Austerity, path dependency and the (re)configuration of policing


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Austerity, path dependency and the (re)configuration of policing

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ABSTRACT

As a standard operating backdrop in the United Kingdom, for more than a decade austerity has become an increasingly dominant logic as to how policing can be delivered and (re)configured to do ‘more with less’. Yet beyond simple rationalisation of public policing in line with market principles, a more complex and long-standing trajectory underpins relations between the police and commercial ‘others’ set within this climate. With austerity as a guiding ‘code’, it has accelerated rather than punctuated the evolution of public policing dispersal. Using path dependency theory, the paper argues that change across both law and policy via different forms of critical juncture has embedded commercial principles, while simultaneously reconfiguring the symbolic (and operational) status of the police and their relationship with the public. In turn, the paper highlights that such pluralisation, in a genealogical sense, has tilted police authority away from central state control to a more dispersed and commercial model – but on a long-term trajectory which long precedes austerity as part of path-dependent change.

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Introduction

With the term ‘austerity’ having gained a prominent, if ill-defined status within public and political discourse, following the 2008 global economic downturn there has been a significant challenge to the sanctity of the public police in England and Wales (Millie 2014). Beyond determining what the police are ‘for’, and ‘how’ their role is being reimagined in a functionalist sense, this paper seeks to develop a more subtle understanding of policing arrangements – and how the austere operating environment has reconfigured ‘traditional’ police practice and organisation over an extended time frame (Innes 2011, Millie and Bullock 2012). With contemporary financial debates about police cost and efficiency as one ‘edge’ to the police ‘web’ (Brodeur 2010), this paper is concerned with a longer trajectory of economic ‘conditioning’ which has created a new ‘order’ to policing between commercial and public spheres. From this perspective, austerity may be viewed as a cypher for existing and path dependent policing trajectories; and as a mode which builds upon pre-existing platforms of public police pluralisation and commercialisation (Marnoch et al. 2014). In this context, the ‘punctuating crisis’ of austerity may be reimagined as shaping police organisational dispersal in a relatively predictable, rather than reactive manner (Bayley and Shearing 1996, Jones and Newburn 1998, Loveday 2015).

Much policing scholarship has of course been devoted to explanations around ‘moral hazards’ of commercialised security; the ‘scientification’ of police work; and economic conceptions of policing (Loader and Walker 2004, Zedner 2006, Brogden and Ellison 2013). Such approaches feed into...
more immediate debates about the social and democratic ‘good’ of the public police; and the sovereignty of state authority as projected through the police officer. Yet in a genealogical sense, it is also apt to look backwards and consider processes which have acted as ‘scaffolding’ for the ‘guiding hand’ of austerity as it relates to policing in the present and the connections to marketised forms of policing.

Using path dependence theory, the paper seeks to extend debates about police commercialisation and austerity on the ‘good’ of the public police (David 1994). It does so by considering that current configurations of public and private policing actors are not just sites of competing power, but interconnected, and evolving networks. The paper is not about ‘listing’ the critical junctures or policies of government action per se which have ingrained austerity ‘logic’ into the policing landscape. Rather, the paper is about appreciating the dispersal of policing by accepting that more long-standing processes and decisions from the past, influence policing arrangements in the present.

**Analytical approach**

Beyond that which is ‘observable’ in the empirical sense of ‘police work’, it may be seen that any change to policing ‘systems’ and organisations, particularly in a United Kingdom context, is an inherently slow and iterative process (Emsley 2009). Yet in terms of contemporary trends for the social scientific study of policing:

> both in what we seek to explain and in our search for explanations, we focus on the immediate – we look for causes and outcomes that are both temporally contiguous and rapidly unfolding. In the process, we miss a lot. (Pierson 2004, p. 79)

A key tenet of the paper is attending to this position through path dependency – that policing in the present can be more fully appreciated via an ‘extended temporal frame of reference’ (Rast 2012, p. 24). As an attempt to move beyond the immediacy of a-temporal explanations, it is an analysis which contends the origins of current policing arrangements cannot be deduced from the function they serve in the present; and that policing developments may be understood more clearly as part of complex intersection between time and history (Rast 2012).

In order to frame the paper, path dependency has been adopted as a means of (re)interpreting and tracking the trajectory of overlap between public and private policing provision – as concentrated via the financial cuts of austerity since 2008 in the U.K. Path dependence argues that particular choices by organisations or governments in the past are consequential because they:

> lead to the creation of institutional patterns that endure of time. In turn, institutional persistence triggers a reactive sequence in which outcomes respond to previous arrangements through a series of predictable responses. (Mahoney 2001, pp. 112–113)

Defined as ‘critical junctures’, these choices and decisions act as natural focal points for institutionally significant ‘moments’ of the past – which impact upon the present (David, 1994, Mahoney and Thelen, 2010, Rast 2012). And in a conceptual sense, path dependence avoids what Mahoney (2001) describes as infinite regression into prior institutional optionality.

