Society for the Anthropology of Work • Policing and Labor

What is the “Work” in “Police Work”?

Kevin G. Karpiak

Published on: Dec 01, 2020

DOI: 10.21428/1d6be30e.e70cf108

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

With France’s election of a Socialist government in 1981, under President François Mitterrand, Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy, and Minister of the Interior Gaston Defferre the French political Left was confronted with a unique set of issues: what would a leftist—meaning a politically republican and socially liberal—police look like? What would be its organization? What would be its goals? How would it direct its violence? In particular, two major issues seemed to demand clarification: first, the nature and foundation of crime (was crime the result of an internal or individualized abnormality or deficit? Was it an expression of economic conditions? Of social anomie?), and second, the appropriate spatial organization by which political power could address crime. If, for example, criminality was produced by social conditions, then how should policing work and operate across the national territory? Where, and toward what, should it direct its efforts? Should its structure be centralized in order to address such large-scale structures, or localized so as to respond to particular realities?

The first of these questions—the question of crime, especially in its emotional register as “fear of crime”—had been put onto the political map several years before with the publication of Alain Peyrefitte’s (1977) *Réponse à la violence*. This report, issuing from the conservative government of former president Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, argued not only that there was a substantive shift underway in the nature of violence and delinquency in France but that what it termed “hesitations” in the use of physical force by police was leading to an even more pervasive sense of popular insecurity. The responses to this report on the left were many (e.g., Coing and Meunier 1980; Ackermann, Dulong, and Jeudy 1983). However, Jacques de Maillard and Sebastian Roché (2004) argue that these initial responses by leftist sociologists and political scientists were, in effect, attempts to dismiss the issue of crime as a political tool of the Right; crime was a social construction, such responses argued, which was to be understood as meaning that it was not real. In contrast, one of the first attempts by a Socialist politician under the newly ascended Mitterrand regime to take seriously the issue of crime was by Gilbert Bonnemaïson (1982), who argued that the feeling of insecurity was itself a problem—crime was, in other words, a social fact. This diagnosis was in line with what became a broader trend toward the contractualization of policing known as *politique de la ville*.¹ The basic premise behind such inventions as the Community Council for Delinquency Prevention (*Conseils communaux de prévention de la délinquance*) and so-called local security contracts (*contrats locaux de sécurité*) is that “security is everybody’s business.” Such innovations occurred alongside a series of moves toward decentralization—or a reterritorialization of political powers—so that,

by the 1990s, *proximité* was a political watchword that signaled a return of state care to otherwise “forgotten” localities.²

This trend arguably culminated in January 1999 when, after a series of meetings and colloquiums on the urgent state of insecurity and delinquency in France, the Interior Security Council, headed by Socialist Interior Minister Jean-Pierre Chevenement, announced the creation and planned generalization of a new style of French policing—the *police de proximité*. Roughly parallel to American “community policing” models but adapted to certain French realities and Republican values, it was to have as its goal the creation of the conditions for quotidian public tranquility (IHESI 2000).

This goal was to be realized by accepting three principles about the nature of effective policing. First, a *police de proximité* should not only respond to, but also know how to foresee and anticipate difficulties; that is, it was to be preventative. Secondly, prevention was to be accomplished through a greater familiarity with the social and cultural characteristics of the population of the district and through the development of personal, even friendly, relations with neighborhood inhabitants. In other words, policing’s preventative capacities were to be based on detailed social scientific knowledge. Third, this kind of police was to be able to better respond to the needs and desires of the local population through increased and continuing dialogue with neighborhood inhabitants, to whom police would in some measure be accountable. That is to say, social scientific knowledge was to be built up out of interpersonal relations of reciprocity and rapport in a manner that one is tempted to label “ethnographic.” Taken together, these three principles were to redefine policing itself, in effect creating a new profession: the *policier de proximité*. Out of a center-left rereading of crime and governance emerged a new model for police work.

The generalization of this program throughout the territory of France was to take place in three waves. The first experimental stage was a series of pilot programs aimed at developing the technical knowledge necessary for such an approach and to create a practical toolkit that could serve as a guide for police departments. Such a guide was put together by the Interior Ministry and published by La Documentation Française for consultation by interested administrators and citizens. After seeking feedback from pilot sites and recalibrating various elements of the program, the *police de proximité* was to expand to the entire territory covered by the Police Nationale by the year 2002 (IHESI 2000).

