



Action replay As protesters clashed with police across the US, many in the establishment blamed professional agitators and unruly youth for the unrest
AFP/OLIVIER DOULIERY

STATES OF MATTER

Stop (the) police

The outrage over George Floyd's killing could be a last opportunity to change the militarised culture of policing



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George Floyd, a 46-year-old black American, was killed on May 25, 2020, as a Minneapolis city cop knelt on his neck while he lay handcuffed, pleading for his life. In the swirl of events that followed, elected members of the city council put forward a proposal to “defund” the police and seek alternative ways of safeguarding the public.

The police uniform symbolises the power of the law. It also carries the promise of detachment from all concerns other than the impartial administration of the law. The law, in turn, is derived from a sense of reason that claims universal validity, or at least general acceptance within a relevant community.

Humanity is imperfect and can only aspire towards that ideal state. There is a zone of ambiguity, continually under negotiation between police and the community, allowing for a closer, though never complete, match to an ideal state. That asymptotic approach is sometimes disrupted and could collapse in active conflict, when the police acquires a sense of attachment to itself, when it asserts a collective interest that is above and beyond the law.

Policing is one segment that has resisted the general squeeze on public sector budgets since the 1980s, the years of neoliberalism. Figures have been sporadic, but between 1982 and 2009, it has been reliably estimated that expenditure on policing by all levels of US government more than tripled.

Figures published by economists Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman in their recent book *The Triumph of Injustice: How the Rich Dodge Taxes and How to Make Them Pay* suggest that welfare spending stood at around 1 per cent of US national income in 1970, about the same as expenditure on law and order. Since then, welfare spending has fluctuated before sliding down in the first decade of the century to about 0.6 per cent and recovering marginally in the second. Spending on law and order

went up through these years to peak at 2.4 per cent of national income around 2008-09, before drifting downwards in the climate of austerity due to the global financial meltdown.

Rising budgets involved significant material and technical changes, amounting in both the US and the UK – the two founts of neoliberal ideology – to a militarisation of the police. As Alasdair Roberts remarks in his book *The End of Protest: How Free-Market Capitalism Learned to Control Dissent*, the arsenals of police forces in the US and the UK became “so well stocked”, that they were literally “transformed into paramilitary services”. Police forces also “followed the military model as they improved their capacity to maintain centralised command over personnel”. In the process, a “coherent doctrine of ‘public order policing’ emerged”.

It was a requisite for neoliberal success that organised working class strength should be neutralised. Overall union membership in the US dropped from 20 per cent of eligible workers in 1980 to under 10 per cent, but public sector unions have seen their ranks swell. And within this segment, as most recent figures from the US Bureau of Labour Statistics show, the membership rate was highest, at 39.4 per cent, in local government, which employs most policemen.

That consolidation of numbers enables police unions to purchase influence and unsettle the political agenda through the threat of disruption. Unsurprisingly, police reform has always been stillborn as part of the US legislative agenda.

There may have been a moment of epiphany in the late-'60s, after a sequence of urban riots, starting with the Watts uprising in a neighbourhood of Los Angeles in 1965. Much like now, the initial response of the rul-

ing establishment was a rush to judgement, to pin the blame on professional agitators and unruly youth, the proverbial “bad apples”.

That clearly was an unsustainable evasion. In 1967, even as riots erupted in Detroit, President Lyndon Johnson appointed a commission headed by Otto Kerner, then the governor of Illinois. Its terms of reference were simply stated: “What happened? Why did it happen? And, what can be done to prevent it happening again?”

The Kerner Commission report, submitted even as riots erupted again in the year of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr, held up a mirror to white America, implicating it in a failed policy of housing, education, employment and social welfare. The black ghetto, it charged, had been created and sustained by decades of discriminatory policies and active measures of segregation and suppression.

If that opened the doorway to systemic reform just a crack, it was quickly shut too. Politics was in transition to the culture of

neoliberalism, which celebrated achievement and contrived to blame the victims of inequality for their misfortunes. Talk of discrimination was, in the new ambience, disparaged as the whining of the losers with a surfeit of opportunity but a dearth of effort or enterprise.

With its militarisation and consolidation into a lobby that asserts an interest beyond the law, the police has emerged as a powerful custodian of systemic racism. The George Floyd killing offers, perhaps, a last opportunity for correction. Retreating into the make-believe of a supposed meritocracy could conceivably knock out the faltering props of democracy in the US.

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