The application of path dependency to policing studies is by no means new. Adopted by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2009) and Marnoch et al. (2014) for example, it enables understanding of why police organisational trajectories are chosen, adopted, missed or rejected (Pierson 2000). Taking the adoption of the police patrol car in the 1960s, not only did this represent a significant ‘punctuation’ for crime fighting practice, but this critical juncture or choice reinforced future options for transporting police officers to fight crime. In turn, the use of police patrol cars became a self-reinforcing and justifying process, shaping budgetary investment; narrowing future choice; and making the delivery of policing almost inconceivable without the use of motor vehicles (Manning 1977, Marnoch et al. 2014). It is the ‘stickiness’ of inherited decisions and pathways which underpins the current analysis...
– especially where the ‘costs’ (either operational or financial) of reverting to norms prior to a critical juncture become prohibitively high or difficult to justify (Pierson 2000).

Using path dependency as an analytical frame also helps to deconstruct not just particular critical junctures within a policing system, but also how various permissive, or triggering conditions influence the impact of particular critical junctures (Mahoney 2006). Thus, path dependency assists in moving analysis beyond functional details of actors and decisions, and to how those critical junctures evolve to become accepted convention or policy on operational levels over time (Marnoch et al. 2014).

Following the initial ‘impact’ of a critical juncture (such as our police car), subsequent decision-making becomes less punctuated and more facilitative because that approach to policing becomes less a-typical – or normalised over time. Or in other words, path dependency acts as a conceptual tool that links ‘the present state of arrangements with some originating context … and interpolates some sequence of connecting events that allow the hand of the past to exert and continue influencing the present’ (David 1994, p. 206). Drawing upon Mahoney’s (2001) cycle of path dependency (see Figure 1), the paper has been structured around the key stages of that model which together, provide an interpretative ‘map’ of how conditions and decisions prior to 2008 for

![Figure 1. The path dependent policing cycle (adapted from Mahoney, 2001).](image-url)
policing in England and Wales helps explain why austerity’s rationality runs much deeper than simple post-2008 budgetary ‘cuts’ to policing (Loveday 2015).

**Antecedent conditions: neoliberalism and the policing landscape**

It was Hierocles the Stoic of c.150 A.D. who proposed that the concern of human beings, should be that of all other human beings – that where society as a ‘whole’ can be aligned with the ‘self’ it remains attentive to its constituent parts (Long 1996). As a referent for the condition of ‘late modernity’ (Garland, 2001), no more clearly than over the past 30 years – and as accelerated through the ‘climate’ of austerity – have we witnessed the (policing) ‘self’ detach from the (security) ‘whole’. Or in other words, the fragmentation of societal life along economic and security lines (Loader and Walker 2007).

In specific reference to policing, Loader & Walker (2001) have captured this shift in terms of ‘a discernible erosion in the authority of the political form that has dominated the modern age – the sovereign state’ (p. 10). Within this post-sovereign world, it is the divisive ‘currency’ of security which underpins modern societal relations; and which has been solidified into risks to be managed (Hughes 2007, Simon 2007). Beyond security per se, it is the amalgam of economic inequality, socio-spatial segregation and consumer culture which have created what Hall (2014) calls ‘objectless anxiety’ – as the ‘hollowing out’ and fragmentation of relations, which have in turn been replaced with concern about the dissolution of social life. It is set within this ‘surrogate social world’ where the overlap of antecedent economic, social and security conditions of policing may be examined (Dorling 2010, Goold et al. 2010, Huey et al. 2016).

Beyond the symbolism of the uniformed police organisation (c.f. Emsley 2009, Reiner 2010), ‘security fetishism’ has been reinforced within the context of the ‘preventative turn’ in the England and Wales (Hughes 2007, Brogden and Ellison 2013, Topping and Byrne 2016). With its genesis in the 1990s, this ‘turn’ may be explained as part of new avenues and opportunities for risk-based and actuarial logics which have taken hold within the criminal justice sector more broadly (Ericson et al. 2000). Underpinned by an increasing ‘accent’ on management and prevention of crime, the ‘preventative turn’ has additionally created new categories of risk and crime requiring an ever-expanding range of policing actors (Zedner 2006). In part, this may be evidenced through the de facto rise in police officer numbers in England and Wales from 2002 to 2010; and through the explosion of police partnerships, extended police families and community safety policy (Crawford and Lister 2006, Crawford 2007, Hughes 2007, Marnoch et al. 2014).

Yet the investment in police numbers during this period cannot be seen without reference to the parallel undercurrent of legal infrastructure beneath. Whether, for example, the Police and Magistrates’ Court Act 1994, the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, the Police Reform Act 2002 or even the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011, as a series of legally bounded critical junctures, the path-dependent premise of ‘others’, cost and efficiency have been consistently ‘coded’ into the policing landscape over time. In turn, ‘others’ have been repositioned from a peripheral to a more central status vis-a-vis the state police role (McLaughlin et al. 2001, Thumula et al., 2011). It may be seen such a process has been part of the state reacting to increased pressures on the police in England and Wales – first by increasing numbers of officers, but then gradually relinquishing ‘rights’ to symbolic ownership of the policing ‘whole’ from the public police (Long 1996, Zedner 2006).

