IMAGES OF POWER: AN ANALYSIS OF THE MILITARIZATION OF POLICE UNIFORMS AND MESSAGES OF SERVICE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the symbolic order of the American policing system. By symbolic order we refer to the various codes of communication between police and community members that reinforce "boundaries" in social relations. In the paper we argue that the militaristic symbolic vessels "worn" by the police reflect the institution's perceptions of worth and value regarding the public. Furthermore, we contend that these symbolic forms identify and perpetuate power inequalities and serve as mechanisms of social control. We conclude the paper with specific recommendations on how police may openly foster and communicate messages of service to community members.

INTRODUCTION:
SYMBOLISM DEFINED

Generally a symbol is any spoken or visual form meant to represent or recall a collective meaning (Wolff & Wogalter 1998). Such meanings, encapsulated within, for example, language and art, are products of a particular human culture for the purpose of communication (Babuts 2003; Russell 1999). In any symbolic analysis however, it is important to discern what is being communicated. In its most basic form the symbol functions to organize shared thought and manifest meaning. By this, we refer to the learning process in which individuals are made "responsible for the objects constituting [their] daily environment" (Mead 1934 79). Examples of this include an individual's acquisition of a language in which objects are named and held (i.e., this is a "bird," a "tree," a "chair").

In another context however, a representation is made symbolic when its depiction speaks to an "underlying meaning." Gusfield and Michalowicz (1984 419) assert:

Words are not, of course, the same as their referents. The word tree cannot yield shade. The denotation of symbolism is rather that in which something stands for something else...as the poet or the Freudian analyst uses symbols [to identify the] lion [as] a symbol of strength or a banana [as] a phallus.

Phrased differently, symbols often hold latent messages whose statements of meaning lie just beneath the surface. They are, as Gustfield and Michalowicz (1984 419) continue, a view of cultural reality "not immedi-ately apparent but perceptible." Sociologically considered a symbol is symbolic when its presence identifies a social relationship. When speech patterns (vocabulary, accent, pronunciation, annunciation, tone) are made to identify one's membership to social class, then language becomes symbolic (Mills 1939; Goffman 1959; Bourdieu 1977, 1991). When consumption patterns (leisure activities, home and fashion decoration, choice of food, drink, art) are put on display, these "consumables" act as symbols of distinction and interactive power (Warner 1959; Veblen 1973; Bourdieu 1984). Such symbolic displays are what Bourdieu (1989 19) terms the marking of "one's place" in the social order and the naming of a "sense of place for others." Here, the symbolic display of power identifies signs (verbal or otherwise) that "impose upon others a vision...of social division...[and] social authority" (1989 23). To state in another manner, symbolic articulations mark one's rank in the social hierarchy and draw differences between persons based on conceptions of value and worth.

In this paper, we discuss the symbolic imagery of the police and the power they reflect. We argue that the symbolic vessels worn by the police reflect the institution's perceptions of worth and value regarding the public. Furthermore, we contend that these symbolic forms identify and perpetuate power inequalities and serve as mechanisms of social control. We define the militarization of the police uniform as the military battle dress fatigues (BDUs) that are increasingly being fashioned by police. These BDUs are black in color and sometimes camouflage. Likewise this attire is usually worn with black gloves and a black military style com-

bat helmet. First we discuss the symbolic presentation of police institutions, focusing specifically on the police uniform and messages of service. We conclude the paper with commentary urging the abeyance of police messages of control and advance specific actions to foster police-community relations.

