwork

for the progressive public acceptance of a once highly contested institution. Reiner's account, however, is as always that of a political economist and fundamental to the success of this strategic 'programme' in his view were the enormously significant social and political changes that led to the progressive incorporation of the industrial working class into the body politic. To this end, there is something substantive for Reiner in the claim that there were elements of this period that deserved the descriptor 'golden-age'.

Reiner's beautifully-crafted account then moves on to consider what, from the perspective of the mid-1980s, appeared to be the gradual unravelling of the legitimisation project. The incessantly rising crime rate challenged police claims of effectiveness, just as corruption scandals and the heavy-handed policing of industrial unrest and urban riots tended to undermine any claim to even-handedness or attachment to the use of minimal force. One by one the mainstays of police legitimacy came under increasing pressure and challenge, and public estimations of policing also began to change. Once again, it is important to note that Reiner's account grounds this 'repoliticisation' of policing in the political, economic and cultural shifts of the period – and, in particular, the progressive de-incorporation of the most marginalized sections of the young working classes, and black and minority ethnic groups. As noted earlier, it was precisely in this 'hot' political climate for policing that the first edition of *The Politics of the Police* was written. Even by the time of the second edition the climate was cooling.

By the time of the third yet another shift was becoming visible – one that offered a sense that a partial, rather fragile process of re-legitimation was underway. That the political mood around policing had altered was largely a consequence of a broader shift in the politics of law and order which saw the Labour Party reposition itself and both main British political parties increasingly compete to present themselves as the "copper's friend". Reiner refers to this post-1992 period as 'pragmatic post-legitimation' (4th ed, 96), describing an environment that was considerably less febrile for the police than the previous quarter century had been without ever suggesting that they would, or could, return to the high point of their 'sacred' institutional status. Arguably the major casualty of this shift was any possibility of a principled debate about the nature of policing, and the role of the police as pragmatic, economic and fiscally driven imperatives came to the fore and *homo economicus* appeared to hold sway. Although a narrow, crime-fighting' view of policing has largely held sway since 2010, and the few attempts that there have been to discuss the principles of policing (Stevens, 2013) have had little impact thus far, there are signs that small spaces are emerging in the politics of policing into which *homo politicus* may possibly reappear. Meat and drink for the fifth edition one would imagine.

Our understanding both of the nature of police powers and of police governance is also heavily influenced by Reiner's analysis. At the time of the writing of the first edition the issue of police powers – the use and their extent – was at the forefront of political debate. The Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE) 1984 had been making its way through parliament, accompanied by voices from the left bemoaning the impending arrival of a police state, and critics from the other end of the political spectrum concerned that the new protections that the

legislation afforded suspects would effectively handcuff the police. Again, Reiner's approach was to seek to 'intervene in this polarized argument in support of a middle way' (Reiner, 1998: 87). It is perhaps here that Reiner's position on policing is most explicitly outlined. This 'middle way', ever-wary of abuses of power, but recognizing the 'tragic necessity' of a police organization in a liberal democracy, in many respects arises from Reiner's own autobiography. As the child of Jewish Holocaust survivors who left Hungary for England as refugees not long after he was born, the twin spectres of Nazism and Soviet totalitarianism were all too immediate. For his parents, 'England, Churchill and all the symbols of the British way of life – from roast beef to bobbies – represented salvation' (1998: 91):

I was acutely aware of the potential for abuse which was inextricable from the police role as the repositories of the state's monopoly of legitimate force. But I was also imbued with a deep sense that the British police tradition (and others derived from it) had at least to a large extent succeeded in minimizing the ultimately inescapable dangers. (Reiner, 1998: 92)

Taking issue with some of the more idealistic and radical opinions offered by those on the left was undoubtedly far from comfortable for a scholar like Reiner, a man of the left himself, but also someone naturally disposed toward finding the positive in all scholarly work rather than dwelling on the negative. But he was fairly soon vindicated for, as tempers cooled and more clear-headed analysis of PACE and its impact was undertaken, the emergent consensus appeared to be that this substantial reform was of greater benefit to those who found themselves in police custody, and less problematic for the conduct of properly professional policing, than many had earlier imagined (Zander, 1995).

If the subject of the reform of police powers had led to considerable controversy, then the issue of police accountability was undoubtedly among the most contentious subjects both at the time of, and in, the first edition of *The Politics of the Police*. Both the riots and the miners' strike in particular had focused attention on the relative powerlessness of local police authorities and had become a focus of heated political debate. Those of a radical bent called for increased democratic *control* of police forces by locally elected authorities. By contrast, those of a more traditional outlook questioned the appropriateness of what they characterized as political involvement in policing and argued, on varying grounds, that policing should be insulated from such oversight. As in relation to other questions, Reiner's approach was underpinned by deep scepticism of all of the more strident claims being made – by both sides.

By the mid-1980s, despite all the assertions about policing by consent, and about democratic accountability, he noted that the British police 'have become virtually impervious to any control by elected political bodies, and are adamant in remaining so' (2nd ed, 237). Although police authorities were by no means impotent the miners' strike had shown that, so long as there was Home Office support, local democratic input could fairly safely be ignored. Though some local areas had established initiatives aimed at increasing political influence, and Jack

Straw had introduced a Private Member's Bill aimed at reform of police authorities, Reiner nevertheless sounded a note of caution. Despite his undoubted sympathy for the aims of many of reform efforts, the 'evidence from other countries suggests ... that the structure of formal control and accountability bears no close or clear relation to the quality of policing' (1st ed, 203). In Reiner's view, critics had failed to get to grips with the reality that policing could never operate consensually, nor dispense with violence. Whilst calls for 'democratic control' were easy to make, outlining what 'acceptable policing' would look like was much more problematic and was consequently something critics on the left so often failed to do. Predictably, the act of distancing himself from the views of some of the more radical commentators of current policing arrangements did not draw sympathy from all academic reviewers (see, for example, Hillyard, 1986).