With police organisations being increasingly drawn into social policy spheres, ‘others’ have necessarily (and routinely) been appended to the broader policing ‘mission’ over time (Hall 2014, Millie 2014). Thus, the shift from the moral and symbolic centrality of the public police to more pluralised policing options has grown. From *homo sociologies* to *homo economicus*, the ‘traditional’ policing of individual offenders (morals, psychology and deviance) to the offences (activity and opportunity), has emerged through the ‘preventative turn’ (c.f. Zedner 2006).
Not least with the private security industry having been ‘fixed’ to the policing landscape through the Private Security Industry Act 2001, as a critical juncture it has become a formal expression of policing ‘beyond the police’ during this time. Underpinned by principles of minimal state and market fundamentalism, such a critical juncture may be viewed as a practical challenge to the ‘public good’ of state policing provision insofar as:

the central ambition of unregulated neoliberalism is to downsize the state and facilitate the further commodification of social relations and public institutions … fundamentally at odds with not-for-profit values. (McLaughlin 2007, p. 97)

With the value of all commercial, public sector contracts to the private sector in the United Kingdom having more than doubled from £9.6bn to £20.4bn between 2008 and 2012 for example, such channelling of public money cannot have happened without facilitative structures and political will in the first place (White 2015). Thus, outside simplistic debates of private security versus public police efficiency, it is more apt to imagine current public / private policing arrangements as an ‘agreed’ and iteratively formed, rather than just a ‘contented’ security space (Loader et al. 2014). Here, the ‘symbolic borrowing’ from the market has become ‘permanent lending’ – as a normalised approach over time for supplementing the attenuated capacity of the public police (Flannigan 2008, Thumula et al. 2011, Loveday 2015).

While perhaps symptomatic of a ‘fading’ in the blue lamp of public policing in England and Wales (McLaughlin 2007), this dispersal of policing functions has been further reinforced in contemporary times through the path dependent ‘values’ of austerity – an approach which simultaneously streamlines resources; seeks efficiencies and casts doubt on police ability and necessity (Spitzer 1987). Additionally, with consumer culture as responsible for changes in consumption and leisure patterns, there has been a reconfiguration to the form and meaning of policing at a fundamental level – especially with regard to ‘sites’ of consumption (Brogden and Ellison 2013, Button 2019).

It is within these hybrid commercial-public sites where citizens have become ‘anxious consumers’, dependent upon security for consumption and consumption for security (Hall 2014). Or in other terms, the sense of security within these commercial spaces has transformed from that derived from public policing and social contract, to that of a temporary status derived from ephemeral consumer membership – as an ‘incomplete’ security commodity (Hampton 1986, Spitzer 1987, Young 1999, Zedner 2003).

But returning to the Hieroclesian idea of the ‘self’ and the ‘whole’, the fragmentation of policing can be more fully understood. With the omnipresent guardians of society – the public police – having been side-lined in many walks of modern consumer life, the individual has become dominant, detached from the need to be part of a system where their security interests are dependent on the ‘whole’. It is within these antecedent conditions of the path dependent cycle (see Fig 1) that debates related to policing change can be more carefully considered (Shearing and Wood 2003).

**Structural persistence: reconfiguration of police work**

Moving beyond antecedent conditions, it is appropriate to ask questions about the configuration of police work – specifically in terms of ‘where’ and ‘how’ the police ‘fit’ into that environment. While the past 20 years of police pluralisation in England and Wales has signified a general change to policing provision, the question of ‘where do the police fit into policing’ has never been more pertinent (Blair cited in Zedner 2006, p. 82, Flannigan 2008, Johnston and Shearing 2003).

With the monopolistic symbol of the uniformed police officer steadily dissolving, this diminishing police-security nexus may be seen as a critical juncture itself, laying the ground for future developments in the policing web (Rast 2012, Crawford 2014, Manning 2014, Lister and Jones 2016). This incremental change be conceptualised in path dependence theory as a form of ‘layering’. With no direct or deliberative means to ‘dismantle’ or alter the broad structure of the public police
system, parallel and additional layers or policing have instead been created, as destabilising to the centrality of public police provision (Mahoney and Thelen 2010).

Yet debates about policing change following post-2008 austerity remain wedded to what can be ‘done’ to police organisations rather than more fundamental reform approaches. Following a significant period of criminal justice expenditure on policing (up 59% in England and Wales between 1998/1999 and 2008/2009), the very political and capital investments in the police by the state have now become the subject of how that can be reversed – at least without damaging the symbolic status of the police role (Brodgen and Ellison 2013). With the large police bureaucracy and apparatus created during this period having gained a monopoly on police ‘outputs’, the Flannigan review of policing (2008); Winsor reviews (2012); and PEEL assessments by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) (2016) for example, have challenged that monopoly and contributed to layering options through consideration of others becoming involved in the ‘business’ of policing (Millie & Bullock 2012). But with little flexibility within the confines of existing police structures, it is police management – in terms of performance and financial controls – which have been targeted (Loader 2000; Audit Commission 2010).

