

The Future Face of Policing in Montreal and Beyond:

The Mask of Multilateralization

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Private police, usually referred to as private security, are not new to North America. For the past decade, there has been a proliferation of private security firms that perform the vast majority of tasks normally restricted to public authorities. According to Statistics Canada, there are more private than public officers in Canada today. What distinguishes this growth of private policing is that, unlike health care or education, it is not a two-tier one. Rather it is an overlapping and interconnected web of private and public institutions that share the functions of authorizing and providing policing services.

This phenomenon, referred to by some analysts as multilateralization, has far reaching implications when it comes to questions of accountability, accessibility, and mandate of police bodies as well as the very integrity of the nation state as the sole legitimate user of force. This multilateralization is also expected to strengthen the transnational nature of policing, with multinational security firms making decisions in local settings that are not necessarily in the interest of the population of the cities, provinces or countries they operate in.

It is becoming increasingly hard to distinguish the party primarily responsible for overseeing policing activities. In fact, an inspection of the latest legislative reforms for private security reveal that this multilateralization is a blurry mask for the slow and indirect take over by private security sector of the governance, operation and regulation of the act of policing. In the case of Quebec, the participation of the private sector in dictating the shape and form of private security is clearly delineated in the provincial Private Security Act, which was enacted in 2004. The bill calls

for the establishment of a Private Security Bureau in charge of issuing permits for private security firms as well as regulating the operation of these firms.

The ostensible mission of the Bureau is to “protect the public... by issuing and controlling permits and processing complaints against permit holders, among other means.” However, the Bureau is governed via a board of director composed of 11 members. Only four of those members are appointed by the relevant ministry, while the rest are representative of private security firms. In effect, then, the firms have the dominant voice in authorizing and regulating private security operations, as well as looking into complaints against their own companies, hardly a set up that would guarantee the best interest of the public.

The Bureau is cited by the newly released Law Commission of Canada report as an example of the “oversight” required to complete the process of the multilateralization of policing.

The 2006 Law Commission report, which is a primary source of recommendations for the ministry of justice, also recommends the establishment of a national policing centre “with a broad mandate to foster and coordinate research, experimentation, innovation, and best practices in policing, policing policy and relevant legislation in Canada.” More significantly, and in the same breath, the commission urges that the proposed centre “should foster the widest possible collaboration between state and non-state contributors towards effective policing” to reflect “Canada’s core democratic values.”

With the infiltration of the private sector into the legislated governing structures of policing, the commodification of what has been for decades a public good is likely

to redefine the boundaries of public policing, which might limit the latter's function to the only task that has not been taken up by private policing yet, namely street protests. This will not rule out, as is the case in Montreal, the cooperation of the public and private sector in devising new methods and techniques to reinforce the global vision of a secure and safe city (to those who can afford it of course, locals and tourists alike) with little regard to issues of equity, equal accessibility of public spaces, and justice. In the case of Montreal, the multilateralization of police services could be a last resort following years of declared police reform, which began over two decades ago.

The first phase of this reform, at least officially, was an attempt to change the mentality of police officers in dealings with the community at large. The second phase involved the introduction of community policing as a means of bringing police to a better understanding of the communities they are assigned to serve. Both reform drives have failed to stem the reputation of brutality of police among minority and activists groups.

The Instigation of Fear in Policing Montreal

Montreal is the capital of mass arrests in Canada, says long-time police anti-bru-

tality activist Alex Popovich. For the last decade or so, the Collective Opposed to Police Brutality says Montreal has witnessed more than 2,200 politically-motivated arrests, more than 1,500 of them part of mass arrests conducted by police during street demonstrations. These include 260 arrests during a Quebec student strike in spring of 2005, 371 at the protest against police brutality in 2002 and an estimated 400 prior to demos against the WTO in July 2003.

In a 2005 comparative study of police repression of 1,152 protests between 1998 and 2004 in Canada's three largest cities, Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, all three cities were found roughly comparable in terms of frequency of demonstrations and arrests. On the whole, however, police in Montreal appear to be the most repressive, followed by Toronto and then Vancouver. One of the telling observations of the study is that protests in Montreal seem to be less about homelessness and other local issues and more about global ones. The study based on that and other factors concludes that the trigger of repression, including the tactic of mass arrest, seems to be less about what the protestors do and more about what the protest is about, who the protestors are and what is the history of their dealings with police.

Popovich says the mass-arrest policies, which became prominent towards the

end of the nineties, came on the heels of a zero deficit, zero tolerance policy pursued by the Bouchard government in the mid nineties. But Popovich points out that a subtle change in tactics and approach to controlling dissent may be taking place in the force.

Initially, mass arrests executed under the "conspiracy", "vandalism", "armed assault" and "unlawful assembly" provisions were followed by lengthy court proceedings that were designed to wear out activists, drain their financial resources, and create criminal records to deter their future participation in political activity. These trials, many of which are still underway, also place considerable cost on police who occasionally appeal court decisions that acquit the accused.

More recently, and possibly in line with the strategy of prevention versus prosecution common among private security, an increasing number of arrests have been carried under a Montreal by-law known as P-6 or the anti-demonstration law, in which violators are simply ticketed and later released.

Popovich says that following the intense wave of anti-globalization protests that swept through Montreal in the late 90's and early this decade, police may not perceive as much of a threat from recent activists and thus resorted to less oppressive means. But another aspect is the →



"Couple of guys named Marx and Engels. Find 'em and give 'em the works."



Will private policing transform jails?

attempt by police to create an environment of intimidation and fear among non-militant activists who might be radicalized under severe punitive measures but simply deterred by financial fines and the experience of an arrest.

By discouraging people from showing up in the first place rather than confronting them with force under the eyes of the media after the fact, the police seem to undermine the very culture of demonstrating and voicing protestation.

Police anti-brutality activist Francois DuCanal, says the adoption of preventative tactics is part and parcel of the increased cooperation between public and private security forces which is also manifested in the “social cleansing” campaigns in downtown: “When, for example, summer festivals take place, the police come and cordons off certain public areas and kick out the undesired elements, in this case the poor and the homeless, and then the private security in charge during the event will make sure that the cleared out area remains as such.”

DuCanal says there are close to 26 new codes used by police officers to deal with the clearing out of sex workers, pan handlers and squeegees from certain areas of downtown. These measures are part of the overall strategy to market cities as globally

competitive zones in an increasingly transnational world.

Lastly, the evolving role of public police and its increasingly intimate relationship with private security in cities cannot be fully understood without an examination of the impact of the culture of counter-terrorism that has become prevalent in North America. The increased involvement of police in “counter-terrorism” operations, called by some “high-gear policing,” has led to the increased militarization of the police as well as contributing to the divorce between security and justice.

Success in these operations is achieved at the cost of sometimes working outside the law and employing community relationships for political infiltration. While this political function of police could stem the tide of privatization, the multilateralization approach could furnish the global capitalist elite fighting this so-called war on terror the perfect set up to further transform policing into a purely security apparatus while preserving its public facade as a government force to serve and protect the people. **R**

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