

Book Review: *Racialized policing: Aboriginal people's encounters with the police*

By Elizabeth Comack, Fernwood Publishing, Winnipeg: 2012; 254 pages (paperback), CAD \$22.95. ISBN 978-1-55266-475-9

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Recent months of 2013 have seen the public release of official reports on the ongoing exclusion and marginalisation of Indigenous peoples vis-à-vis the Canadian criminal justice system. The Iacobucci review (2013), commissioned by the Ontario Government, documents systemic racism throughout the courts, prisons and jury systems that disadvantages Indigenous peoples. The review emerged from the lack of Indigenous jurors in coroner's inquests into the death of Jacy Pierre in police custody, and the drowning of Reggie Bushie in 2007. Another report from the Correctional Investigator documents the over-representation of Indigenous people in the federal prison system, which has increased by 43 per cent in five years (Saper 2012). These observations are set against the political backdrop of the conservative government's 'tough on crime' agenda and ongoing policies of Aboriginal title and rights extinguishment (Diabo 2012). In this context, Elizabeth Comack's documentation and analysis of the racialised policing of Indigenous peoples in what is now known as Canada is vitally important. As she argues, the police are the front line of reproducing the dominant social order and thus, everyday practices of policing must be understood in terms of ongoing colonialism.

With *Racialized policing: Aboriginal people's encounters with the police*, Comack makes a significant contribution to the literature on racialised policing practices, which has predominantly focused on the policing of Black men in Ontario. Her starting point is the 2005 shooting death of Michael Dumas in Winnipeg, Manitoba, by a member of the Winnipeg Police Service and the ensuing inquest finding that it had 'nothing' to do with racism. In this well-written and accessible book, Comack effectively counters that it 'had *everything* to do with "race" and racism' in the context of the white settler state (p.13).

In the first chapter, Comack defines terms and sets out the theoretical and conceptual framework for the book, which draws on Robert Miles' conception of racialisation and on Michael Omi and Howard Winant's concept of racial formation, to understand colonialism as a racial project. Chapter Two provides a comprehensive overview of the existing Canadian literature on racialised policing practices that has emerged since the 1990s. Most of this literature, academic and various inquiry reports, focuses on the experiences of Black men in Ontario (specifically, the Greater Toronto area), and tends to be taken up in terms of 'racial profiling'. Comack outlines the limitations of using racial profiling as a conceptual framework, which individualises the issue. She argues that policing practices should be understood in a systemic, macro-level context as *racialised policing* and as integral to the racial project of colonialism. Drawing on Richard Ericson's description of police work as the reproduction of order, racialised policing reproduces the status quo of a white settler state.

These practices are shaped by ‘cultural frames’, ‘stocks of knowledge’ and the occupational culture of policing to construct racialised ‘usual suspects’ and the dangerousness of ‘disorderly’ racialised spaces. By applying this framework to various cases, Comack challenges the ‘foundational narrative’ and ‘collective imaginary’ of the Canadian nation-state that romanticises the RCMP (and its predecessor, the North West Mounted Police (NWMP)) and masks the white settler project through the discourse of multiculturalism. In the third chapter, Comack identifies colonialism as an ongoing process that has shaped the racialised socio-economic marginalisation and exclusion of Indigenous peoples. She explores the historical prominence of the NWMP and the RCMP in the displacing and dispossessing of Indigenous peoples from land, controlling and suppressing resistance, as well as in the ‘civilising mission’ of the assimilationist project.

