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Malcolm D. Holmes, Brad W. Smith. *Race and Police Brutality: Roots of an Urban Dilemma.* SUNY Series in Deviance and Social Control. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008. ix + 186 pp. $65.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-7619-2; $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7914-7620-8.

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Adler on Holmes

Police brutality, and reactions to the use of excessive force, spurred the transformation of American race relations during the twentieth century. The repeated, unabashed, violent mistreatment of African Americans at the hands of white policemen galvanized support for the civil rights movement during the 1940s and 1950s, and horrific, widely circulated images of the police use of fire hoses and attack dogs against protesters shocked white observers and attracted them to the crusade for racial equality during the 1960s. Over the course of the last century, the use of excessive force by local law enforcers ignited dozens of race riots; reactions to these riots simultaneously heightened pressure to improve race relations and fueled a furious backlash against civil rights. In *Race and Police Brutality*, Malcolm D. Holmes, a sociologist, and Brad W. Smith, a criminologist, offer an original, thoughtful, and laudably interdisciplinary perspective on the topic. Integrating sociological and criminological theory with research from social psychology, they provide important insights into the causes of police brutality. Although the subtitle of the book is *Roots of an Urban Dilemma*, the analysis includes only a modest historical component. Instead, Holmes and Smith focus on the social-psychological roots of this "urban dilemma," devoting particular attention to the cognitive processes underlying the use of excessive force by the police.

Sociological and criminological studies, according to the authors, do not adequately explain police brutality, though Holmes and Smith are quick to note the important contributions of this scholarship. Analyses that emphasize the flawed organizational structures of local law enforcement, for example, fail to account for the persistence of police brutality. Moreover, models based on conflict theory, which typically treats law enforcers as foot soldiers for the power establishment, stop short of explaining the behavior of the police. Too often, conflict theories deny agency to local cops, treating them as the unthinking pawns of the dominant group in society. Furthermore, Holmes and Smith argue that a compelling examination of the use of excessive force must account for the seemingly irrational and self-destructive nature of police brutality. The use of excessive force heightens tensions and alienates residents, thus making inner-city police work more difficult and more dangerous. Similarly, the most brutal, violent cops risk incurring career-threatening sanctions for their actions.

To address these shortcomings in sociological and criminological theory, the authors look to social psychology. Applying insights from studies of emotional and cognitive processes, Holmes and Smith argue that humans, to navigate through complex conditions, formulate "category-based reactions" (p. 37). Individuals forge powerful connections to social groups and develop bonds of loyalty and solidarity. As a part of the same process, humans are hardwired to form negative images of "outgroups," exaggerating the boundaries between social groups and hence reinforcing their ties to their "in-groups." Such stereotyping, Holmes and Smith argue, is a "generic human quality" and permits people to automatically and unconsciously recognize potential dangers and respond accordingly, either by fleeing or by employing aggression (p. 74). "The brain evolved fully while our ancestors still lived in simple foraging societies," the authors explain, and the instinctive ability to identify threats proved to be an important survival skill (p. 144).

These cognitive processes, however, interact with modern inner-city conditions in ways that increase the potential for police brutality. "Although the growth of humans' sophisticated cognitive abilities ultimately paved the way to the emergence of the complex societies that exist today," Holmes and Smith explain, "basic human mental processes operate the same as they did in far

simpler social environments" (p. 144). Police activities and a cop subculture generate powerful bonds of loyalty among law enforcers. Furthermore, police officers are socialized and trained to anticipate danger and to respond quickly to threats. In such a hypercharged work environment, perceptions of disorder feed innate category-based assessments and trigger "automatic stereotype activation," in this case casting African American city dwellers as dangerous (p. 60). But Holmes and Smith chart a parallel cognitive process among minority residents. Blending personal experience, anecdotal evidence, and their own category-based assessments, African American city dwellers stereotype police officers as potential threats and interact with them in ways that reinforce mutual fears and suspicions. Poverty, racism, and social isolation, in short, tap into automatic cognitive processes and increase the potential for conflict, particularly police brutality, even when there has been no specific provocation. Both police officers and inner-city residents become primed to respond, contributing to the cognitive production of "reciprocal antagonisms" (p. 35). Thus, "police brutality," according to the authors, "constitutes a normal, albeit highly unfortunate, manifestation of human psychological functioning" (p. 102).

Such an argument is largely ahistorical. Although Holmes and Smith demonstrate basic familiarity with the history of race relations, and although their model assumes racial segregation, *Race and Police Brutality* devotes little attention to shifting patterns of race relations, to changes in urban politics, or to transformations in the composition and social geography of the American city. The social context for the use of excessive force by the police is static in this book, and, as a consequence, law enforcers and inner-city residents float through (and collide in) a timeless and placeless universe. The roots of police brutality are grounded not in historical context but rather in the ways in which the human brain, through evolutionary adaptation, processes information, interprets threats, and responds to perceived dangers. The analysis includes no indication that rates of police homicide, for example, have changed significantly over time and across space or that the triggers for brutality have been more pronounced (or more muted) in some eras and in some places. Therefore, the authors miss an opportunity to explore how and why trends in the use of excessive force by police officers have been historically contingent. But, in fairness to Holmes and Smith, they did not attempt to integrate historical perspectives into their theoretical formulation, and their analysis already engages an unusual and impressive range of cross-disciplinary literatures. Hence, their inattention to historical context does not so much reflect a major shortcoming in this book as it demonstrates that historical scholarship has not adequately informed sociological and criminological treatments of police brutality. In *Race and Police Brutality*, Holmes and Smith cross numerous disciplinary boundaries, just not this particular boundary.

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