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*Book Review*

## **Book Review: *Before the Badge How the Academy Training Shapes Police Violence***

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The adage “Culture eats policy for breakfast” is often bandied about in the rarefied air of corporate leadership and capital gains. It’s also an open secret in policing, where culture has been named a culprit in policing’s staunch resistance to reform and accountability for at least 60 years; the record is closer to 100 years long if one includes early local and federal commissions that described widespread corruption and brutality without ever uttering “culture.” Despite the longstanding recognition that culture shapes a wide range of damaging policing outcomes, a fundamental question persists: where does police culture come from?

Samantha J. Simon’s *Before the Badge: How Police Academy Training Shapes Police Violence*, provides us a vital, ethnographic account of police academy socialization to better answer this question. In particular, she describes a process which she terms “the socialization of state violence” (Ch. 1), wherein would-be officers are recruited to enter the academy (Ch. 2), recruits’ are forcefully taught to value and use state violence (Ch. 3 – 5), and some recruits’ are predictably prevented from graduating the police academy (Ch. 6).

A single-academy study—the sort undertaken by storied policing scholars like John Van Maanen in the 1970s—would be an important and impressive contribution unto itself; Simon collected interviews and ethnographic observations across *four* police academies. Though Simon’s sites are restricted to a single state in the southwestern United States, the multi-site design of her study provides exceptionally firm ground on which to draw conclusions about police socialization and culture that transcend the idiosyncrasies of a single department or its academy.

The contributions of this book are far too numerous to fully enumerate in a single review. Setting aside engrossing and shocking description of paramilitary, survival-focused training—a group of recruits being made to write their own obituaries as collective punishment stands out (pg. 141-2)—Simon builds a compelling case that a host of popular reforms are ill-suited to achieve their lofty goals.

De-escalation training, for example, emphasizes verbal tactics that can avoid violence and enhance police-community interactions. With such training, the logic goes, officers will be less likely to use violence and, thus, avoid the injury or killing of community members. As Simon shows, however, de-escalation training is no match for more consistent and dire academy lessons, such as the profound danger of police work and the sanctity of officer survival. As a result, de-escalation training is subsumed by “warrior” pedagogy that teaches recruits to see danger at every turn and value their violence as a necessary tool to ensure they go home alive.

Simon describes, for example, academy staff who confidently disparaged de-escalation as little more than an empty “buzzword” concocted by social scientists (pg. 173). Others went out of their way to emphasize that de-escalation was far less important than using violence to ensure officer safety.

After showing recruits a slide with the quote, “Be polite. Be professional. But have a plan to kill everybody you meet,” one academy instructor declared, “Even though we’re talking about de-escalation today, I’m not watering down officer safety. Do not ever drop your guard” (p. 176).

Another instructor, after showing a gruesome video of an officer being killed during a traffic stop, told recruits, “I hate going to funerals. Don’t make me go to your funeral because you were using words when you shouldn’t be” (pg. 177).

Similarly, Simon shows that diversity initiatives focused on hiring more women or racial minorities are no match for policing’s institutional fixation on officer survival by any means necessary.

Regarding gender, recruits (but especially women) who fail to live up to the masculine ideal of consummate and decisive violence demanded by instructors are subjected to ridicule, punishment, and even dismissal. Even when women excel in the academy, they often become a useful foil which instructors can use to insult and shame male recruits (pg. 168-72).

Simon’s candid conversations with Black officers also underscore the tremendous inertia of the police institution. These officers face a unique bind within policing: they must embody the “warrior” while existing as Black people liable to be interpreted as threats when out of uniform. Nonetheless, Black officers, like their white counterparts, also explained their work—be it police shootings or

public sentiment toward police—with coded, ostensibly race-neutral language about “neighborhoods,” “crime rates,” or “reasonableness” (pg. 116-24). As Simon shows with admirable care for the complexity of these officers’ views, it is exceedingly unlikely that significant institutional change will be achieved by simply hiring more officers of color.

Simon’s analysis is, of course, limited to the academy context; how the training she observed did or did not manifest in officer behavior on patrol is unknown. But the value of her contribution is difficult to overstate. With analytic clarity and empathy, Simon shows how police officers are *made*, intentionally constructed in ways that actively undermine reform efforts suggested by policing leaders and demanded by the public. This book is necessary reading for not only scholars of policing, but also police executives, line-level officers, policymakers, and members of the public that want to understand why policing functions as it does. Whether readers agree with her conclusions or not—and arguing with the data presented in this book will be a tall order—there is no doubt that Simon’s ethnography of police training is the finest and most essential produced in 50 years.

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