AN ACT OF SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE: THE MILITARIZED POLICE UNIFORM

Conceived traditionally, violence is any physical act committed against a person or object for the purposes of instilling harm. Symbolic violence, on the other hand, is a cultural action used to inspire fear and subservience (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu & Passerson 1977). In this sense, symbolic violence is always "misrecognized violence," for it appears in the guise of integrity, respect, prominence, or reverence. Symbolic violence is "in the guise of everything, that is, but the overtly maleficent" (Hummel 1996 1). Bourdieu (1977) argues that the power of symbolic violence lies in its ability to set up relationships that perpetuate themselves in a form of seduced coercion. Powers (1995) asserted that the legitimacy we grant to persons in uniform is in our psychology, and in our socialization into relationships of command. In this sense, the police uniform commands respect, yet exists with the power to seduce the public into subservience over police violations. For as Powers (1995) continues, [nontraditional] black [and camouflage] law enforcement uniforms tap into associations between the color black and authority, invincibility, the power to violate laws with impunity. Thus the actions of the wearers of black (that is the wearers of power) go rarely unquestioned.

The modern militarized police uniform (with its emphasis on camouflage and/or black colors) is a force of symbolic violence used primarily to distance community inquiries of police action. The removal of traditional police uniforms are symbolic acts used to distance outsiders (e.g., the community) from the practice of policing. Specifically, the removal of traditional police colors attacks the policing of the police. As Manning and Singh (1997 347) write:

> An important irony is that much state violence in the past (i.e., policing) was covert and, although public, not subject to review or criticism...The increase in the mobility of

television cameras, satellite feeds, and constant television news coverage...means the probability of viewing...backstage activities, the untoward, the violent, the corrupt, and the venial may readily come front stage news.

The police, as a control agent, are made legitimate only when their ability to use violent (and sometimes fatal) force goes unquestioned. However, when public scrutiny enters this arena, the police's central role (the threat of applying violence) is questioned. Conceived here, the militarization of symbolic forms is an act of violence used to structure social relations between the police and the community. The militarization of police uniforms functions to: 1) maintain an internal legitimacy within the department by enhancing their role as enforcers of public violence; and 2) serves to symbolically construct a hierarchy between the police and the public.

MESSAGES OF SERVICE: THE VIOLENCE OF SILENCE

The above passage by Manning and Singh calls additional attention to the role of symbolic violence in shaping social relations. Specifically, focus is placed on particular police logos and their function as control agents. The authors have noted the increasing removal of police banners on cars and uniforms which read similar to the following: "To Protect and Serve," "Serve, Protect, and Defend." We contend that such actions are forms of symbolic violence fostered in silence. In this case, the act of silence (the removal of police logos) further attacks community inquiries of police action. Stated differently, the stripping away of police service logos is a cue to observers to remain silent and distant. Silence, as language, is essentially a "system of symbols" that functions to coordinate collective action. As Ganguly (1968 197-198) argues:

> Our language is also full of silencers— statements through which we request others to be silent...To use a silencer is to request others not to pursue the desire to argue any further; metaphorically speaking, the silencers can be regarded as the 'red light' area of our language.

We argue that the loss of communications

of service is silencers — techniques used to distance community members from observing police actions. And we hold that they are effective, but potentially damaging to police-community relations. Ganguly (1968 198) notes, "As soon as we come across such an area of silence the best and wisest thing to do is to keep quiet." To illustrate these theses, we highlight the various social acts that inspired the militarization of the police uniform and messages of service.

Police Militarization

The initiation of the Drug War in the early 1980s prompted an almost obsessive congressional determination to insert a military presence into domestic drug law enforcement (Parenti 2000; Reiman 2004). In 1981 Congress passed the Military Cooperation with Law Enforcement Official Act which encouraged the spread of military equipment, training, and technology with civilian enforcement agencies. Similarly, in 1986, President Ronald Reagan officially designated drug trafficking as a national security threat thus perpetuating the use of military hardware by civilian police. A year later, Congress set up an administrative apparatus, with a toll-free number, to encourage local civilian agencies to take advantage of military assistance; and in 1989 President George Bush created six regional joint task forces in the Department of Defense to act as liaisons between police and the military. A few years later, Congress ordered the Pentagon to make military surplus hardware available to state and local police for enforcement of drug laws. And in 1994, the Department of Defense and the Department of Justice signed an agreement enabling the military to transfer wartime technology to local police departments for peacetime use in American neighborhoods, against American citizens. Further, as a result of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 and the war effort in Afghanistan and Iraq, military equipment sharing with local police has increased significantly.