These plans were interrupted, however, by the presidential elections of 2001, in which the far-right Front Nationale candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen advanced to the second round.³ The result of this political scandal was that, in an effort to address and redirect the seemingly growing right-wing sentiment of the electorate, President Jacques Chirac proposed to bring sweeping reforms around the issue of insecurity. This reform was to be headed by the up-and-coming Nicolas Sarkozy. On February 3, 2003, a few days after the fourth anniversary of the announcement of the *police de proximité*, Sarkozy stood in front of a crowd of police officers, administrators, unionists, and reporters in the city of Toulouse, one of the pilot cities for the program. “If I’ve come here today to Toulouse, it’s because things aren’t going well,” [the country’s new Interior Minister announced](#). This was a clear shot across the bow of what was, by now, received police wisdom. “The *police de proximité* exists to prevent crime,” Sarkozy continued, “but if that’s done to the detriment of the work of investigation and arrests it’s of no use to anybody.”

Later that day, in a more intimate meeting that included an officer who had organized a soccer tournament between local youths and policemen, [Sarkozy snapped](#): “You are not social workers. What citizens want from you, first of all, is that you arrest delinquents. Your role isn’t to play soccer with the kids in the neighborhood, but to get to work!” What was needed, Sarkozy argued, was the installation of a “culture of results” within the police itself, which would push police officers to work harder and more efficiently.

Viewed in this light, policing was to achieve economic efficiency and accountability of action for individual police officers through a series of organizational reforms that rewarded merit as measured through “work.” This could mean ratios of arrests or interpellations per work hour, but also territory covered per shift (as measured through new technologies of GPS tracking), reports written, and complaints cleared. Amid all of this activity and its bureaucratically legible evidence, “social” activities were comparably amorphous and could not, therefore, count toward results. The *police de proximité*, for Sarkozy, was literally *not work*. What was needed, he argued, was a strategy to get police officers *working*—to motivate them to *do things*. As opposed to the *police de proximité*, Sarkozy’s program explicitly rejected the terrain of the social as either a legitimate or useful object of policing. Instead, it offered the instauration of

a series of high-stakes auditing and actuarial practices in order to reorient police work itself.

The “culture of results” strategy had an immense effect on the practical motivations and tone of police work in France. For example, since the Police Nationale is a national police force, initial recruitment is from all over French territory and a police officer’s first post is usually in the Paris metropolitan area—the area that police officials see as having the highest policing need. The result is that young officers are often forced to leave behind their families, friends, and sometimes boy or girlfriends and spouses in order to move to what they often consider a lonely, alienating, and frightening locale. Consequently, French police officers are highly motivated to do what is required to achieve a transfer to a more agreeable position and locale; usually, this means “back home” in the provinces. Sarkozy’s reforms took advantage of this desire by finding new ways to operationalize it: basing transfers (as well as other benefits) on the all-encompassing assessment measures developed under his administration and an emphasis on individual dossiers, which themselves consist largely of statistical indicators of the officer’s performance.⁵ The “work” in “police work” had, in that sense, become a series of indicators operationalized to administer police behavior itself. The work of policing had become, among other things, that of rendering oneself governable by the Police Nationale.

Notes

1. The phrase could be translated as “city politics.” This philosophy of governance pushed for municipal, rather than state, control of police forces. For limits to this approach, especially in regard to security policy, see Le Goff 2004 and Sintomer and de Maillard 2007.

2. These moves included the 1982 Decentralization Act, which transferred more financial resources and decision-making power to elected representatives on the regional, departmental, and municipal levels; the Territorial Administration Act of February 6, 1992; and the 2003 modification of the Constitution by the jointly assembled Congress, which proclaimed the French Republic to be decentralized (Maillard and Roché 2004; Sintomer and de Maillard 2007).

3. Although Le Pen’s advancement was experienced as a political shock by many, the *police de proximité* program had met with significant resistance even before this event from police and academics alike. The reasons for this are many and have been explored by a number of works (e.g., Dupont 2002; Lévy and Zauberman 2002; Roché 2005). Especially salient in the academic critique, and a current upon which Sarkozy himself would go on to draw, is the problem of how to evaluate such police work (see Ferret 2001, 2003; Dupont 2003; Ferret et al. 2003; Ferret and Laniel 2003; Ocquetau 2003). These challenges, among others, have led some to argue that the program was more of a shift in ideological emphasis than in everyday police practice.

