



# Crisis and control: the militarization of protest policing

Gino Canella

To cite this article: Gino Canella (2016): Crisis and control: the militarization of protest policing, Social Movement Studies, DOI: [10.1080/14742837.2016.1150164](https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2016.1150164)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2016.1150164>



Published online: 29 Feb 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**Crisis and control: the militarization of protest policing**, by Lesley J. Wood, London, Pluto Press, 2014, 205 pp., £64.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-7453-3389-2; £15.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-7453-3388-5

Global unrest stemming from economic inequalities, coupled with issues of police brutality, appears to be at an all-time high. Lesley J. Wood's *Crisis and Control* is therefore essential reading for scholars and activists seeking to make sense of the protests demanding justice on these issues, the strategies the police are using to manage these protests, and the socioeconomic and political conditions that underlie these tensions. Wood examines the tactics of protest policing in the United States and Canada from 1995 to the present and grounds her analysis in the notion that protest policing strategies 'must be understood as a result of a neoliberal transformation of political, social and economic systems, and their effect on police organizations and decision making' (p. 3). Taking a historical materialist approach, Wood makes use of public records, court transcripts and reports from social movements, as well as her field notes and research as an ethnographer at the G20 summit in Toronto, Canada, to structure her conclusion that, for reasons that are explored below, 'protest policing is unlikely to become less repressive in the foreseeable future' (p. 23).

The book complicates reductive analyses that posit that the police are 'mere pawns' of the state in a capitalist system, or that the use of body cameras and other new technologies will reduce police confrontations with citizens. Rather, *Crisis and Control* examines the discourse within and between police organizations, and how that discourse has influenced a 'diffusion of innovation.' Wood argues that the incorporation of new tactics occurs when police organizations, drawing on the discourse of other law enforcement agencies, recognize 'a perceived need for change' (p. 93). This diffusion encourages police to adopt military-style methods as well as intelligence-gathering via monitoring. Wood argues that when police agencies feel their authority and legitimacy is threatened, this sharing (or diffusion) of best practices about how and when to engage protesters helps construct and strengthen their professional identity – the police 'brotherhood.' Heightened surveillance – especially in the United States since the adoption of the PATRIOT Act in 2001 – has allowed police forces to monitor the activities of social movements and community organizers and 'strategically incapacitate' the protests before they even begin. These non-lethal means of policing, which include pepper spray, rubber bullets, and fences, were popularized during the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle.

As a doctoral student of Media Studies, for me the discussion surrounding the framing of protesters by the news media was particularly fascinating. Protesters and activists are typically portrayed as 'subhuman,' threatening actors who operate outside of accepted social norms. The perception that protesters are unruly and dangerous is one that persists around the world and does not materialize by accident. Wood does an excellent job showcasing how these depictions are carefully crafted by police organizations that use a savvy public-relations approach to develop relationships with the press and state and local representatives. Protesters themselves have questioned whether social movements should employ non-violent or violent strategies. Should activists remain calm at a time when authority and structural economic conditions are producing extreme global poverty and decimating fundamental resources for hundreds of millions, if not billions, of citizens? *Crisis and Control* offers a thoughtful and engaging context to begin asking these kinds of provocative questions.

While Wood offers a convincing and thorough analysis, I think she could have taken further a critical discussion of race with regard to the 'broken windows' policing and 'soft on crime' policies

referenced in Chapter 3. Recent demonstrations led by Black Lives Matter in Ferguson, Missouri, and other cities across the globe have forcefully disrupted civil order to inject a conversation into the public consciousness about racial profiling and structural inequalities that disproportionately target communities of color. The militarized reaction toward these protests shown by federal, state, and local authorities in the form of tanks and National Guard troops armed with assault rifles connects directly to Wood's analysis of this 'neoliberal transformation' that, she says, is at the root of these clashes. As *Crisis and Control* makes clear, the past several decades have seen rapid increases in the privatization of state and public resources, which have dismantled the middle and working classes. While police recruitment has become more diverse in an attempt to more closely represent the communities they serve and officer training has become less authoritarian, according to Wood, I suggest that the problem lies in the implicit (and perhaps even explicit) racism that is reinforced once officers are on the job. This mentality originates with management and perpetuates throughout the organization. However, I agree – regrettably – with Wood's conclusions that the policing strategies reviewed in the book, influenced by our current political economic context, will continue to move police forces in a direction that is more aggressive, less adept at community policing, and more closely aligned with the social elite and political powers.

Gino Canella

*Media Studies, University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, CO, USA*

 [gino.canella@colorado.edu](mailto:gino.canella@colorado.edu)

© 2016 Gino Canella

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2016.1150164>