



Watching the Cops: The Genesis of the Northern Police Monitoring Project

Author(s): Tanzil Chowdhury

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ACTIVIST CONTRIBUTION

Watching the Cops: The Genesis of the Northern Police Monitoring Project

Tanzil Chowdhury¹

Dr Dre [as the Judge]: The jury has found you guilty of being a redneck, white bread, chickensh*t motherf**er

Cop: But wait, that's a lie! That's a god damn lie!

Dr Dre: Get him out of here!

Cop: I want justice!

Dr Dre: Get him the f**k out my face!

Cop: I want justice!

Dr Dre: Out, right now!

N.W.A.- 'Fk the Police'**

The closing skit of *N.W.A.*'s iconic hit enacts a fictional court room scene (though inevitably spurred on by the events of Rodney King) in which a Los Angeles police officer is about to be convicted. Dr Dre presides as the judge, with his colleagues MC Ren, Ice Cube and Easy E as the prosecuting district attorneys. The officer's (presumed) whiteness- though likely a nod to the structural issues of white supremacy and the litany of Los Angeles Police Department scandals that it prefigured, proves beyond reasonable doubt his guilt of some unspecified abuse of police power. Dre proceeds to expel the officer but in one last redemptive and ironic twist, the officer screams '*justice!*'. In that utterance, one observes the completion of the 'role-reversal' in which the officer finally senses the very same trials and tribulations likely encountered by the group in real life. Indeed, that it was a police officer being charged draws attention to what they and many others saw as both police impunity and the precarity of the rule of law.

¹ Tanzil Chowdhury received his PhD from the School of Law University of Manchester (2016). He is currently working as a Research Associate at Birmingham Law School, assisting on a project exploring Post-Colonial constitutionalism in British Overseas Territories. He is the co-founder of the Northern Police Monitoring Project (npmp.co.uk). He would like to thank Waqas Tufail and Victoria Cooper for their comments. Comments to T.chowdhury@bham.ac.uk

At the time, *F**k the Police* was a rarely narrated encounter in popular culture² though it resonated with the experiences of working-class communities and people of colour beyond N.W.A's native South Los Angeles. Important parallels can be drawn with the sense of 'powerlessness' of individuals and communities with the police and policing, both in the US and UK. Obligations to obey the police, either out of fear or pragmatic acquiescence in the face of abuses of their powers, foster such resentment and powerlessness. These frustrations however, are not just limited to police contact, but also illustrate the inadequacies of police accountability mechanisms. In Greater Manchester, an independent, grassroots community organisation, the Northern Police Monitoring Project (NPMP), has attempted to provide a radical alternative of accountability that confronts these imbalances. As their slogan cites, it seeks to *educate-empower-organise*.³

The Summer of Riots

Though the Northern Police Monitoring Project was set up as a response to problems with policing from 2012, tensions between the Greater Manchester Police (GMP) and local communities began well before. The Strangeways Prison uprising, the 'minor moral panic' attributed to Manchester's Hacienda-induced Acid House birth, the 'heavy handed police incursions' during the "Council Estate Riots", the speciously named 'Northern Race Riots' of 2001, the exposure of GMP's 'racist banter' in 2003 by BBC's *The Secret Policeman* documentary, and the summer 2011 riots (Jeffrey, Tufail et al., 2015) were some of the flashpoints in GMP's public order and community policing strategy. Most notably however were the 1981 Moss Side Riots, in which scores of predominately young African and Caribbean men and women marched to the local police station to vent their frustrations with racism and racist policing attitudes (Moss Side Defence Committee, 1981). The riots came to an end on the 11th July when the then Chief Constable responded with a mobile task force of 500 officers, making 150 arrests within 24 hours, which rose to a total of 470 in the weeks following (McLaughlin, 1994: 45). The *Hytner Report* (Hytner, 1981) set up to examine the circumstances leading up to the trouble. It claimed that the riots happened simply because they were expected, identifying the main causal factors as imitations of efforts in Brixton, 'combined with opportunism, the quest for excitement and the expectation that the violence would happen'

² Gil Scott Herron, *No Knock* (Free Will, Flying Dutchman Records)

³ www.npmp.co.uk/

(Venner, 1981: 377). The *Moss Side Defence Committee* (John, 2011), set up in the aftermath of the social upheaval, labelled the report a whitewash, refuting the reports claims that the riot was inevitable. Its chair, Gus John, stated that “what was needed was a radical change in police attitudes and methods’, drawing ‘dissatisfaction with the complaints procedure” (MEN, 2011). The formation of the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) was only a partial resolve to John’s critiques which ‘since its inception, failed to secure public legitimacy’ (Gilmore and Tufail, 2013: 8).

Progression or Regression?

More recent events illustrated the notable continuities with 1981. In March 2012, a GMP marksman, Q9, shot dead unarmed Anthony Grainger under the auspices of a covert surveillance *Operation: Shire*. Grainger had been the suspect of a theft involving a memory stick containing details of police informants, though he was cleared of all charges. The 2013 IPCC investigation identified failings by the GMP and the officer who had shot Grainger (IPCC, 2013). The case was handed over to the Crown Prosecution Service who decided not to pursue the case, though the then Chief Constable Peter Fahy was charged, as the representative of the GMP, with Health and Safety violations. These charges were later dropped. A Public Inquiry was announced by the then Home Secretary, Theresa May, which began in January 2017. The inquiry recently attracted controversy after it had emerged that V53- the officer that had fatally shot Mark Duggan and whose death is said to have sparked the unrest in the summer of 2011, met with the Grainger shooter in, a previously undisclosed, meeting five days after the shooting but, crucially, before any officers from the shooting had made formal statements. The meeting between the two was apparently to ‘offer support from his [V53’s] experience’ (Halliday, 2017). Grainger’s counsel described Q9 of being a member of a “little club for firearms officers who shoot people” (Scheerout, 2017).