No issue has had more impact on the criminal justice system in the past two decades than national drug policy. The "war on drugs" has perpetuated the militaristic method of operation on the part of a great many law enforcement agencies. Moreover, the military mindset on the "war on drugs" further exacerbated police–community relations, especially in minority communities

(Walker 1998). Research throughout the 1990's that examined self-reports of drug use revealed that 76 percent of illicit drug users were white, 14 percent black, and 8 percent Hispanic (Miller 1996). The irony here is that African Americans make up about 35 percent of all drug arrests, 55 percent of all drug convictions, and 74 percent of all sentences for drug offenses (Mauer 1999; Mauer & Huling 1995).

The impact of greater emphasis on militaristic law enforcement as a strategy for fighting the "war on drugs" has had a dramatic impact on African Americans as a result of three overlapping policy decisions: the concentration of drug law enforcement in inner cities areas; harsher sentencing policies, particularly for crack cocaine; and, the war's emphasis on law enforcement at the expense of prevention and treatment (Cole 1999; Austin & Allen 2000; Jensen, Gerber & Mosher 2004). The front line in the "war on drugs" is on the streets, primarily carried out in poor and minority neighborhoods. Police dressed in military gear saturate specific neighborhoods performing what they call "drug crackdowns." For example, arrests for drug offenses increased 115 percent in the 1980's, reaching a total of 1 million by 1990 (Walker 1998). As a result of the war's increased law enforcement, incarceration rates increased which subsequently swelled the nation's prisons. The brunt of those incarcerated for drug crimes disproportionably fell on minorities (Austin, Bruce & Carroll 2001). The drug war's stigmatization and incarceration particularly of such a high percentage of African-American males for drug crimes will have significant adverse long-term effects on the black community (Cole 1999).

A declaration of war suggests an imminently threatening national crisis or open conflict requiring the use of extraordinary power and authority, and the mobilization of massive resources to curb the threat and vanquish the enemy (Merlow & Benekos 2000). These events have enabled the proliferation of military equipment (camouflage and "ninja style" uniforms, flash-bang grenades, assault rifles, armored personnel carriers) that make symbolic statements of war. Consider, for example, the following statement:

> There won't be a subtlety in security uniforms anymore, or casualness. Because of the current war effort, the military influ-

ence will show up more and more in uniforms across all industries. At least part of the rationale for a military trickle-down look is emotional. When we wear these details, we are wearing safety; we wrap ourselves in a little bit of that military security and feel more protected somehow. (Doran 2002 1)

Social Significance of Militarization: Action and Appearance

Some contemporary scholarship has reported a disturbing growth of military tactics and ideology within United States law enforcement agencies (Kraska & Paulsen 1997; Kraska & Cubellis 1997). For example, Kraska and Kappeler (1997) reported that 89 percent of police departments have paramilitary units, and 46 percent have been trained by active duty armed forces. The most common use of paramilitary units is serving drug-related search warrants. According to Kraska and Kappeler (1997) 22 percent of police departments use paramilitary units to patrol urban areas. When police organizations look and act like soldiers, a military mind set is created that declares war on the American public. In this mentality the American streets become the "front", and American citizens exist as "enemy combatants" (Weber 1999 10). Once an organization with a militaristic orientation becomes institutionalized, the members exist within a culture wherein they believe that they are literally engaged in combat. McNeill (1982 viii) writes:

[When] the police constitute a quasi-military warrior class [they act as warriors]. In common with warriors generally, they exhibit bonds of solidarity [that] are fierce and strong. Indeed, [their] human propensities find fullest expression in having an enemy to hate, fear, and destroy and fellow fighters with whom to share the risks and triumphs of violent action.

When police organizations train officers to act and think like soldiers they alienate them from the community which they are supposed to be a part of. Soldiers at war operate under a code of domination, not service. Thus, all actions (or perceived offenses) by civilians must be handled by domination— by force and control. Stated boldly, no longer do police officers operate as officers of the law; they act as the law itself. Within this mentality laws are applied arbitrarily without

the validation of civilian voices and the courts. Weber (1999 10) writes,

The job of the police is to react to the violence of others, to apprehend criminal suspects and deliver them over to a court of law.