The ‘necessary’ 20% financial cuts imposed by the Coalition government between 2011 and 2014/2015 to policing in England and Wales have no precedent, model or comparison in recent times. Only in the Northern Irish context of political settlement have such fundamental changes to a police organisation actually happened before in the United Kingdom (Ellison 2007, Topping 2008, Topping 2015). As may be considered:

there is no model to follow; no game-plan to ‘seize the day’ to modernise the police service. Drastic changes are measured almost solely in financial criteria … as determined by the relative influences of various lobbies. (Brodgen and Ellison 2013, p. 63)

With such budgetary ‘cuts’ as both a critical juncture and inevitable logic, the combination of political pressure and financial necessity has acted as the permissive environment within which the reconfiguration of police work has happened (Mahoney 2006 Innes, 2014). With no supportive evidence or frame about how those cuts should be imposed in a strategic sense, the ‘best fit’ arguments for what to protect (and what to lose) have remained as the lowest common denominator in political and policing circles. While Millie (2013) has argued this period of cuts was rightly an opportunity to revisit what the police should be doing, from a path dependence perspective, the direction of travel for any such reassessment was to an extent, already set.

Considering this point in more detail, it was the former Home Secretary Teresa May in the 2010 Home Office White Paper Police in the twenty-first Century: Reconnecting Police and the People, who believed that a step for the police back to mythical crime-fighters was the basis for government policy. As stated in the paper: ‘Frontline staff will no longer be form writers but crime fighters freed up from bureaucracy and central guidance and trusted to use their professionalism to get on with their job’ (Home Office, 2010, p. 3). Recasting the police as tough, no-nonsense ‘cops’, this may be imagined as a strategy to protect the visible ‘frontline’ of police organisations (Brogden and Ellison 2013). With ‘frontline’ as a functionally ill-defined concept, it is Millie (2014) who argues the term is of little use in defining core policing tasks, noting:

In talk of budget cuts, rather than narrow definitions of crime control … policing policy and practice has instead, focused on protecting ‘the frontline’ … just about everything except for back-office functions. (p. 58)

This general trajectory of reform has been centred on the police being ‘compared’ to markets and embedding market efficiencies. Or in other words, making the police fit for the financial, rather than criminogenic environment (Manning 2014). Although it must be noted the recent Home Office drive in 2019 to recruit 20,000 new police officers in England and Wales has been somewhat of a reversal in the trajectory for officer numbers. Albeit this has been to rebalance the 20,000 officers lost in England and Wales over the past 10 years under the Conservative/Coalition government to mirror the 2010 White Paper by ‘getting more police on our streets’ (Home Office 2019, Grierson 2020).
The outworking to the structural persistence of austerity’s logic has therefore been two-fold. Firstly, to protect the ‘brand’ of the public police and their traditional role. Or in other terms, altering the DNA of police organisations without damaging the public image (Millie 2014). And secondly, to promote a narrative of semi-permanent under-resourcing, widening the potential of the security market to act as a ‘buffer’ between the state and the public. While the moral position of the police has remained (relatively) intact, this process has also redrawn the police role within a world which is too complex for anything but symbolic police functions (visible patrols and crime fighting) – with more complex policing tasks dealt with by flexible (commercial) ‘others’ (Loader et al. 2014). Of course the existence of non-warranted volunteers remains a long-standing feature of policing in England and Wales, albeit the empirical extent of that contribution remains unclear (Millie and Wells 2019). But from a path dependency perspective, we can observe that austerity has accelerated a long-standing sequence to pluralisation of the public police, but in a more predictable, commercially focused direction (Mahoney 2001).

So too reconfiguration of police work as part of the path-dependent cycle may be defined as a ‘conversion’ form critical juncture. In essence, the pressures of austerity have caused policing roles (in the widest sense) to be redeployed within the ambit of existing rules (Rast 2012). In this context, ‘conversion’ argues that policing actors (public or private) may be reconfigured, provided the symbolism of public policing is not damaged. And with the state still laying core claim to the centrality of policing, they too ‘own’ policing arrangements, but are ensuring that ‘more’ is done with ‘less’, and with different combinations of (non-state) actors (Mahoney 2001).

A clear example of ‘conversion’ may be witnessed through evidence-based policing agenda in England and Wales. As a shift from ‘who’ and ‘what’ to ‘what works’, it is an expression of ‘conversion’ precisely because the focus of police work has been altered within existing ‘rules’ (or practice) (Brodgen and Ellison 2013). Or at very least, evidence-based policing may be viewed as a path-dependent response which ‘locks in’ the logic of efficiency (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2009, Mahoney and Thelen 2010, Marnoch et al. 2014). Aside from the criminological reality that most police work is not related to crime, the simple premise of evidence-based policing is to apply business and social scientific models to police work (Loader 2014). It is thus part of a ‘resurgent positivism’ which further encourages efficiency, without recourse to existing structural inequalities; and which bypasses biases embedded in police practice, but within the rules of ‘routine’ police work (Brodgen and Ellison 2013; David 1994; Young 1999, Lacey 2013, Hillyard 2009, Shiner et al. 2018). Although it must be noted that while debates about the effectiveness of the police have occupied a permanent position in academic literature, the effectiveness of evidence-based policing is not subject to definitive capture beyond fraught police metrics or underpinning police cultures. With little empirical evidence beyond the philosophy of ‘efficiency’, evidence-based policing as a path-dependent trajectory may be viewed as a predictable response to austerity, one which restructures policing from the inside (White 2014).

