The Victimized State

Joe Sim deconstructs the data on violence affecting the police and prison officers, and analyses the politics of depicting these workers as victims of violence.

John Keane has pointed out that despite the renaissance in theories of the state and civil society there has been a 'strange silence' with respect to the discussion of violence in these two spheres (Keane, 1996). This 'strange silence' has extended to academics, policy makers and politicians concerning violence perpetrated by state officials within (and without) institutions. Whenever state violence is discussed these groups concentrate on the few 'bad apples' whose removal (on the rare occasions that it does happen) it is said will restore the consensual and benevolent equilibrium of state institutions. However, concentrating on individual examples of mal/bad practice, as John Muncie has recently noted with respect to young people, masks the institutionalized nature of violence while reducing policy interventions to "checks on applicants for residential posts, rather than...overhaul[ing] residential care policies"(Muncie, 2000).

State servants as the victims of violence

This article explores another issue concerning violence that is related to, but also goes beyond, the debate

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about institutionalized state violence, namely the ideological mechanisms through which state servants construct themselves as the victims of violence. This social construction has a number of very important social and political consequences. First, it distracts attention away from the institutionalized nature of violent state practices. Second, it allows state servants to virtually monopolize the debate about violence and danger. Third, it results in a narrow and circumspect definition of violence. Fourth, it insidiously positions those who challenge dominant definitions of violence as heartless (they don't care about the officer who is victimized) and naive (they don't live in the 'real' world). Finally it binds together the mass media, government and opposition spokespersons, liberals and broader public opinion, cementing them into a moral and political force which uncritically accepts the criminal justice reality articulated by powerful interest groups such as the Police Federation and the Prison Officers' Association. These processes, taken together, generate an "ideological mystification" (Box, 1983) around state violence and its consequences so that dangerous situations and any ensuing victimization are conceptualized as events that are faced by and done to state servants rather than as processes which are also engaged in by them.

Deconstructing the data on violence

It is undeniable that police and prison officers are the victims of violence, sometimes deadly, during the course of their work. This violence can have a devastating psychological impact on those officers (and their relatives) at the sharp end of it. However, the assertion that state servants are routinely, violently victimized is problematic and contestable. Let me take a number of examples from prisons and policing to illustrate this point.

As long ago as 1923 the Stanhope Committee argued that

the work of prison officers was less dangerous than miners, railway workers, quarry workers, police officers and factory workers (cited in Fitzgerald and Sim, 1982). More recent figures for assaults against prison staff also raise some important questions in relation to the dominant conceptualization of danger and violence.

In 1997, the Home Office noted that the definition of assault in prison ranged from "the most serious of assaults to *incidents involving little physical contact*" (Home Office 1997 emphasis added). Furthermore, the Home Office has estimated that approximately eight per cent of assaults on staff can be classified as serious. In March 2000, assaults on staff were running at 3.9 per 100 of the population while assaults on prisoners were running at 5.1 per 100 of the population. (personal communication, National Operations Unit; Hansard, 6 March, 2000). The Audit Commission has also indicated that over one-third of the days lost at work by prison officers in 1997-98 was due to musculoskeletal problems or injuries while "absences caused by assaults on duty have been falling over the last four years". Furthermore, sickness "arising from accidents and assaults in prisons represents a small proportion of absence, with roughly five per cent of sickness arising from accidents and at least two per cent from assaults" (National Audit Office, 1999). Finally, one prison officer was murdered between 1990 and 2000. In contrast, in 1999 there were 107 self-inflicted deaths in British prisons and other penal establishments while between 1990 and 1999 1,350 people died in the prisons, psychiatric hospitals and police cells of England and Wales. (personal communication, National Operations Unit; Hansard, February 1, 2000; The Observer, November 7, 1999).

These figures therefore suggest a number of different interpretations regarding the victimization of state servants: that the global figure for assaults on prison staff should be treated with caution; that prison might be a more dangerous place for

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prisoners; and that in a health and safety sense prison officers might be in greater danger from their lifestyles than from violent prisoners.

Similar arguments can be identified with respect to the police. In 1982, the Commissioner's Report for the Metropolitan Police revealed that the number of days lost through officers being injured on duty coincided almost directly with the number of days lost through officers being injured off duty, nearly 60,000 in each category:

"When further information was requested from Scotland Yard, a spokesman in the Yard's statistical branch stated that some officers were involved in road traffic accidents when travelling to work, some fell off ladders and others were injured playing sports. These figures are significant given that a central element in the police's argument about policing London is the danger involved in tackling criminals and in public order situations." (Greater London Council, 1982).

More recent figures again raise questions about the nature and extent of violence against the police. Between 1997 and 1998 there were a total of 29,100 prosecutions for assaults on police officers, a figure that implies common everyday violence against them. However, closer examination of these and other figures reveals a different picture. First, less than ten per cent of these cases (2,503 or 8.6

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per cent) resulted in imprisonment. This suggests therefore that unlike other occupations, almost every injury sustained by officers is likely to be reported to and recorded by the authorities, thus inflating the figures. Second, between 1997 and 1999 the actual injuries caused by assault or violence to police officers fell from 527 to 448, a reduction of 17.6 per cent. (House of Lords Weekly Hansard, 1 February 2000). Furthermore, 28 police officers died on duty between 1994 and 1998. Four of them were murdered while 21 died in road traffic accidents. The remaining three died from collapsing in the office, having a heart attack while baton training and in a helicopter crash (personal communication, Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary). Finally, between 1996 and 1998 police officers sustained 309 serious injuries and 3,054 other injuries in accidents involving their vehicles (Hansard, 6 March 2000). These figures therefore not only challenge the dominant discourse which says that violence against the police is inexorably rising but they should focus attention on the discourses of masculinity within police culture which can also have a seriously detrimental impact on the health and welfare of officers.

Deconstructing the official figures can begin to open up a very different perspective on the conceptualization of state violence. As noted above, thinking about such violence means getting beyond individualized notions of deviant 'bad apples' or flawed policies to examine the systemic and institutionalized methods that are utilized to violate and intimidate those who are supposed to be in the care of the state. It also means extending the definition of violence to include "something about which people seldom talk: namely the mechanisms of fear" through which the state conducts its business (Poulantzas 1978). However, this theoretical and political shift from the individual to the institutional can only take place if there is a concomitant recognition of the central and complex ideological role that

violence plays in constructing and positioning state servants as always the victims and never the victimizers. Such a construction does very little either to illuminate the interpersonal and structural dynamics of violence or to institute policies that will seriously diminish its devastating impact inside and outside of the criminal justice system.

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