A soldier on the other hand,

does not think; [he/she] initiates violence on command and doesn't worry about the Bill of Rights. (Weber 1999 10)

The mentality of war has additional consequences for the American community. Specifically, the paramilitary model of policing destroys the very fabric of social life, trust. Simmel (1990 178) asserts that, "without the general trust that people have in each other, society itself would disintegrate." The only alternative to trust is as Luhmann (1979 4) argues, "chaos and paralyzing fear." When community residents distrust and fear the police, cooperation becomes void. The police cannot stop or control crime without the help of ordinary citizens. And citizens won't help a cop unless they trust her or him.

It is a commonly accepted law enforcement notion that police agencies are designed on the military model of organization and leadership (Cowper 2004; Birzer 1996). For the police to be paramilitary assumes that they take on many of the traits and culture of the military. The paradox here is that the military and the police are strikingly different in philosophy and mission. For example, Cowper (2004) points out that there are numerous concepts or doctrines within the military that support and encourage an organizational war fighting mentality that are almost completely missing from policing. According to Cowper (2004), the military actively employs concepts such as combined arms, which views successful war fighting as the highly coordinated employment of every organizational function or specialty in a mutually supportive manner and actively integrates all of the actions of an organization's resources and personnel to best operational advantage. We argue that a true military mentality in police organizations would be disastrous for democratic civilian policing. However, the salience here is that American policing has slowly evolved more and more toward what Kraska and Kappeler (1997) refer to as the

rise and normalization of paramilitary police units.

There is some literature that speculates that the very nature of the mentality of the drug war, and the militaristic culture that law enforcement has created in fighting this war, has perhaps perpetuated police corruption (Lersch 2001). A report by the United States General Accounting Office (1998) indicated that drug related corruption differs in a variety of ways from other types of corruption including, protecting criminals, stealing drugs and/or money from drug dealers, selling drugs, and lying under oath about illegal drug searches. The report also revealed that the most commonly identified pattern of drug-related police corruption involved small groups of officers who protected and assisted each other in criminal activities, rather than the traditional patterns of non-drug related police corruption that involved just a few isolated individuals or systemic corruption pervading an entire police department or precinct.

In the end we argue that the militarization of the police creates a social arena that is less safe and more violent. Persons targeted as criminals become more combative in their interactions with the police because of the potential for increased harm fostered in the military mind set; while the average citizen (now seen by the police as a "criminal in wait") loses trust in the institution designed to protect them (Parenti 2000; Derber 2004).

Recommendations for Change

As an important symbolic step, law enforcement should give up their military style clothing and gear. Camouflage and black or near-black uniforms and similar military hardware should be replaced with symbols more representative of service and democracy. Rosselli (2002 1) writes,

> When you think of police uniforms, the color blue ultimately comes to mind...Perceived as authoritative, the color conjures up images of professionalism and competency, making it a natural color for police uniforms.

Ironically even O.W. Wilson (Wilson & McLaren 1977), a staunch advocate of the military command and control culture, acknowledged that police agencies are equipping at least a portion of their uniformed force with blazer jackets in an attempt to add a businesslike, nonmilitary appearance.[1]

Scholarly literature discusses the police uniform and the effect the uniform may have on police culture, community relations and perceived professionalism. One rather dated essay reports the results of a small experiment where a police department traded the typical police uniform for civilian type clothes and an informal survey revealed that the community residents favored the change by a ten to one margin (Cizanckas 1970). Similarly, Gunderson (1987) studied the effects of police officers' uniforms on their credibility. Gunderson reported that a large difference emerged in perceived professionalism, favoring the blazer uniform over the traditional uniform. With the growing trend of military tactics and ideology in American policing, empirical evaluations of the effects of the military style uniform and the like on the community are sorely needed.