**Reactive sequencing: the public-private police nexus**

Having observed a gradual, path dependent shift for the public police away from a monopolistic role, in one sense this has caused police organisations to ‘decouple’ from their symbolic status, fracturing a key connection to the ‘public good’ of democratic policing (Loader and Walker 2001, Manning 2014). Yet beyond changes effected through ‘layering’ and ‘conversion’ critical junctures, it is apt to question the appropriateness of simply viewing the public police as a distinct historical ‘past’ (Zedner 2006). No single critical juncture in isolation has definitively shaped the foundations contemporary policing arrangements (Mahoney and Thelen 2010). But it is the cumulative sequencing which has impacted the contemporary ‘shape’ of those foundations, traceable to particular moments in time long pre-dating the financial crisis (Roycroft 2014).

Since the Police Act 1964, the process of redrawing the autonomy and authority of the public police has from a path-dependent perspective, been continuous – with austerity as but a new
economic (rather than just political or social) crafting of the police mission. Including, but not limited to the critical junctures of the Police and Magistrates’ Court Act 1994, the Sheehy Report (1993), Posen Review (1995), Police Reform Act 2002, Private Security Industry Act 2001, Winsor (2011; 2012), the Policing and Crime Act 2017, and the Strategic Review of Policing (Police Foundation 2020) quite ‘what’ the police do and how they perform in England and Wales has seldom fallen out of the political gaze. Police organisations may then be viewed as ‘porous’ in terms of susceptibility to antecedent conditions of recent history (Pierson 2000). Thus, blunt acceptance of post-2008 austerity as the sole explanation of public police ‘thinning’ needs to be reimagined as but one point on a much longer spectrum of critical junctures which have impacted public policing – while at the same time raising the prospect of commercial pluralisation.

As part of a ‘residualisation’ of the public police role to core tasks of crime fighting, non-state actors (although primarily the private security industry) have long been held to possess the key to more efficient policing – as an answer to the slow moving ‘solid state’ police organisation (Bayley and Shearing 1996, Zedner 2006; Lister and Jones 2016). And particularly in terms of the path-dependent sequence of the public-commercial policing nexus, the very issue of iterative change rather than historic punctuation in police mission has been key – with a language of ‘transformation’ rather the ‘replacement’ as more accurate (Jones et al. 1996, White 2014).

Related to the public-private policing nexus, a ‘displacement’ critical juncture may also be observed. Defined as the replacement of existing rules (the public police) with new ones (private police), caution about introducing ‘others’ (especially market-based) into the public policing equation is of course, nothing new (Loader 2000, Mahoney and Thelen 2010, Thumala et al. 2011, Loader 2014, Loader et al. 2014, Gill 2015). Yet from a path dependent perspective, rather than conceive policing arrangements as comprised of two dichotomous worlds – one of tradition; and one of economic calculation – it is the evolutionary sequences to market-oriented frameworks which provide a better explanation. Through a mixture of regulation, competition and compromise over policing goals (Button 2019), path dependence frames the public-private police nexus as ‘a consistent structure … about the preferences, rationality and actions of agents … in achieving rational … solutions to coordination problems’ (David 1994, p. 209).

Importantly, this position is premised upon a different ‘starting point’ from which to consider austerity’s ‘reach’ and its impact on the public-private arrangements. Instead of imagining an ‘idyllic’ form to the social and democratic ‘good’ of the police and potential to be tainted by ‘alien’ market logics, the conceptual starting point begins from a position where the police have long been disrupted by market forces. Not least that path dependent changes in terms of law and policy have created a permissive and structurally persistent environment (Pierson 2000). With the existing and diffuse use of commercial security agents within and outside the public police organisation, the ‘contested’ debates about security as a commodity need to be grounded in this path-dependent trajectory around police dispersal and marketisation (Brogden and Ellison 2013).

It is of note that the London Olympics of 2012 for example, point to the ‘limits’ of a critical juncture in the policing system which entirely ‘displaces’ the state police role in certain regards – not least where the boundaries of private capacity, governance and accountability were laid bare (Gill 2015). But it is the general ‘jostling’ of market and non-market values which has remained as a constant variable over time as part of public and private police relations both before and after austerity. From purchasing of locks, replacing the duty of the ‘watchman’, through to sponsorship of police stations and cars, the impact of austerity has merely been to illuminate such ‘jostling’ – while ‘steering’ policing towards commercial, rather than public police control (Emsley 2009, Duffin, 2013).

