

**The Circumlocutions of Public Relations,  
Legitimization Crises, and Community Policing: A  
Review of The Politics of Community Policing**

By

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Review of The Politics of Community Policing  
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The federal government has played an active role in stimulating the growth and popularity of community-oriented policing (COP) through grants from the COP office in Washington, DC (Rankin, 1999). At the same time the President has regularly invoked the COP image in speeches. It has become the popular solution to various problems, embodying an ostensibly new approach to handling old problems. Indeed, in the book The Politics of Community Policing, Reed argues that "true" COP is a departure from the legalistic policing that accompanied the movement towards police professionalism.

A decade ago, scholars preached caution and skepticism at the notion of police moving towards the COP ideal. Some doubted police restraint in directing community opinion, fearing that the COP ideal might be employed to achieve inappropriate ends under the rubric of working for the community, and questioned the ability to determine *who* represents a community (Mastrofski, 1988). Others expressed concern that COP would be no more than a set of "circumlocutions" that wrapped a tarnished occupation in new images (Klockars, 1988). This latter argument summarizes COP as a new public relations ploy. Media coverage of the aggressive COP strategy in New York City, for example, is conflicted over its impact. On one hand, serious crimes have been reduced by more aggressive police action. Rates of citizen complaints, however, appear to have increased with the implementation of COP (Willing, 1999).

Wilson Edward Reed's book The Politics of Community Policing attempts to shed light on how COP was implemented in one large urban area. The stage is set in Washington's Seattle Police Department, where Reed adopts a "case study" approach to the development of COP between the years 1985 and 1993. Reed uses newspapers, primary and secondary source documents, and interviews to inform his discussion of COP in Seattle. He initially provides an overview of COP and then takes critical aim at the term "community" and some of the assumptions of COP. The author then moves on to explain the three frameworks he will adopt in trying to decipher COP in Seattle. These include legitimization processes, urban political processes, and micro-organizational processes.

A history of COP is offered by Wilson, and he holds the Seattle model up against the scholarly

ideal. The author skips his theory and data on page 30 and gives us a preview of his conclusion:

None of the above [referring to the necessary ingredients for COP] existed in Seattle, and public involvement was also limited. There were police-community liaisons in every precinct, but the activities were directed by the police. The bottom line is that it was not community policing as espoused by scholars. Therefore, in Seattle during the period of 1985-1993, the mayor's office and the police department, in consultation with the South Seattle Crime Prevention Council (SSCPC), fashioned a variant form of community policing...This was a bastardized version of the philosophy of true community policing (30).

This observation would appear to support the skeptical scholars' concern that COP would be diverted for purposes that best suit the police.

The third chapter is, in my opinion, the author's most valuable contribution to our understanding of COP. Herein he interprets the events of 1985-1993 as a mechanism for the legitimization of the police department. As such, the department presents a nominal change, in the form of a "bastardized" COP program, to co-opt resistance and increase its ability to maintain social control through community institutions. The Seattle Police Department is viewed through the prism of two COP efforts. The first is an effort to divert the community's attention from the impending Rodney King verdict. The police take great pains to "get in touch" with the community through a "Community Outreach and Youth Appreciation Week." This is described as an effort at "subtle social control," and as a success in the improvement of police-community communication and, hence, the legitimization of the police.

The second example used to illustrate COP in action involves the implementation of a "Weed & Seed" program. This program was met by stronger community resistance as expressed through newspaper stories by local newspaper columnist Dick Lilly, who questioned whether this was a vehicle to harass black teens, as well as by a group called The Mothers Against Police Harassment. Ultimately, Reed concludes that:

Obviously, the Seattle Police Department was subtly involved in the politics of community policing, and Seattle's version of community policing had both social control mechanisms and public relations components. The ostensible purpose of these public relations schemes and race relations programs was to placate local community leaders, neighborhood organizations, business leaders, and police officers into police-driven strategies that have limited community support and involvement (69).

Chapters Four and Five analyze urban political processes and micro-organizational processes as frameworks for understanding the events of 1985-1993.

Reed charts the political struggle between elites, who are naturally drawn to side with the police, and the residents of the Central District. This allows Reed to explore the opinions of the individuals that resisted COP as well as the contours of internal and external forces that shape the politics of community policing. One insight the author offers is that police are more willing to listen to the elites because they are asking for the least internal change.

In his conclusion, even after finding that COP in Seattle was a bastardized version that aimed at maintaining the power and efficacy of the police as a social control mechanism, Reed maintains optimism that as researchers expose the gaps between rhetoric and reality, better social control structures can be obtained. I am an optimist, but in examining the competing internal and external pressures that Reed charts within this tome, I am doubtful that anything BUT a bastardized and compromised form of COP can result.

### Legitimization and Popular Culture

A book focused on COP is not a topic I would have considered for review in *JCJPC*. Perhaps that is why I am not one of the editors. Once I received The Politics of Community Policing and had read about half of it, I realized why this book is appropriate for *JCJPC*. Community policing is part of the popular culture. A search of major newspapers with Lexis-Nexis revealed 399 "hits" for the term "community policing" within the six months considered. This amorphous term has crept into our discourse on crime and stealthily covers a variety of police practices. However, the popularity of the term is not necessarily accompanied by a corresponding common interpretation by different audiences.

To put COP in its pop-culture perspective, I propose the following questions: Is COP the *Seinfeld* of criminal justice (i.e., meaningless, but artfully packaged)? Or, is it *The Simpsons* of criminal justice (i.e., superficially crude, yet complex and well thought out)? Overall, I interpret Reed's work as an affirmation of COP as more *Seinfeld* than *The Simpsons* - doing little of substance, but packaging it to get good ratings.

One is reminded of Rothman's (1980) Conscience and Convenience and the tensions between doing something good and doing something expedient. We are living history, and it is likely that we are repeating mistakes of the past. Scholars need to poke their collective heads above the rhetoric and establish the hard facts of what is occurring within the social control apparatus on a daily basis. That COP is done in good conscience is not a substitute for the fact that the implementation is likely to be one born of convenience. That tension is what led a phalanx of scholars to openly doubt the promise of COP a decade ago. We cannot easily drop our guard.

I would recommend Reed's work for those interested in COP as a panacea since it offers a study of the conflicts that occur when implementing such

changes. I found the chapter on legitimization processes to be especially thought provoking. While I disagree with some assertions and interpretations, the author produced a concise case study of COP in Seattle.

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