

BOOK REVIEW

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Iain Channing, *The Police and the Expansion of Public Order Law in Britain, 1829-2014*, London: RoutledgeSOLON, 2015. 272pp. £34.99 paperback. ISBN 0415640776.

Whilst public order law has been a focus within the fields of law, criminology, history and sociology, there are few publications that place these legal developments within an extended chronology of historical contexts. It is in this way that Iain Channing's book, *The Police and the Expansion of Public Order Law in Britain, 1829-2014*, is a welcome addition to the interdisciplinary study of this topic. Its regional study of the riots, protests and demonstrations that have taken place over the last three centuries in Britain allows for an analysis of how legal powers, police discretion and reactions to the crowds have affected the ways in which British police forces have enforced public order law.

The first chapter provides an overview of the book's central argument, that public order law has been affected by history. It emphasises the importance of the eighteenth century concept of 'liberties' and how they were protected by the constitution or were seen to defend the right to speak and protest. The author contends that these ideas continued into the nineteenth century, and were epitomised by the reluctance to utilise the police at the demonstration that resulted in the Peterloo Massacre of 1819. It is argued that events such as this led to the passing of a number of laws, predominantly the Police Act 1829, in the same way that the Battle of Cable Street in 1936 led to enactment of the Public Order Act in the same year. This leads onto the second chapter on breach of the peace and considerations of how police discretion has affected the likelihood of certain people being arrested for this crime. This is seen to be influenced by the police's experience of particular protesting groups, resulting in a selective enforcement of the law. This chapter's description of the law's ambiguity provides reasoning as to why right wing groups, such as the English Defence League, attack minorities whilst praising the police. They are consequentially less likely to be arrested compared to left wing groups who attack the establishment, including the police.

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This idea of discretion evolves in the third chapter, which reflects upon the use of the Riot Act within various historical contexts and the changing definition of public assemblies under this Act as well as the Public Order Act 1986. The author puts forward the argument that police actions affect crowd behaviour. Case studies of events such as the 2011 England Riots are used to demonstrate how signs of force from the police create battle lines that reinforce '...the collective identities of the crowd against the oppressive authority' (p.50).

Chapters four and five examine the police's interactions with public demonstrations before and after the 1936 Public Order Act. Here, the differences between public assemblies and processions are analysed, as are the varying ways that the police have approached these depending on the context of each event. Referencing Richard C. Thurlow's 1998 article written on the Battle of Cable Street, Channing describes the Act as the 'straw to break the camel's back', as it provided authorities with more powers to deal with events such as this one, despite the fact it was still ambiguous on the issue of police powers.² The Public Order Act 1986 is also seen to have led to more changes, although many police officers said it was insufficient in providing them with powers to maintain public order. Whilst reflecting upon the utility of these Acts, it is stated that 'The legislative developments concerning public processions, both in the Public Order Acts of 1936 and 1986, placed a heavy emphasis on the philosophy of preventative measures' (p.110).

Chapters six and seven explore how police discretion affected the maintenance of public order at public and private meetings. The examples of the British Union of Fascists (BUF) public meetings of the 1930s are used to demonstrate the regional differences in police tactics. The dilemmas that the police face at public meetings is seen to be complicated by debates of at what point a public meeting in a private space breaches the peace. For this, the author provides a variety of examples, including the meetings organised by the Chartists and Suffragettes, to illustrate how the police often focus on the disorder of the interrupters, who are seen to flame the disorder at such gatherings. Whilst also referring to the more modern example of the anti-nuclear protests that took place in Cornwall in the 1980s, it is argued that there is no single approach taken by the police because of the lack of clarity on how public order law should be enforced.

The final chapter might be of particular interest to cultural historians, as it deals with the criminalisation of political uniforms and adornments that promote disorder. Whilst there is the

² See R.C. Thurlow, 'The Straw that Broke the Camel's Back: Public Order, Civil Liberties and the Battle of Cable Street', *Jewish Culture and History* 1(2) (1998).

more obvious example of the black shirts worn by the BUF, which gave them 'exposure and notoriety', there is also the lesser-known instance of the clansmen robes worn by those who attended the KKK demonstration of 1968, in Rugby, Warwickshire (p.212). It is emphasised that despite the passing of the Public Order Act 1936 and the Terrorism Act 2000 there was, and is still, a large amount of ambiguity within the law on the subject of prohibited political uniforms. This leads onto the argument that these groups have caused different regional responses from the police as well as diverse legal responses from the government.

In the conclusion, this research emphasises the ambiguity of police powers in terms of public order law and how this has led to inconsistencies in the ways that demonstrations and riots have been policed in British history. Channing describes the history of public order law as a 'tug of war' that has also affected modern police tactics. He states that the British police are currently at a crossroads, with public engagement and facilitation being up against more forceful methods, such as the water cannons requested by the former Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, during the 2011 England Riots. The history of the police is a complex and multi-layered one, but the author's decision to structure the book chronologically and thematically ensures that the arguments are accessible and thought provoking. The progression of each chapter allows the reader to understand the nature of police discretion within various historical contexts in addition to how legal developments have ensured its use in modern policing. This is made possible by the fact that certain events, most notably the public meetings organised by the BUF, are returned to frequently throughout the text. This is immensely useful for policy makers and readers of different disciplines, particularly as it puts forward a case for more neutral police cooperation in the future.