Finally in terms of the public-private policing nexus, technological capacity of the police acts as another critical juncture through which public police-private marketisation overlaps. Even set against historically low crime rates, demand on the police has not dropped at a commensurate rate in England and Wales (The Police Foundation 2016). The empirically unclear trajectory of crime towards online, virtual and technological arenas has increased the complexity of dealing
with crime vis-à-vis the costs of investigation, exposing further the limits of the traditional police role (Innes 2014). With austerity-driven reforms as a ‘blunt trade’ in human bodies and finance, the harnessing of market capacity around technology and ‘big data’ for example (as with our original police car example), offers a potentially new critical juncture for change; and the opportunity to increase the flexibility and agility of police organisations and their officers (Sabbagh 2019). As argued by Innes (2014):

Rather than being conceived as the ‘limbs’ and ‘sensors’ of the ‘big brain’ at the centre of the organisation, frontline officers enabled by information technologies could be re-shaped into more networked, self-organising forms of police activity that are potentially better suited to meet changing political and public expectations of their work. (p. 71)

Furthermore, the lessons from path dependency theory on this technological front, as with the patrol car, are that decisions about policing tasks taken now will impact upon the public-private nexus, and shape the sequencing of policing decisions and pluralisation into the future (Marnoch et al. 2014, Millie 2014).

Outcomes of path dependency (1): re-distribution of policing on the ground

As a critical juncture of the 1980s, private security and its evolution have rendered it as a significant force of social ordering in contemporary public space, having shifted from a peripheral support activity, to a straightforward and ‘obvious’ policing approach in the U.K. (Stenning and Shearing 1980, Crawford 2014; Button 2019). At least in terms of private security industry personnel, there currently exist some 365,000 licenced members alone compared to 153,000 police officers in the U.K (Security Industry Authority 2020, Allen and Zayed 2021). With austerity having accelerated marketised principles which have long existed, the modern policing landscape has returned to a pre-Peelian ‘patchwork’ of security delivery – with non-state policing largely monopolised by the private security industry (Zedner 2006). From a path dependence perspective, these policing distributions on the ground point to a system that ‘is to all intents and purposes, here to stay … such that it has become sociologically implausible to seek to defend or resurrect a field constituted by one sole state provider’ (Loader 2000, p. 324).

With the centrality of public policing having bowed to these new forms of private security distributions in the public sphere, the scale of commercialised security has rendered it as a form of social ordering in and of itself, where such commercial provision can determine public conduct on a scale not possible by the police (Loader et al. 2014). Usurping the democratic ‘good’ of public police values, current risk orientations within this landscape have further provided the opportunity for market security to commercialise ideas of safety previously held by the public police – even those traditionally provided through friendship or social capital (Beck 1992, The Guardian 2016). As a form of distortion to ‘traditional’ policing ‘on the ground’, it may be seen that commercial security ‘pay[s] insufficient heed to the social meanings of policing and security and sever almost entirely the connection to the question of democracy and justice’ (Loader and Walker 2001, p. 20).

As an additional strand to the ‘outcomes’ phase of our path dependency model (see Figure 1), hybrid property and security ‘bubbles’ created through changing leisure and social patterns have been responsible for significant redistribution to policing (Loader 2000). This has caused a shift from the public as passive beneficiaries of state policing provision to becoming proactive consumers of market security, signalling to the public that security is a negotiable commodity (Zedner 2006, Loader et al. 2014). This may be viewed as an incremental, path dependent change to policing defined as a ‘drift’ form of critical juncture (Mahoney and Thelen 2010). With the gradual, rather than sudden, growth of commercial habitats, ‘drift’ may be defined as failure to recalibrate or set new policing rules for the realities of these hybrid environments (Mahoney and Thelen 2010). In turn, acceptance of the ‘regularity’ to these new distributions of policing arrangements creates conformity – which sets the precedent for future hybrid security arrangements (Lewis 1969).
Or in other terms, a path dependent expectation around the validity to these policing arrangements may be observed – that both public and market security norms should co-exist in the public space. Yet on a practical level, bar an absolute necessity for police intervention, such hybrid public settings are functionally governed and ordered by commercial, market principles and goals (Button 2019). It thus makes visible that market principles have become a key organising paradigm for the delivery of security in hybrid-space life. But as conceptualised through ‘drift’, there have been no explicit governmental rules to these distributions. And the ‘shape’ of those redistributions is merely derived from path-dependent sequences underpinning private security in the past (Rast 2012).

Yet in spite of this growing, marketised influence upon policing arrangements in England and Wales, such dispersed commercial policing has created inequitable ‘hollows’ within which exclusionary practices have been able to flourish (Castells 1997). Here, there can be no automatic assumption that fragmented forms of market security – whether individuals, organisations or schemes – can be coordinated or assessed in an effective overall manner. In terms of the ‘totality’ to market security outside the state;

there is no oversight mechanism for the totality of ‘nodal policing’ in any given locale … there are no formal mechanisms for rendering plural police networks as a whole accountable to democratic values. (Lister and Jones 2016:207)

Within this world of hybrid public space, ‘drift’ has further created a ‘noxious market’ whereby social ordering is based on ability and willingness to pay, underpinned by profit, not public interest (Satz 2010).

