The Division Between the Police and the People

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It can be assessed that a big predictor of police brutality can be the level of separation between the police and the communities that they police.

The authority given to law enforcement over the civilian population creates a social separation that can be observed the most within marginalized communities.

The socio-economic divide between the police and those who they police is notable when discussing the disconnect between law enforcement and marginalized groups. For instance, white middle class police officers from the suburbs will often oversee policing in lower income communities populated by people of color. This lack of community representation within policing is what leads to the disconnect that gives rise to police violence.

In a historical context

This divide between law enforcement and the communities that they police has its roots in colonialism. In the context of South Africa and the United States, European colonists would exploit Africans as a source of cheap labor. In order to perpetuate the conditions of slavery and subjugation, policing was implemented to enforce the edicts of the state. In these contexts, the police were of a background, and had interests, that differed immensely from that of the oppressed group.

Black Africans in South Africa would be given little choice but to work low level jobs mining for white mine owners. Legislation would be continuously passed and upheld for the purpose of ensuring that these conditions be maintaining.

What is and is not permitted

As witnessed during the Birmingham confrontation of 1963 and the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, certain forms of advocacy are not viewed as acceptable to authorities. While those that were deemed moderate would be accepted, Tia Dafnos states, "In contrast "bad" protesters engage in "transgressive contention" with goals that seem highly abstract or radical (Dafnos, 400)."

Civil rights leaders would be considered transgressors for advocating for changes viewed as being "radical."

Martin Luther King Jr. was famously made the target of authorities for organizing and engaging in peaceful demonstrations to promote civil rights in parts of the country where African Americans were not given political representation.

After organizing many peaceful demonstrations against apartheid, Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC) would be persecuted by the South African government. After the banning of the ANC, Mandela went into hiding and would co-found uMkhonto we Sizwe. After being seized by authorities, Mandela avoided the death penalty mainly due to international criticism of the oppressive South African government.

While Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela may receive mainstream praise today, both of these men were highly controversial figures back during their time of political activism. While their names may be synonymous with freedom and liberation today, they would both be perceived as threats to authorities and would be portrayed as radicals.

When the interests of the state clash with the interests of the people

Because the police are the representation of the state, their violence is on behalf of the state and therefore permitted and justified. When marginalized groups attempt to protest for civil rights, it becomes a priority to eliminate dissent.

This is a monument dedicated to those that marched during the Birmingham Campaign and were subsequently made targets of police violence.

Events such as this have become emblematic of the divide between law enforcement and the civilian population, especially when it comes to marginalized groups.

In his article entitled "A violent Legacy: Policing Insurrection in South Africa from Sharpeville to Marikana," Bill Dixon cites the Marikana Massacre of 2012 as evidence that relations between the police and Black Africans have yet to improve. In it he states, "At a micro level, it is something of a commonplace of both police history (not least in South Africa) and comparative studies of policing to observe that the police are more likely to police for specific domination in the interests of a dominant class, 'race' or other social group in unequal, divided societies (Dixon, 1144)."

Moving forward

A way of countering the detachment police may have regarding the communities they are policing is to promote community representation in local law enforcement. In elevating marginalized groups and expanding opportunities to those inside the community, there can be more equitable democratic participation when it comes to policing.

Yanilda González and Lindsay Mayka point out in their article "Policing, Democratic Participation, and the Reproduction of Asymmetric Citizenship" that while community representation in law enforcement is a good step, expansion of law enforcement tends to entail a higher level of policing, which disproportionately impacts marginalized communities. It is because of this that expansion of the institution is not the goal, but instead proportionate representation.

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