



**Review of *Cop Knowledge: Police Power and Cultural Narrative
in Twentieth Century America*^{*}**

by

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Book: *Cop Knowledge: Police Power and Cultural Narrative in Twentieth Century America*.

Author: Christopher P. Wilson

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As is befitting a cultural studies scholar, Wilson wants to link various kinds of "cop knowledge" to social structure. Unfortunately, he does not distinguish between three kinds of knowledge: knowledge held by police, or "police knowledge," and knowledge others have of the police, or "knowledge about the police," and analytic frameworks used to organize police knowledge, "knowledge about police knowledge's." These are three distinctive kinds of knowledge, collapsed by his punning title which further confuses because it uses a slang term, "cop." His primary concern, so far as I can discern it, is the second type, knowledge others have of the police. But even here, he confuses the knowledge an audience might have after reading or seeing some presentation of knowledge about police, and theorized knowledge of an observer who sees, reads, or hears about policing. This confusion, between hypothetical content-based meaning and that which a reader takes from the text (as an analogue) constantly vexes cultural studies because the field has no method to discern these two kinds of meaning.

It is perhaps useful to see his analysis in semiotic terms, although he does not use this language. Here, I mean seeking the referents of the term, "Cop knowledge" (cpk) and the context that links expression (what points) and content (what is pointed to) to produce a full representation or sign. Absent a content linked in context with an expression, a sign has no meaning. If "cpk" is an expression, it has various denotations. I use numbers to indicate denotations. Wilson uses as evidence of cop knowledge: cpka1 (films, books, TV, essays); cpka2 (a pastiche of references to sociology, media studies, criminal justice and history) and cpka3 (his meta-analysis or argument about how cpka1 is linked to or associated with cpka2). These three, cpka1-3, function as a metonymic list that is ordered by an implicit value hierarchy that valorizes cpka3. These denotations of cpk are loosely related, but not tied to, what I see as three additional denotations of cpk, which might be called cpkb1-3. Cpka and cpkb are linked metaphorically. They are alike in some fashion, not merely by proximity or as a series. Knowledge with the "b" notation is cop knowledge also. Cpkb1 is knowledge that police have "in their heads" or display in their practices;

cpkb2 is knowledge that academics and others have of cpkb1; and cpkb3 is the valuation of or the sanctioned "proper knowledge" that arises from ethics, politics, and economics. Another set of implicit and un-explicated denotations of cop knowledge are cpkc1, "knowledge [useful] on the beat and on the streets"; cpkc2, a slang reference to all the knowledge police possess; and cpkc3 is an analytic gloss on the first two. These three sets of denotations, linked by the metaphor "knowledge," are quite distinct. **[End page 58]** Unfortunately, Wilson does little to clarify the links, using the terms expeditiously to advance his argument. By that I mean, by punning in the title, he confuses the reader- is he interested in what police know about policing? What filmmakers, television writers and authors know about policing? What the reader or viewer knows? What theory orders these observations about meaning?

Perhaps clarity could have been produced by presenting a method, or technique, or even a rule of thumb that designates what counts as evidence and why. Absent one of these, serious and careful studies (e.g. the work of Reiss, although he sees through the vapid claims of the "Broken Windows" authors) are dismissed, off-handed observations on the meaning of films are taken as strong evidence, and no criteria are advanced by which any claim could be dismissed as either flawed or irrelevant.

The argument is, in brief, that cpk1, seen through the perspective of cpk2, shows that "policing" (undefined) is a socially, politically and culturally shaped phenomena which has been (is) seen via various perspectives that reveal the value contexts of various (chronologically defined) periods. Wilson locates a progressive view of the police focused on corruption and veniality (based on the writings of Stephen Crane and Lincoln Steffens); a reform period focusing on procedure (using Vollmer et.al.); a 1960's conflict view (based on Wambaugh's novels); a 1980's realism based on street journalism (David Simon and others) and a final period in the 'nineties based on an analysis of the Boston Globe's coverage of a murder of a teen-ager. The content of these periods is treated to an apparently detailed analysis, judging by the number of footnotes in the 217 pages of text (517 or 2.4 a page). It is not clear, however, how the periods were defined, what themes are central to them, how the representative works were chosen from among the possible texts, nor how the content was analyzed.

Wilson contends that knowledge of policing (perhaps this should be called cpk4, or knowledge of all sorts of police knowledge's), is increasingly mediated, or presented via some communicational means other than face to face experience. It is furthermore always shaped by class, race and politics, contains differential, detailed knowledge of policing (as cpkc1) and contains a current reading of social distance between various reading and viewing publics and the police. Ironically, the view of the police as distant and unassimilated returns to view in the 'nineties in the form of CP rhetoric'. Rhetoric, being what officers actually say, has no place here. The book is a representation of representations.

Of course, the implication of "knowledge," that which is true, cannot be disentangled from the ways in which the media display and manipulate it. All media, however, as Wilson suggests, play on repeatedly the paradox of control. While a decentralized form of local control is emphasized, neighborhood safety is seen as a consensual matter, and the idealized home, family, and neighborhood as custodians of each others' fate is dramatized, the media "elevate homicide" as the ultimate tragedy. It is described, a-contextually, as preventable, local, and devastating because

given the first premise, homicide is an unthinkable act. This juxtaposition, the media's primary and repeated weapon – their "spin" or "take" – destroys by trivializing values and dramatizes both their apparent relevance and their *de facto* shabbiness, tattered and dubious tenacity. The fact that cops consider this "paradox" the bottom line of their work, this [End page 59] book says very little about that kind of knowledge. It seems to me that ethnographic work that identifies and elaborates knowledge police have about policing is a stronger evidentiary base than what Hollywood, television producers and journalists think the police think, or what these cultural icons think they know about what police think.

ENDNOTE

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