

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF SOUTH AFRICA'S PUBLIC ORDER POLICE

Marks, M (2005) **Transforming the Robocops: Changing police in South Africa.** Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. ISBN: 1-86914-043-5. xvi + 291 Pages

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Elvis Costello sings:

She is watching the detectives
Oh, it's so cute.
She is watching the detectives
When they shoot.
Beat them up until the teardrops start,
But he can't be wounded `cos he's got no heart.

(Watching the Detectives, 1977)

“Watching the detectives” may, in some very loose way, be what Monique Marks sets out to do in her book **Transforming the Robocops**, but her process of observing, engaging, and ethnographically researching this subject matter could never be referred to as “cute”. As Superintendent Faizel Ally highlights in his foreword to her book, “She earned the respect of members by going out on operations and engaging directly with them rather than just asking questions and interviewing them” (Marks, 2005:x).

In **Transforming the Robocops**, Marks explores how the Public Order Police (POP) - what was once the strong arm of the apartheid regime – engages with transformation to meet the demands of a democratic South Africa. This is tough and gritty stuff both in terms of POP's horrendous apartheid past and the high levels of violent crime facing the new dispensation. It is a subject that previously was rarely accessible for research, let alone by a woman. Marks documents the experiences of members going through a process of dramatic transition within their Durban unit, over a four-year period, from 1996-2001. She tries to discover how what she terms “rank-and-file” and “senior” police members experienced, understood and reacted to the transformation process that was taking place in the unit, as a microcosm for change within the South African Police Service as a whole - a key institution in South African society.

Marks provides the historical context for her research: Previously known as the Riot Unit, and later as the Internal Stability Division, Marks describes how POP was the unit responsible for the policing of protests, demonstrations, and situations the apartheid government deemed to be public disorder. She points to how POP's members were widely perceived by black South Africans as "murderers in uniform" (Marks, 2005:8). She notes that white men with strong allegiance to the apartheid government dominated this unit. She suggests that they saw their operations as a form of war combat – with military-style training, equipment, and institutional structure. This was, and is, as Marks discusses, attractive to certain people who want simplicity, solidarity, and action. Marks goes on to highlight that the new government decided that a revised Public Order Police unit had to be crafted. However, rather than more gradual and co-ordinated movement that may occur in other contexts throughout the world, the transformation required of POP's Durban unit was enforced change. This unit was to be "demilitarised/civilianised, community- and service-oriented, representative of the broader society, accountable and non-partisan, and committed to human rights" (Marks, 2005:8). Its modus operandi had to change from "repressive to tolerant, from reactive to preventative, from confrontational to consensual, from rigid to flexible" – bringing it into line with international trends in public order policing (Della Porta and Reiter, 1998, cited in Marks, 2005:8).

A dilemma this book sets out to explore is the very public claims that have been made as to substantial changes in the expressed mission, structure, leadership, racial and gender composition of the police, versus the lived reality of these changes. As Marks (2005) explains, police organisations are characteristically bureaucratic with strict rules and entrenched structural hierarchies that get in the way of change. With this in mind, this book attempts to answer certain questions about police reform:

- "Why do police persist with old and unreconstructed modes of behaviour despite reform initiatives?"
- What role do police supervisors and managers have in implementing police organisational change?
- In what way do historical legacies and memories impact on attempts at police reform?
- What mechanisms would be most effective in bringing about police organisational change?
- How can lasting police cultural change be brought about?"

(Marks, 2005:6).

In answering these questions Marks' observations suggest the key to understanding police practice and values is cultural knowledge, in its various dimensions. She explains that this cultural knowledge is deeply embedded and it informs police rationales, their understanding of what they do, their ways of seeing people they interact with and the methods they use. She concludes that for real and fundamental change to occur in police organisations, it is these core values and assumptions that have to be transformed. This means changing the way police work is seen by police service members themselves. Marks argues that for significant change what is needed are both directive leadership and participatory management styles. Directive leadership and supervision, she explains, provides "rank-and-file" members with the guidance they need to be confident about changing the way they do things. Participatory management

practices, on the other hand, allow individual members to feel that they have a stake in the change process rather than being mere “Robocops” in an organisational machine. This in turn builds morale and commitment to the service, without which organisational change will go nowhere.

The book is structured in an accessible way: An initial theoretical chapter lays down some of the necessary parameters, derived from international police studies, for the historical and analytical explorations that follow. The next two chapters present the horrifying record of South African and Durban public order policing up to the fall of the apartheid regime. She then goes on to spotlight the men and women who made up Durban POP in the initial years of the new dispensation. Then comes a chapter that tells Marks’ own tale of stepping into the Durban POP narrative. In this chapter she also discusses the methodological and ethical issues that researchers who enter the world of the police must be cognisant of. Marks explores how the political transition created a climate that both aided and impeded police transformation – how, for example, training was held up to be the panacea for all ills, yet there was on the whole no systematic re-training for existing members. She presents members’ responses to legislative and political transformation, with a view of examining whether the introduction of new mechanisms brought about desired change. Throughout these middle and final chapters Marks also, in a step-by-step fashion, reflects the implications of what her research uncovered.

Overall, I feel this book makes a valuable contribution to the debate on police transformation, particularly in transitional societies. It examines what post-apartheid policy has meant for POP. It explores some of the dilemmas for a woman researching an action-orientated unit. It also provides some insight into the transition in South Africa.

Transforming the Robocops is an insightful book, rich in case study illustrations that illuminate the process of transformation within POP. Marks’ research shows that major change is possible and that police culture can be changed even in a complex and difficult environment. Marks documents the daily experiences of “Robocops” going through dramatic change. She shows - unlike Elvis Costello’s opening lyrics suggest - that these “Robocops” do feel because they have got heart. This book gives the police a voice, but also gives the police, and us, an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, to look toward a more sensitive and informed continued metamorphosis tomorrow.