

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Didier Fassin, *Enforcing Order: An Ethnography of Urban Policing*. Cambridge: Polity Publishing, 2013, 320 pp., \$26.95 paper (9780745664798)

The most exciting moments of a police officer's career seldom live up to the dramatic standards of police dramas like *The Shield*. Social scientists emphasize the tedium of most police work and suggest policing is less about action-packed "crime fighting" and more about "general order maintenance" (Reiner 2010). Didier Fassin's *Enforcing Order: An Ethnography of Urban Policing* continues this tradition, but emphasizes the harassment of underprivileged minorities at the core of general order maintenance in France. Fassin's discussions of "moral violence" and "comic epiphanies" stand out, and will be valuable for future studies of policing.

Enforcing Order draws upon Fassin's ethnographic study of "anti-crime squads," police units that patrol the low-income housing projects in France's *banlieues* (suburbs of large cities). Over 15 months, Fassin shadowed anticrime squads on patrols of the *banlieues*, observing their routine activities. He argues an observational methodology was best suited to reveal the experiences of police officers, their comprehension of people within the *banlieues*, and thus the function of anticrime squads. To relay his data to the reader, Fassin writes in a narrative style detailing his experiences in support of larger arguments about the function of anticrime squads.

Fassin concludes that anticrime squads reinforce a social order where lower-class minorities are expected to internalize a marginalized status in a France high on rhetorics of national insecurity and rising crime. Fassin points out 4 of 5 police recruits are raised in rural areas, come from working class families, and have limited understanding of the experiences of underprivileged minorities who, because of poverty and discrimination, are overrepresented in France's urban housing projects. Correspondingly, Fassin reports experiences that suggest anticrime squads rely on stereotypes that frame the underprivileged as savage "*bâtards*" (bastards) and "criminals," justifying aggressive police tactics including prolonged interrogations and "stop-and-frisk" measures.

Fassin describes stop-and-frisks as humiliating for minorities who are forced to submit to harassment, insults, and mild physical violence

like slapping and shoving from police. Fassin (p. 130) suggests these encounters involve a form of “moral violence” given their degrading nature and lack of consideration for the dignity or personhood of the individuals being stopped. He suggests it is unfortunate that even critics of police actions fail to recognize the moral violence inherent in stop-and-frisks, and urges readers to consider these policing tactics from the perspective of underprivileged minorities.

Fassin again questions the need for harsh policing tactics when he points out policing is often dull and *comical*. To clarify, Fassin is not concerned with police humour. Rather, he analyzes *unintentionally* funny and awkward moments witnessed during his research. Fassin uses the term “comic epiphanies” (p. 109) to characterize the comedic nature of policing. He tells stories of police errors, including arriving at the wrong address when called to a crime-in-progress, rushing to potential crimes only to find those who reported them have exaggerated the details, confusing the individual who reported a crime for a suspect, and triggering alarms while trying to be covert.

Fassin’s more humorous stories describe officers who are eager to meet the standards of superhero-esque characters in popular police dramas, taking unnecessarily risks along the way (driving dangerously to respond to a minor crime), and then comically failing. Thus, Fassin’s study builds on Bittner’s (1974) discussion of the tediousness of police work and Peter Manning’s (1997) discussion of police officers’ preoccupation with crime control, by describing the comedy that results when police officers try to match standards set by *Dirty Harry*. Fassin’s discussion of comedy in policing can be used more widely to consider the contrast between exciting police fiction and tedious police realities.

Fassin argues the police do everything possible to keep their moral violence and comical errors secret. His discussion of moral violence suggests *escaping the gaze* may, however, be growing more difficult as a result of the spread of video cameras that can record police behaviour. Fassin ultimately dismisses the power of these technologies to expose moral violence, as the police are presented as being able to control the location of stop-and-frisks and therefore avoid cameras.

Fassin might be overly dismissive of the power of such devices. Police officers are increasingly visible as a result of the spread of security cameras and affordable cellphone cameras, making it difficult for them to control the spread of potentially discrediting images (Goldsmith 2010). While these images may not constitute formal complaints against police, when they “go viral” on social media websites, they can potentially influence the public’s knowledge of policing and tactics like stop-and-frisk. Fassin’s description of poor minorities forced to *submit*

to humiliating stop-and-frisks is undoubtedly accurate. But, it would be interesting if he had considered if and how minorities find alternative ways to respond to anticrime squads and the order they enforce, particularly when they can readily capture and share critical and/or comedic images of policing through social media.

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