Police officers should openly foster and communicate messages of service to community members. The authors argue that this can be best accomplished by 1) returning messages of service and 2) implementing community policing policies. Our first suggestion speaks to the end of communicative silencers by returning slogans of service (i.e., To Protect and Serve) to officer's patrol cars and uniforms. The second suggestion of community policing is relatively simplistic inso-much that the police take on a role of being more community oriented and the citizens take on a role of being more involved with assisting the police with information (Thurman, Zhao & Giacomazzi 2001). Community policing requires police officers to identify, and respond to a broad array of problems such as crime, disorder, and fear of crime, drug use, urban decay, and other neighborhood concerns. For example, as Trojanowicz (1990 125) observes:

> Community policing requires a department-wide philosophical commitment to involve average citizens as partners in the process of reducing and controlling the contemporary problems of crime, drugs, fear of crime and neighborhood decay; and in efforts to improve overall quality of life in the community.

Community oriented policing beckons police executives to examine their organizations and effect change in support of community

policing strategies. This requires changes in organizational structure, decision making, leadership, and in training and education which socializes personnel into the community policing ethos (Birzer & Tannehill 2001; Weisburd, McElroy & Hardyman 1988; Zhao 1996).

Community oriented policing is a strategy which entails crime prevention, problem solving, community partnerships and organizational transformation (Bennett & Lupton 1992; Eck & Spelman 1987). Many scholars argue that with community policing, police officers will be expected to become partners with the community in maintaining social order (Carter & Radelet 1999). This differs from traditional law enforcement because it allows police the freedom to expand the scope of their jobs. Police in this sense are challenged to become community problem solvers and encouraged to use their time creatively. Likewise, police will be required to discern vast amounts of information and recognize available resources in order to apply them to problem solving.

Considerable theoretical scholarship on community policing has speculated on the importance of the police to work in partnership with citizens, and other private and public organizations in order to solve problems and improve the quality of life in neighborhoods (Maguire & Mastrofski 1999; DeJong & Mastrofski 2001). We argue that through the implementation of community oriented policing strategies which require, in part, organizational transformation will begin to strengthen ties between the police and communities. Community policing recommends changes which include, allowing for more participative decision making, eliminating the traditional paramilitary command and control culture, and increased and renewed partnerships with the citizenry to identify and solve community crime and disorder problems. The vast majority of the studies which have examined the impact of community policing on citizens' attitudes towards the police have uncovered positive effects (Cordner 2005).

CONCLUSION

A symbol is an object of communication made material within a social and cultural context. As such, any symbol object reflects the social order, the hierarchies of status and power, and the general conceptions of value and worth that reside within the group, community, or society of its origin. In this paper we have argued that the symbolic form serves to make and/or perpetuate social boundaries, and we have provided examples within the world of police-community relations. We present the notion that the militarized appearance of the police is an act of symbolic violence used to distance community inquiries into police actions. Specifically, the militarized police image attacks, the "policing of the police." In the end we have suggested the reformation of the American policing system within a broader system of organization that focuses on community service, trust building, and changes to the police's symbolic order of social control. We hold that such measures could alleviate the polarization that exists in police-community social relations.

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END NOTES

[1] In the 1970s several police departments traded in traditional police uniforms for blazers and ties in order to foster an alternative public vision of police officers. As Bill Huffman, former Cal State Fullerton Public Safety Chief, notes,

> During that time, the Cambodian War and Vietnam War [was] erupting and the Chicago Seven had just protested the Democratic National Convention in Chicago...It was really ugly. You were automatically discriminated against as a whole for being a police officer...You were seen as part of the system...So departments turned to blazers and ties to help improve the image of police officers. (Cited in Brennan 1998).

We reject the idea of putting police officers in blazers. The reason, as Huffman contends, "If you are in trouble and looking for police, you will look for a uniform, not someone in a blazer." (Cited in Brennan 1998). We argue that the uniform is a necessary element of police duty and that said uniform should communicate service and authority, not fear or invisibility.