4. This assessment is, of course, an overdetermined one, structured as it is by racial fears (Fassin 2013) and other mechanisms of anomie (Karpiak 2010).

5. Previously, the country’s many police unions had had a much stronger say in the promotion and transfer of officers. Sarkozy’s initiatives centralized and repurposed the governmentality of these desires.

Author Bio

Kevin G. Karpiak is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminology at Eastern Michigan University. He is Director of the Southeastern Michigan Criminal Justice Policy Research Project, coeditor of the Cornell University Press monograph series *Police/Worlds: studies in security, crime and governance*, and General Editor of the blog *Anthropoliteia*. He has authored numerous peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, and has edited a special issue of the journal *Theoretical Criminology* as well as the collection *The Anthropology of Police* (2018).

Preview Image

Photo by [Chris Henry](#).

References

Ackermann, Werner, Renaud Dulong, and Henri Pierre Jeudy. 1983. *Imaginaires de l'inécurité*. Paris: Librairie des Meridiens.

Bonnemaïson, Gilbert. 1982. “[Face à la délinquance: prévention, répression, solidarité](#).” Paris: Documentation Française.

Coing, Henri, and Christine Meunier. 1980. *Insécurité urbaine? Une arme pour le pouvoir*. Paris: Anthropos.

Dupont, Benoît. 2002. "[Implementing Community Policing in a Centralised Criminal Justice System: Another French Paradox](#)." Working paper.

_____. 2003. "[Évaluer ce que fait la police: l'exemple Australien](#)." *Criminologie* 36(1): 103-120.

Fassin, Didier. 2013. *Enforcing Order: An Ethnography of Urban Policing*. Malden, MA: Polity.

Ferret, Jérôme. 2001. "Police de proximité en France: Une expérience de recherche institutionnelle à l'IHESI entre 1998 et 2001." *Cahiers de la sécurité intérieure* 46: 97-118.

_____. 2003. "Évaluer la police dite de proximité? Certitudes et incertitudes tirées des expériences françaises." *Cahiers de la sécurité intérieure* 53: 83-110.

_____, and Laurent Laniel. 2003. "France, police de proximité et évaluation: État des connaissances disponibles." *Cahiers de la sécurité intérieure* 53: 111-32.

Ferret, Jérôme, Anne Willeumier, Pierre Duffé, Jean-Claude Emin, and Bernard Guénaud. 2003. "Évaluer la performance? Regards croisés sur une pratique d'administration centrale." *Cahiers de la sécurité intérieure* 53: 133-56.

Institut des Hautes Études de la Sécurité Intérieure (IHESI). 2000. *Guide pratique de la police de proximité*. Paris: Documentation Française.

Karpiak, Kevin G. 2010. "[Of Heroes and Polemics: 'The Policeman' in Urban Ethnography](#)." *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 33(S1): 7-31.

Le Goff, Tanguy. 2004. "Réformer la sécurité par la coproduction: Action ou rhétorique?" In *Réformer la police et la sécurité: Les nouvelles tendances en Europe et aux États-Unis*, edited by Sebastien Roché, 82-106. Paris: Odile Jacob.

Lévy, René, and Renée Zauberman. 2002. "Police and Public in Paris." Conference paper, New York University, New York, NY, April 25-27.

Maillard, Jacques de, and Sebastian Roché. 2004. "[Crime and Justice in France: Time Trends, Policies, and Political Debate](#)." *European Journal of Criminology* 1(1): 111-51.

Ocqueteau, Frédéric. 2003. "[Comment évaluer l'impact du travail des policiers de proximité?](#)" *Criminologie* 36: 121-41.

Peyrefitte, Alain. 1977. *Réponses à la violence: Rapport à M. le Président de la République*. Paris: Documentation Française.

Roché, Sebastian. 2005. *Police de proximité: Nos politiques de sécurité*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Sintomer, Yves, and Jacques de Maillard. 2007. [“The Limits to Local Participation and Deliberation in the French Politique de la Ville.”](#) *European Journal of Political Research* 46(4): 503–529.