

Australian Outlook

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Pseudo-Anarchy: Can Societies Function Without Police?

28 Jul 2020

By Jay Ryder



It is worthwhile to understand the history of political theory in order to understand the role of police. Police are a central foundation of modern societies, and their absence may enable anarchy.

Without police, will we be living in a post-apocalyptic wasteland? Probably not. Yet the role of police is rightly being questioned due to recent brutality against African Americans in the US. The world has its eyes on the US. The idea of no policing may incite fear in many, yet this concept has become increasingly popular in the wake of nationwide calls to defund police in the US. Whether this is possible remains unknown. Calls for defunding police have not yet extended to Australia.

From a Western perspective, societies are based on a number of important foundations. The 1648 Treaty of Westphalia drew a formal conclusion to several European wars, including the devastating Thirty Years' War, and introduced the idea of a state-based system. Sovereign states have permanent, defined borders. Domestically, the state must protect its citizens from each other, based upon codified laws, through an enforceability mechanism. This mechanism is generally a police force of some sort that legally has the power to enforce order through violence against the population to ensure stability. In this context, "violence" means the ability to coerce, rather than the use of physical violence in every situation. It is similar to the term "structural violence," where harm may be inflicted through societal structures, though not physically.

Police use the threat of violence to enforce order, though they are empowered to use direct violence if they deem necessary. This is where the problem currently being addressed in the US arises. The balance between order versus personal liberty remains highly contested, and the legitimacy of using violence against domestic populations to enforce order is increasingly debated.

The idea that citizens need protection from each other was popularised in the 1679 work of Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes' most important concept was the “state of nature,” later named the “social contract” and explicated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1778. The social contract concerns the legitimacy of the state to exert authority over individuals. Hobbes argued that without social order, everyone would seek their right to all things, including plundering, raping, and murdering anyone they desired. He termed this problem *bellum omnium contra omnes*, the “war of all against all.” To counter this problem and establish civil society, Hobbes argued that we must exist within a society. In a society, individuals cede some personal liberty in exchange for protection from others by the state.

In 1704, John Locke contrasted these ideas with his own concerning the inherent nature of humans. Locke argued that people are inherently cooperative and will work together to collectively achieve an outcome. However, Locke acknowledged that without government, people would live in fear of each other. Locke believed government power should come from election by the people to ensure governments would only exercise their absolute right to violence to protect citizens, not to abuse them. Similarly, Rousseau argued that if individuals stray from societal responsibilities, the state must coerce them back into “correct” collective conduct. This is his concept of being paradoxically “forced to be free,” since police brutality or coercion should never be acceptable in any society.

If police are the violent enforceability mechanism in society, though, this does not mean that police should be violent to citizens. Of course, not all police are inherently violent individuals; no absolute statement is correct in social sciences, just as the abolition of police is absolute and unlikely feasible. Police *do* represent the enforcement of violence as an extension of government. However, this perhaps conflates the individual and their role as informal societal arbiter. What then can be done?

Many believe defunding police, or abolishing them entirely, is the remedy. Broadly, this potentially adopts a liberal political philosophy, though even classical liberals such as Locke founded their political philosophies upon the centrality and absolute need for police in society. Without police, anarchy would likely ensue. Recent looting is an example of this potential. An alternative that has been proposed is a community-based police force, though how this would differ from current police forces is unclear, as their function and actions would similarly be based upon law. What kind of training would be provided, and if laws would be drastically overhauled, is also unclear.

A more efficacious solution is police reform through enhanced training and altered legislation. This may include more clearly defining rules of engagement, emphasising the importance of alternatives to discharging a weapon when people flee, and enhanced training to alter biases against people in society based on race, socioeconomic status, or other identifying factors.

Additionally, increased funding of supportive measures, such as refuges and financial grants for female victims of violence and increased mental health program funding, will alter the cycle of violence. Such preventative measures may treat the origins of crime and support its victims, rather than function as a punitive system that seeks to imprison the masses. Similarly, deprivatising the numerous prisons run by private companies in the US would perhaps lower the impetus for arrests and incarceration. Not only do private prisons function as multi-billion dollar businesses, prison labour is a billion-dollar industry in itself, and it is inherently exploitative. Disincentivising arrests in this way may reduce the apparent desire for many police to arrest people as often as giving parking tickets.

In Australia, we are lucky to have relatively good introductory programs into mental healthcare subsidised by the government, but in the US this is not the case. Not only are psychologists and psychiatrists expensive, psychiatric medications are unaffordable for many.

If there is nothing else to take away, it is that we should be very careful to investigate deeply the effects of police abolition before any wide-reaching actions are taken. It is not a sustainable option as it removes protections for all citizens, who would then exist at the whim of all others, if law became unenforceable. It is better to reform and provide extensive supportive measures for all people in society.

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