



**University of Dundee**

## **Enforcing order**

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**Enforcing order: An ethnography of urban policing**, by Didier Fassin, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013 (2011 French edition), 287pp. ISBN: 9780745664804 (pbk).

Discussion and research into the nature of relationships between the police and ethnic minority groups are not new and in some areas are increasing in frequency and intensity. While the research which formed the basis of *Enforcing Order* took place in France between 2005 and 2007, more than ten years ago, it still has salience for current events in countries such as the USA and the United Kingdom. While the exact structure and history of policing in France is unique to that nation, there are clear parallels of experience for relations with minority communities in these countries, as well as parallels in terms of police culture research and the role of the state in social control. Fassin addresses all of these elements in a graceful and compelling way, although without employing many of the standard academic conventions which might have made this book less accessible to those outside the academy. This is a deliberate choice on the part of Fassin, whose normative orientation is never concealed and who thus wishes to reach as wide an audience as possible.

The book begins with a preface which positions the text in relation to other incidents of urban unrest, such as in the US, and explains and defends Fassin's use of ethnography. While many British researchers of policing are already sold on this method, it is much less common in the US and in some European countries. In choosing this method, Fassin follows in the footsteps of previous police ethnographers (such as Cain 1971, Manning 1997, Skolnick 1966, Banton 1964 and Westmarland 2000) in adopting a position of both insider and outsider. He directly observed the work of the 'anticrime squad', a plain clothes unit which polices the *banlieues*, the low socio-economic suburbs of Paris. In Fassin's prologue he explains through the concept of *interpellation* that he does not wish to explore personal experiences of police harassment, but to use the stories and observations he gathered in his ethnography to present a wider commentary on the state and society in France (as well as other Western nations). Interpellation is the process by which the state 'transforms individuals into subjects' (p.6). These are processes in which extraordinary uses of formal power and authority are accepted by certain populations as normal and routine aspects of daily life. Even those exercising this power, in Fassin's case the anticrime squads, are to an extent unaware of the manner in which they have normalised their aggressive and intrusive authority. Throughout the book, Fassin demonstrates how the state uses these processes to exert social control over troublesome populations, such as those in the banlieues.

In the Introduction, Fassin explains the process by which he was granted access to these police units. Considering the usually closed nature of French police groups to outsiders, the fact that he gained any access at all, let alone two periods of direct observation, is remarkable. Fassin tried to extend the study further, but was eventually denied access and the research came to an end. He acknowledges, like many police ethnographers before him, the delicate line he had to maintain between complicity and duplicity. Chapter 1 explores the 'Situation' in the banlieues. These are areas that, according to Fassin, have been largely abandoned by the welfare state and replaced by a policing one. Fassin acknowledges that neither the police nor the residents have created the situation in which they find themselves, but it is a situation which the police seek to perpetuate through repressive practices that encourage further disorder. Chapter 2, 'Ordinary', is a detailed description of just now mundane and uneventful the work of the anti-crime squads is. They receive few calls for service, but are under political pressure, as well as their own unrealistic expectations, to maintain an active 'fight against crime'. The result is that the squads find ways to make their own work, such as by harassing ethnic minority males and using obscure laws to justify their actions.

Rather than maintaining public order (which is not actually problematic in these areas until the police get involved, according to Fassin) these officers 'reproduce social order' by putting certain populations in their place. Fassin takes this theme of creating social order into Chapter 3, 'Interactions'. Here, in the tradition of Goffman, he analyses the exchanges between the police and young people of the banlieues. The main method of interaction for the police with these groups is stop and search. The young people have learned to stay silent and not provoke the police during these encounters. In so doing, Fassin argues they have also learned their own subjectivity and powerlessness in the face of the police, and by extension, the state. Fassin explores the tension between citizen and subject by describing how for the police a young person of colour is a proxy for crime, and nothing else. The imagined community of the law abiding citizen must be protected from them at all times.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore 'Violence' and 'Discrimination' respectively, and in particular how the police are able to exercise these with impunity. Police violence is often portrayed as police 'use of force', and Fassin argues that the court system is complicit in this. Fassin then takes this discussion a step further and argues that violence is not just about the physical assault, but is also about the humiliation it engenders in the victim, who tend to be from certain populations and not others. For Fassin, this is a moral violence, used to instil abasement and mortification in the vulnerable. This links to the subsequent discussion of discrimination, in which Fassin argues that the police in France are institutionally racist. He argues that, despite academic research in France which tends to deny racial discrimination, the practice is rife in policing. However, to fully appreciate it Fassin insists that one needs to look beyond the statistics and witness the nature of police interactions with local populations, which shows how the police treat all minority groups as morally and culturally the same, and see them all as a threat.

The final two chapters, 'Politics' (Chapter 6) and 'Morality' (Chapter 7), explore how popular attitudes among the dominant classes as to what behaviour is considered 'deviant' and who is likely to exercise it enable the police to act as they do. Immigrants are often the primary target for political rhetoric as well as questionable policing tactics. Fassin ponders whether this shows that the police are the armed wing of the state that protects the dominant classes (à la Marx) or whether the police have become their own bureaucracy (à la Weber). Regardless, successive governments have legislated against anti-social behaviour, giving the police more power to use as they wish. Fassin observed how the night shift officers were particularly harsh towards immigrants, in a way not replicated among day shift officers, but who nevertheless would never voice concerns about their colleagues' behaviour. Fassin concludes the book with a discussion of how his study is not just about the police, but is an analysis of how nations are becoming more securitised at the expense of just and democratic policing. The police serve the state, not the people, and use their powers and the leeway afforded them by the state to enforce social order, rather than preserve public order.

Fassin's writing style is engaging and compelling. His is a deep ethnography of a usually closed policing unit and he describes many events which he witnessed in rich detail. However, he does this in a unique and free style and this has led some scholars to criticise the text (such as Åkerström 2014). His openly normative purpose may also prevent some academic readers from seeing this as a legitimate work as it does not adopt a neutral or 'objective' tone. However, I would argue that Fassin's work is clearly in the tradition of many notable policing scholars of the past, especially in his thick depictions of the mundane aspects of policing and the ways in which the squad would often get things wrong (such as driving at speed to an incorrect address). He draws on many relevant Anglo-American policing and standard sociological theorists in his analysis, opening this text to

readers in the English-speaking world. This will make the parallels easier to draw across the continents, although care should be taken. The policing situation in France, and in Parisian suburbs in particular, will have aspects unique to them which are not replicated elsewhere. However, we have witnessed sufficient evidence in the US and the UK of how the police enforce a particular social order to understand the broader point Fassin is making with this book.

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