On a related point, it is Ericson et al. (2000) who argue that neoliberalism itself thrives upon inequality and individualism. Consequently, with limited forms of security accountability located within market policing structures, there can never be guarantees that policing is distributed fairly, or in line with principles associated with the public police. Accountability within commercialised security contexts is instead derived from narrow, marginal, self-interested and cost-driven principles – defined by consumers and personal mandates (Lister and Jones 2016). In turn, a shift from the Hieroclesian social-democratic ‘whole’ to interest-based ‘self’ policing may be observed. As part of this ‘drift’ in terms of commercial security growth as a critical juncture, there has been a steady erosion to the coordination, quality and state ownership of security, allowing “the formation within and beyond government view, multiple “sites of power” … that are either thinly subject to forms of regulatory supervision or else have almost entirely broken free” (Loader 2000, p. 329).

It is from this perspective that path dependence poses questions as to distributions of private policing in terms when might the state lose its Weberian policing capacity; under what configurations of marketised policing will the public policing project become vulnerable; how will we know that tipping-point has been reached; and will it be possible (or even desirable) to row back from (or exit the present path) market creep into policing (Pierson 2000)?

**Outcomes of path dependency (2): citizens in the new policing world**

Having used path dependence theory to examine the evolving trajectory of the ‘policing web’, it has been argued that the accelerating capacity of austerity around commercial policing is much more than decision-making around efficiency or ‘cheaper’ security in the present. Rather, the dual pressures of governmental cost-cutting and market opportunity, through a longer-term series of critical junctures as noted, have caused a predictable shift in how, and by whom, policing is delivered (Button, 2019).

Where once the capital investment by government in police numbers reinforced their status as protectors of the public interest, path dependence highlights a long-term trend towards individual responsibility, ‘shifting thought and action away from the loftier levels of
moral order and collective responsibility’ (Ericson et al. 2000, p. 554). While this broad movement towards a ‘criminal justice of responsibilisation’ have been considered elsewhere, the slide from order maintenance to order production has additionally reconfigured citizen loyalty away from the state into selective, risk-based communities (Zedner, 2006, Hughes 2007, Sindall and Sturgis 2013). With the ‘public good’ of security now characterisable in terms of the worth to individuals one-by-one, insecurity and uncertainty from the perspective of the citizen have now condensed into measurable, objective anxiety about safety (Waldron 1993, Bauman 1998).

Returning to the specific issue of citizens in this policing world, it is a moot point about the extent to which the public police currently send – and communities receive – authoritative signals that the world is a police-ordered place (Loader 2014, Bradford et al. 2019). With security markets themselves predicated upon people making individual security choices, the order of that environment now begins with a range of public and private security options to predetermine personal security pathways (Loader et al. 2014). Yet when examined more closely, such choice is actually more than a rational (or simple) calculation. With an apparent ‘under-reach’ of the public police now embedded as part of the governmental decision-making, the path-dependent ‘routinisation’ of security markets into public policing spaces has allowed for its ‘over-reach’ into the deepest aspects of citizens’ life – further influencing social order in society.

With insurance companies, for example, utilising smart devices and smartphone apps to predict and monitor personal behaviours, financial incentive for behaviour has far outstripped the relative power and authority of the police to influence road safety behaviours via the uncertain threat of sanction (Osborne 2012). Such shifts typify how citizen behaviour in public and private space is being policed via commercialised approaches – a ‘layered’ form of critical juncture whereby technology creates parallel and additional policing optionality (Lopez-Sou 2016, Rast, 2012).

It may be seen however, that marginal, socio-economic sections of society may continue to remain as a form of ‘security poor’ denizen – with the public police as their main guarantors of social order (Shearing and Wood 2003, Crawford 2006, Loader and Walker 2007). Yet in terms of the historically disproportionate contact between such sections of society and the police in the first instance, evidence-based policing has become a ‘new’ face for problem-solving policing within austere times (Young 1999, Bullock and Tilley 2003, Brogden and Ellison 2013, Herbert et al. 2018).

From this particular perspective, the underpinning principle of ‘what works’ (efficiency) has to an extent, become part of the public police’s decision making ‘loop’ – as the common-sense (path-dependent) manner in which crime and social problems should be engaged and relations approached – and as a crucial critical juncture in and of itself (Mahoney, 2001, College of Policing 2014). With the post-2008 period of austerity described by the College of Policing as both ‘exciting and challenging times’ (2014, p. 5), evidence-based policing has become a new ‘social imaginary’ for policing, as encoded into the College of Policing’s ‘professionalisation’ agenda via their Police Qualifications Education Framework (PQEF) (Ericson 2007, Brown et al. 2018).

Related to governmental approval and ‘buy-in’ to this evidence-based path, it is this adopted path which sets the goals of success, extolled through PEEL efficiency inspections of HMIC (2016) – whereby considering the ‘impact’ of officer and programme interventions is key to ‘success’. And while the uptake of evidence-based policing has been far from uniform across police service in England and Wales, its positivistic agenda lacks focus on finding ways to derive resources and capacities from communities and their social capital; or as a means of reinvigorating the police-community nexus in line with community-oriented policing practice (Innes 2011, 2014, Topping and Byrne 2016, Brown et al. 2018). Or in other terms, evidence-based policing may be conceived as a ‘displacement’-oriented critical juncture within the path dependent cycle where older rules (or policing styles) are replaced with newer (evidence-based) rules, in turn impacting on how citizens are treated, relations managed, and police work delivered into the future (Mahoney and Thelen 2010).

