



*Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 8(2) (2001) 152-154

---

## A REPLY TO PETER K. MANNING\*

by

**Christopher Wilson**  
**Boston College**

Conversation across the disciplines is notoriously difficult, and therefore I am grateful to Peter K. Manning, an award-winning social scientist and police scholar, for taking the time to review my book (*Cop Knowledge: Police Power and Cultural Narrative in Twentieth Century America*) in [Volume 8, Issue 1](#) of the *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*. (And thanks, too, to the journal's editors for allowing us to extend our conversation here). That being said, I think the review highlights some important differences between Professor Manning's approach and my own that the readers of the *JCJPC* might find of interest.

My main concern, I guess, is that that these readers wouldn't be able to discern my book's overall argument and approach from his review at all. (Other reviewers have no trouble in this respect: readers may wish to consult, for instance, Stuart A. Scheingold's fair-minded summary in the *Law and Politics Book Review* at <http://www.polsci.wvu.edu/lpbr/subpages/reviews/wilson.html>.) Professor Manning, instead, devotes over half of his review to a semiotic extrapolation upon two words in my title – and thus, no doubt unintentionally, is forced into telegraphic and (I'm afraid) misleading synopses for the rest. For instance, his opening characterization of me as a "cultural studies" scholar would be understandable, were it not that my introduction explicitly says otherwise, and that he uses that notoriously broad label in such a dismissive way. As a result, *JCJPC* readers won't easily discern that my book is actually a work of cultural history, and that each chapter takes issue with some of the dominant theoretical paradigms in "cultural studies" as such. Professor Manning's summaries of my chapters might also lead readers to believe that I

am relying on popular-cultural texts as "an evidentiary base" (his words) of police consciousness or tactics. In fact, these chapters consult dozens of works by historians, as well as police manuals, police advocacy texts, memoirs, interviews, criminological studies, news accounts and more. It is reductive and misleading to say, therefore, that my first chapter's account of a "progressive view" of the police is "based on" the writings of Crane and Steffens; nor is my third chapter "based on" Wambaugh (it draws upon ethnographer Steve Herbert, several historians of the LAPD, and ends by discussing a Chicano gang memoir). And so on. Contrary to his synopsis, chapter 5 is concerned with the murder of two African American boys, age 11 and 15, not "a teen-ager." Perhaps most characteristically, Professor Manning suggests that my book is just full of "off-handed observations on the meaning of films" while it has summarily "dismissed" what he calls "serious and careful studies (e.g. the work of [Albert] Reiss. . .)." The truth of it is that, taking all five of my chapters together, I discuss "the meaning" of one film – by looking at the crime on which it was based, by recounting some of its production history, and by a close reading of its original script. And I actually offer an extended critique (about a third of a chapter) of Reiss's *The Police and the Public* (1971) and his contemporaries. (I would have much preferred accuracy on Manning's part to a computation of my footnote-to-page ratio.)

I know what *JCJPC* readers may be thinking: an author's defensiveness about a reviewer's inaccuracies can be tiresome. My intention is simply to ask whether Professor Manning's willingness to engage in interdisciplinary exchange might be inhibited by his seeming indifference to well-accepted methods of historical documentation (what else can his "apparently detailed" mean?), as well as his obvious impatience with textual analysis other than the semiotic. As for his sense that ethnographic field work on the "knowledge police have about policing" is a far more legitimate enterprise than examining the interactions of policing with media forms, as I have done – well, I guess that's for readers to decide. But let me take our disagreement about Reiss as a final example of what may really be at issue here.

The central point of Professor Manning's excursion into semiotics, I gather – and I have to admit, I still don't fully understand all of it – is that I don't sufficiently differentiate among what he sees as "kinds" of police knowledge that, he asserts, can be separated analytically (cpk1, cpk2, etc.). Again, perhaps it's best

left to readers to decide whether I do or I don't. But the more salient interpretive issue is whether such "kinds" can be so easily differentiated in practice, in a world where policing is now saturated with public relations, political spin-doctoring, and media co-production, all creating – alas – feedback loops and trap doors even in ethnographic practice itself. My examination of Reiss, therefore, draws upon the recent challenges to ethnographic "realism," to the notion that what police do (not only, as Manning suggests, what they say they know) can be transcribed from the statements of reliable informants or observations by a neutral observer. (For instance, Reiss's less-than-careful conclusion that "race is not an issue in the unnecessary use of force by the police" [Reiss 147]). My worry, in fact, would be that Professor Manning's semiotic "kinds" would actually work to reinstall the brittle empiricist distinctions between material practices and symbolic authority that my book is trying to rethink.

I apologize if this all sounds too defensive: Professor Manning's final paragraphs (as well as his own extensive work on community policing) suggest we actually agree about a lot of things. I also endorse the kind of investigation he describes in his last lines. But even if ethnographic accounting were the gold standard for us all, its applications for interdisciplinary analysis run into barriers I would hope someone with Professor Manning's experience and perspective could address. In closing I would emphasize three such limits. First, its limitations for cultural historians like me, who obviously can't do field work among the dead. Second, its proclivities for using the empirical ground of what cops say? – know? do? – as a supposedly unmediated "evidentiary base" to disparage the textual or rhetorical analyses employed by other disciplines. And third: if, as my book tries to show, police work is customarily informal, discretionary, out of view – as well as "increasingly mediated," as Professor Manning himself says – what then?

## ENDNOTE

\* Direct correspondence to Professor Christopher Wilson, c/o English Department, Boston College, English Department, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467 (email: [wilsonc@bc.edu](mailto:wilsonc@bc.edu).)