A year after the Grainger shooting, Jordan Begley died of cardiac arrest after having been tasered in his home by the GMP who were called by his mother following a fracas. The jury at the public inquiry said that the restraint and use of the taser by the police ‘more than materially contributed’ to the factors that caused his cardiac arrest. The IPCC found no case to answer for any of the officers involved. However, in a first, the IPCC asked for the High Court to overturn its original findings to start a fresh investigation (IPCC, 2017).

Criminalising Communities of Colour

Activists, who would later become the co-founders of Northern Police Monitoring Project (NPMP), had been key in supporting 55 anti-fascist protestors in the 'Justice4Bolton' campaign (Gilmore and Tufail, 2013: 9). However, it was their work in South Manchester that provided the momentum for the genesis of the NPMP. Between 2013-2014, GMP had begun to raid Somali-run cafés around the Moss Side area. Upon speaking to members and owners of the cafés, it emerged that the pretext for many of the raids was to search for Khat, a natural chewable stimulant popular in the Somali community, but which had recently been made into a class C drug by the Home Office (2004). Through further discussions with these communities, it had also emerged that leaders of the Somali community were being harassed and arrested by the GMP, with youngsters threatened with arrest if they were seen at a demonstration against the English Defence League that was taking place at the time.

In addition, stigmas of criminality among the Black and Asian Manchester community continue to persist. The former Home Secretary, Chris Grayling, likened Moss Side, a heavily Black and Asian area, to the US drama *The Wire*, saying that crime had escalated into an 'Urban War' (Osuh, 2009). The claims of Moss Side's alleged criminality is perhaps most prominent in the problematic 'gangs discourse.' Recent studies of the GMP's 'gang database' found that though Black and Ethnic Minorities (BAME) were responsible for 23 percent of 'serious youth violence', they represented 89 percent of those on the database (Williams and Clarke, 2016). Part of the GMP's apparatus to criminalise Black young people include the controversial accessory liability law, commonly known as *joint enterprise* and the stop and search powers held under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, which are used 3 times more against black men and women than their white counterparts (Stop Watch, 2016). The arcane use of stop and search powers, the arbitrary use of Joint Enterprise (Clarke, Chadwick et al., 2017: 98) and Counter Terror legislation has invited negative press from allegedly progressive commentariat, describing Moss Side as a 'home to Jihadis' (Parveen, 2017). NPMP wrote a rebuttal countering the narrative, identifying both the structural issues effecting the community and robustly refuting the 'imagined criminality' of the Black and Asian populace (Minott, Chowdhury and Williams, 2017)

Who Polices the Police?

The litany of issues for communities that are targeted by the police provided the space in which to establish a radical alternative to ‘investigate instances of police deviance and hold corrupt police forces to account’ (Gilmore and Tufail, 2013: 9). NPMP began with the screening of Ken Fero’s *Who Polices the Police?* at the Phil Martin Centre⁴ in Moss Side, which was followed by a discussion with young and old residents, local academics, youth workers and community activists. From the discussions, it was agreed that a group would be formed to confront these issues with the police. Of critical importance, to ensure trust and confidence from the community, the organisation made a principled stance on the independence of the group: they would not take money or support from the state or any state organisation and would rely upon donations from the community. Further, the group took the position not to share platforms with the police. Finally, *accessibility* was established as a central tent of the organisation. For example, the law-firm which it regularly works with, Robert Lizars, is situated in the heart of the Moss Side and Hulme and public meetings are almost exclusively held in community spaces, in which attendance is always free.

The group’s work revolves around a 3-pronged approach. Firstly, NPMP signposts individuals toward legal advice and representation, working closely with locally well-respected legal practitioners who can assist with civil and criminal actions against the police. Secondly, the organisation provides a platform to support local and regional family campaigns, as well as facilitating a forum of discussion to challenge dominant policing narratives. NPMP has helped to platform the Justice4Alder campaign, the Rotherham 12, as well as the director of *Riots Reframed*, Fahim Alam, who discussed critical perspectives on the 2011 riots. Thirdly, and perhaps most important, NPMP has developed a program to train and supervise residents from the local community to become active monitors of the police. Drawing inspiration from the *Newham Monitoring Project*, *Manchester Green and Black Cross*, and working with NETPOL, NPMP’s free training program equips members of the community with the skills and confidence to support individuals that are confronted by the police.

⁴ The event took place on the same evening as the hustings for the Greater Manchester Police and Crime Commissioner. Wesley Ahmed, the cousin of Anthony Grainger, had attended both events and said that only 30 people had attended the hustings. Around 80 had attended the film showing.

Conclusion

The effectiveness of radical alternatives hang on community-led responses to a crisis in the police and policing. NPMP nurtures those with research expertise, and elevates the voices of the community whose experiences are key in shaping the strategies of the organisation. In effect, it is an organisation predicated on self-determination, with many of its organisers having had some previous confrontation with the police. While fully acknowledging that issues of policing are not separate from larger structural issues- but are connected to them- part of the NPMP's approach has been to work in communities so that they are informed, empowered and organised.

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