In taking a step back to consider how the place of citizens has been reoriented, austerity may be viewed as accelerating ideas around science of policing tasks – albeit in an uneven way across...
England and Wales. This ‘policing sociology’ has to all intents and purposes also ignored decades of research that points to the fact no one really knows how many police, or in what configurations, are required to impact on crime on the ground (McNeill 2016). It is merely the orthodoxy, or the path dependence to the approach which generates conformity and expectations around policing society in more ‘efficient’ ways – in parallel to commercial policing models (Marnoch et al. 2014). The point being, it is the iterative path dependence of ‘marketised’ and commercial approaches which have influenced these shifts, not as a genuinely new and ‘punctuating’ step-change in policing delivery.

Conclusion

In the context of almost 190 years of the uniformed police in England and Wales, for more than a decade so-called austerity has exerted new and previously unseen pressures on public policing. On the one hand, Peel’s ‘brand’ remains as a global product for export to ‘enlighten’ policing in less developed democracies (Ellison and O’Reilly 2008). But on the other hand, it may be seen the climate of austerity has in fact ‘distilled’ a much longer sequence of path-dependent decision-making which has systematically altered the orientation of public police work. Above and beyond mere historical or institutional narrative (Pierson 2004), path dependency – as the core analytical frame – has allowed for a reinterpretation of how particular policy, legal and operational changes (or critical junctures) in the past, have helped influence policing configurations in the present over an extended time frame (David 1994).

Considering the self-reinforcing nature of path-dependent decision making, as a theoretical frame path dependency has helped to illuminate the context in which the public police in England and Wales, as the central police service, are part of a wider policing system which has provided greater opportunity for commercial pluralism. As witnessed through the lens of Mahoney’s (2001) path dependence model (see Figure 1), it is possible to see the that antecedent, external condition of neoliberalism (the neoliberalisation of policing landscape) has gradually conferred legitimacy to structural changes within policing (reconfigured policing work). In turn, this has allowed market and economic principles to become structurally persistent and embedded (public-private nexus). A reactive sequences of cuts, efficiency and non-state policing provision has then evolved as a ‘solution’ (redistributions of policing) which both service antecedent government policy, further justifying the structures in place (David 1994). The ‘outcome’ of diminished public, and bolstered private policing provision in society thus serves to reinforce that policing beyond the police, is necessary operational ‘setting’ (the new policing world) – and that deviation or regression from that adopted path to ‘traditional’ modes of policing is both too costly and inefficient (Brogden and Ellison 2013). This is further reinforced via redistributions to policing and altered relations with society at an operational level. In turn, this path-dependent cycle which began at an earlier moment in time, has fed into the underlying, marketised policing conditions of the present, reinforcing prior decision making – and justifying similar choices in the future.

At the same time, path dependence theory has facilitated a deeper analysis of choices and decisions – or the different ‘character’ of particular critical junctures which help to give effect to the path-dependent modality. As identified, certain policy and operational changes within the policing landscape provide parallel, additional or alternative options within a framework of state and non-state policing provision. The important point is that the majority of those critical junctures have helped ‘steer’ the policing landscape in a self-reinforcing, and increasingly marketised direction – while feeding into the self-reinforcing path-dependent cycle (see Figure 1).

So too this analysis raises questions for wider policing research around the pluralisation of policing. Beyond considering plural policing through commercial ‘others’ as a relatively new development of policing history, path dependency has provided insight as to the process and circumstances which can facilitate the introduction and persistence of actors into policing spaces. And most significantly, this approach helps to move analysis of policing dispersal beyond the immediacy of current trends to consider the intersection of time and history (David, 1994).
But it is of course austerity, as a key critical juncture of modern policing times, which has acted as a focal point for the dispersal and reinvention of contemporary police practice vis-à-vis commercialised policing. But as argued throughout, austerity, unlike our police patrol car of the 1960s, has not punctuated the delivery of policing. Instead, it has acted as a path-dependent and coordinating ‘accelerant’ to the multitude of critical junctures of recent history which have steadily enabled non-state, commercial actors and rationales to be inserted into the public policing sphere.

Crucially, like the public police ‘project’ established under Peel, police power cannot exist without founding beliefs which cannot always be empirically tested, but which determine action (Supiot 2017). With a path dependency related to commercial ‘others’ having steadily encroached upon the sacred, Weberian status of the public police, marketisation has become a founding belief – with power in the sense of market dominance, all that is left to pursue (Manning 2014). And with the pursuit of this power fuelled collectively by economic rationales, the inevitable consequence is that until there is a regressive ‘punctuation’ in future to re-invigorate more centralised conceptions of public police work, policing is predictably fated to ride along an established path-dependent trajectory to involve market ‘others’, ever more remote from its ‘traditional’ roots of the past.

Note

1. Refers to Max Weber’s concept that the state is defined through the monopoly on use of force

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