These three introductory chapters provide the context for a detailed examination, in the ensuing chapters, of four ‘encounters’ between Indigenous people and police. Chapter 4 recounts the 1988 shooting of J.J. Harper in Winnipeg by members of the Winnipeg Police Service (WPS). In Chapter 5, Comack examines several documented cases of ‘Starlight tours’ in Saskatchewan, which led to the deaths of several men. This sheds light on a police practice of taking Indigenous peoples to remote locations where they are left to find their way back, often in freezing temperatures. Chapter 6 documents the routine or ‘mundane’ policing practices (‘everyday racism’) as experienced by Indigenous people in the racialised spaces of Winnipeg’s inner-city. Drawing on first-person narratives, this chapter provides an important complement to the case studies of the other chapters and effectively reinforces the persistence and pervasiveness of practices such as ‘red-zoning’, use of ‘the drunk tank’, physical violence and ‘starlight tours’. In Chapter 7, Comack returns to the 2005 shooting of Michael Dumas, the case that stimulated the inquiry of the book. She situates this case among the others, demonstrating the normalised nature of racialised policing and its historical continuities in the context of producing the white settler state.

Comack structures each chapter in a similar format: a detailed description of the encounter, the ensuing police investigations and the inquests or inquiries stemming from those events. She then analyses the events through the framework of racialisation to argue that, counter to the pervasive denials of the role of racism in the encounters and subsequent police investigations, ‘race has everything to do’ with what happened. Comack effectively demonstrates the interconnectedness of seemingly separate events, linked by racism and colonialism. The regional specificity of Comack’s case studies is not a limitation; rather, these concrete encounters are entry-points to the much broader dynamics of racialisation and colonialism in Canada.

In the concluding chapter, Comack raises the question of ‘what is to be done’ about racialised policing (p. 224). She discusses conventional recommendations such as encouraging formal complaints, increasing police diversity, increasing police ‘cultural sensitivity’ training and the community policing model, which all have been relatively ineffective. What is needed, Comack argues, is ‘a dramatic shift’ to reframe the problem as socio-economic issues rather than criminal justice matters (p. 231). Based on this reframing, Comack suggests that police organisations could contribute to decolonisation by adopting a ‘community mobilization’ approach with the ‘crime-fighting’ role as a ‘subsidiary’ function. She states that police ‘could participate in the fashioning of a new form of social order; one not founded on race and racism—and racialized policing’ (p. 234).

I found this brief discussion at the end of the chapter to be the main shortcoming of the book because of its inconsistency with the critical arguments and conceptual framework developed throughout the preceding chapters. In this ‘community mobilization’ model, police would work with communities and social service agencies in partnership in an ‘asset-based’ approach that focuses on the strengths of communities rather than their deficits. Her articulation of what ‘community mobilization’ would entail reiterates many of the ideals or principles of community policing based on a problem-solving model—a model that she discusses in terms of the disjuncture between its rhetoric and implementation. It is not evident how Comack envisions ‘community mobilization’ to be radically different, other than a cultural orientation to decolonisation on the part of police officers and organisations.

The implementation of reforms and accountability measures to prevent the violence enacted upon Indigenous peoples and other marginalised social groups are crucially important. The question of police being active participants in the construction of a radically different social order ‘not founded on race and racism’ is a different matter (p. 234). The process of decolonisation in terms of producing a ‘new’ social order requires social transformation of political and economic relations of the nation-state that are built upon and (re)produce racial formations. The proposal therefore seems disconnected from her analysis in Chapter 3 of the colonial-capitalist impetus underlying the establishment of the North West Mounted Police and policing practices since then. It begs the question of whether, in the process of decolonisation, the police institution—which is founded in capitalist-colonialism—can be reformed, as opposed to transformed.

While I found this final discussion detracted slightly from the cohesiveness of the overall argument, the question of ‘what is to be done’ is a crucial one that certainly inspires important, and perhaps contentious, debate and discussion. Arguably, these discussions, and the need to take action, are even more vital in the current Canadian context of the intensification of ‘law and order’ ideology and policies of extinguishment, reflecting an amplification of settler colonialism in the current crisis of global capitalism. By making visible the racialised colonial dynamics of policing, Comack makes a significant contribution to this discussion and the reframing that is essential to move towards decolonisation. *Racialized Policing* would make for a great introductory text for undergraduate criminology or sociology courses, but is also an important read beyond academia, especially for settlers who, as Comack emphasises, are an important part of this project of decolonisation.

References

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