Again, as with the broader field of the politics of policing, the field of police governance has been a continuously changing one, and the shifts are carefully charted and analysed in the successive editions of *The Politics of the Police*. Where the first and second editions had focused on the increasingly marginal fate of elected police authorities, the third and fourth editions chart the significant reforms that had been introduced as part of the 1990s managerialist revolution that had affected policing as all else. As suggested earlier, no longer was great effort expended debating policing policy or even police powers. Rather, the dominant concerns were expenditure and questions of efficiency and effectiveness. Indeed, this led Reiner to add a third ideal typical model to Geoffrey Marshall's famous distinction between 'subordinate and obedient' and 'explanatory and cooperative' models of accountability - one he referred to as 'calculative and contractual' (Reiner, 1993). This has in turn itself been superseded for the period since the fourth edition has seen the most dramatic reform of governance since at least the 1964 Police Act with the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs), which is arguably a role that makes little sense unless the police service occupies a more subordinate and obedient position than has been the case for many decades. These reforms were both radical and highly controversial, and once again opinion has been quite widely and obviously divided. Proponents of PCCs were convinced of the necessity of such reform and of the likely success of the initiative just as, predictably, many opponents were almost unquestioningly sceptical. No doubt the fifth edition of *The Politics of the Police* will once again provide the opportunity for Robert Reiner to steer a careful path between the more outlandish claims either about the supposed effectiveness of the latest changes to police governance or their alleged shortcomings.

Arguably, what separates policing from many of the subjects studied by criminologists is the way in which many members of the public feel they have a reasonably clear sense of how the police organisation works. That they believe this but are generally misinformed is largely a consequence of the ways in which the institution, its officers and its working methods are presented in the media. As criminological research from at least Reiner's PhD supervisor, Michael Banton (Banton, 1964), onwards has demonstrated, and is so comprehensively demonstrated in *The Politics of the Police*, the police are primarily peace officers

rather than law enforcers. And on this topic all the hallmarks of Reiner's scholarship and working methods are once again on display. First and foremost there is the ability to condense a huge extant literature into a series of clearly articulated arguments and then to outline a position that builds on the best of the work available, but nevertheless is able to outline a distinctive and original vision. He stands outside both what he terms the 'subversive' and 'hegemonic' camps as regards media portrayals of policing, accepting that whilst the majority of 'factual' and fictional representations play a more or less successful legitimating role, they are neither monolithic nor unchanging. This part of the book – and it is only one of several – was described by one reviewer as a 'tour de force' (Hillyard, 1986: 536). He went on, rightly, to observe that it demonstrated 'an extensive knowledge of detective fiction and crime films. The reader is left wondering about the number of hours that must have been spent in front of either a small or large screen.' Encompassing a thoroughgoing knowledge of television from *Dragnet* to *The Bill* and beyond, cinema in all its variety, and cop and detective fiction from Agatha Christie and Joseph Wambaugh to the regularly cited Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, it is unlikely anyone will ever be able to match the depth and extensiveness of Robert Reiner's knowledge in this field. Intriguingly, the absence of any sustained reflection on this particular interest is perhaps the one significant missing element in his autobiographical reflections on his career (Reiner, 1998).

I began by describing *The Politics of the Police* as *the* source for understanding the history of British policing, and the broader territory of the sociology of policing. Four editions allows for regular updating, and the reasonably substantial intervals between editions – they were published in 1985, 1992, 2000 and 2010 – has the advantage of allowing the changing landscape of policing to be neatly captured. Where the first edition appeared almost at the high-point of controversies surrounding policing, these were already dissipating by the time of the second edition. Indeed, reading all four editions nicely frames the rupture in the politics of policing that occurred in the mid-1990s. Although there are some substantial differences between all four volumes, this shift is first detectable in the third edition and is given sustained analysis in the fourth. Not only had policing changed by this point, but by the time of the most recent edition so, substantially, had the sociology of policing. The consequence is a new opening chapter in which the 'new policing' theories are examined, and their more grandiose claims challenged. One occasional criticism of earlier volumes was that they somehow failed to keep abreast of the major developments in *policing*, in particular paying insufficient attention to the new pluralized landscape. Whilst on a superficial level this could not be denied – *The Politics of the Police* was always intended to be about *the police* – what Reiner neatly demonstrates in his rejoinder is that the analytical structure he had developed in the earlier editions was perfectly capable of encompassing and understanding such changes. Importantly, he resists the suggestion implicit in some of the newer theories of policing that pluralization was somehow primarily a functional response to the shortcomings of state-based arrangements but, rather, argues that the shifting pattern of policing should be seen as a consequence of the 'destabilising and criminogenic effects of neoliberalism' (4th ed, 32). Arguments about the comparative efficiency of different sectors miss the point. The reality,

of course, is that neither public *nor* private policing can provide the foundations of security. As Robert Reiner says in the preface to the third edition:

The police will appear more successful the less they are actually necessary. The sources of order lie outside the ambit of the police, in the political economy and culture of a society. To the extent that these provide most people with meaningful and rewarding lives, conflict, crime and disorder will be relatively infrequent. Subtle, informal social controls, and policing processes embedded in other institutions, regulate most potential deviance. When these informal control processes are successful, the police will appear highly effective in crime prevention, and deal effectively and legitimately with the crime and disorder that do occur. The police stand as romantic symbols of order and morality, 'knights errant' ever ready to protect against threats. (3rd Ed, xi)

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