

**Book Review: A.S. Vitale, *The End of Policing*. New York: Verso. 2017. ISBN: 978-1-78478-292-4 (Paperback). 273 Pages. \$17.95.**

Reviewed by Thomas Dutcher<sup>1</sup>

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In his book, *The End of Policing*, Alex S. Vitale, professor of sociology and coordinator of the Policing and Social Justice Project of Brooklyn College, immerses the reader into the world of critical policing studies with his comprehensive distillation of the current issues related to policing in America. Broadly, this is a book about economic, social, and political injustices and how this trifecta manifests itself in the various aspects of policing. The book begins its initial argument by proposing that the most commonly enacted methods of reform (more training, body-worn cameras, and community policing programs) have not and will not “reduce the burden or increase the justness of policing” (222).

This book takes on a critical examination, through detailed sourcing both modern and historical, of the role of policing when it comes to; protecting all persons especially BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, And People of Color) folx, working in schools, responding to persons with mental illness, homelessness and quality of life policing, sex work, the war on drugs, gangs, migration, and ultimately political relationships. These ten topics make up the bulk of the text and provide a comprehensive analysis of how our reliance on police in the scope of these ten frames is in its essence, problematic.

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<sup>1</sup> **Thomas Dutcher** is currently a criminal justice doctoral student and fellow at the University of New Haven, West Haven, Connecticut. He holds a master’s degree in International Migration from the University of Kent– Brussels School of International Studies. His theoretical interests largely come from the field of critical criminology, specifically peacemaking criminology and cultural criminology. His research interests include the criminalization of homelessness, identity construction of both incarcerated individuals and their families, and the stigmatic impact of the criminal label.

As this book takes on these ten, large in scope, issues, it maintains a central theme and mode of analysis. Vitale, calling attention to what his book itself is doing, what the reader must do to absorb his message, and what society must do if it truly seeks change, creates a thematic through-line uniting his topically structured chapters. “We must constantly reevaluate what the police are asked to do and what impact policing has on the lives of the policed” (27). This simple sentence is a call to action that shows the purpose of this book, the authors call to action to the reader, and a common thread to make this a complete book and not simply a critical encyclopedia of policing in America.

This line unites each chapter and in doing so connects previous works by, Alexander (2012), (Davis, 2017; 2003), Kendi, (2017), Waquant, (2009), and others with critical voices on modern and historical functions of policing in America. What Vitale offers is a platform for bringing these arguments together for an all-out critique on the institution of policing. This structural critique is carefully crafted within the following paradox on policing roles, “For decades they [referring to political leaders] have pitted police against the public while also telling them to be friendlier and improve community relations. *They can’t do both* [emphasis added by reviewer]” (27).

Before diving into the details of what this reviewer is calling, “The Policing Companion to *Are Prisons Obsolete*”, a note on the structure of Vitale’s book. The ten chapters of this book (excluding the conclusion) address these already outlined topics with near equal page weight. By structuring the book this way Vitale impresses upon the reader, without needing to say it, that no topic covered is objectively more important than the other. Rather they are all co-occurring, mutually reinforcing circumstances, equal in their weight in relation to how reliance on punitive policing relative to these issues has don’t little to nothing to contribute to the core systemic and structural changes needed for positive change.

Additionally, the identically structured chapters take the reader on a repeated process of enlightenment and despair culminating in calls to action or “alternatives” which seem far less radical after the information that precedes them. Each section begins with a rich historical analysis of modern-day problems related to our overreliance on police to solve social issues. These early pages commonly assert that the concept of police as protectors is historically a myth. It is within these initial pages of each chapter that the reader is presented with encyclopedic knowledge of how police tactics we see today are representative of historical oppression. Once this historical and current event stage is set, the author,

channeling Martinson's (1974) pessimism on rehabilitation efforts, shows that policing reforms have in large part failed because these roles are antithetical to the core mission of policing in the United States.

From a theoretical lens, a central standpoint of the book is that broken windows and deterrence theory-based policing are in large part to blame for oppressive policing. The reader is presented with the concept that there is only one (multi-stage) alternative left due to these prominent theoretical underpinnings in policing, "Ending the war on drugs, abolishing school police, ending broken windows policing, developing robust mental health care and creating low-income housing systems" (222) and not, more training, more body cameras, and more officer led community basketball programs. This quote sums up the "alternatives" sections that concludes each chapter and turns Martinson's (1974) logic on its head. Whereas Martinson (1974) famously concludes that attempts to reform criminal justice-involved persons have failed and now we must turn to retributive punishment, deterrence, and increasingly punitive measures within prisons, Vitale argues that the failure of punitive and deterrence based policing means we must shift now to community-led, restorative justice approaches in the aforementioned areas.

Through excellent technical writing, Vitale reformulates and reimagines his call to action (from page twenty-seven) within the context of the topic of every chapter. Pulling from chapter three, so that the reader may get a sense of what to look out for, "It is not reasonable to expect a patrol officer to make a meaningful clinical diagnosis of patients in the field." (81) This quote related to policing persons with mental illness readily applies to chapters two, five, six, and seven simply by changing out the word patient with; school-child, person experiencing homelessness, sex worker, and drug addict respectively. Then when discussing political economy in chapter eight Vitale once again refers back to his central analysis in wrapping up this section by calling for "a holistic approach that beings by reducing our reliance on the criminal justice system and building political power to demand more comprehensive and less punitive solutions (175).

Rather than leaving the reader to form these connections themselves, and further establishing that this book is accessible to both academics and non-academics and those with or without an intensive knowledge of criminal justice-related research, the book unites these separate thematic statements in its conclusion. In doing so his text embodies the central argument of Alexander's (2012) *The New Jim Crow* that "We need an effective system of crime prevention and control in our communities, but that is not what the current system is." (224).

This book provides insight into the current socio-political movements calling to defund and dismantle policing bodies across the United States (see groups such as Black Lives Matter, Cre8thechange and Project Zero all of whom have taken up various forms of reformist or abolitionist doctrines) and provides its own interpretation of what defunding and dismantling means. Of special interest are pages 214-216. This portion of chapter ten echoes the words of Van Jones discussing the systematic elimination of black political power through assignations and incarcerations of prominent figures (within Duvernay, 2016, 0:42:10). Within these three pages, Vitale provides the reader with insight into police crowd control training.

Both methods mentioned, the “command and control model” and “Miami Model” rely on adversarial Us v. Them logic combined with the use of military weaponry and active confrontation with protesters: and in doing so channels broken windows logic (214-216). Vitale proposes to the reader, once again referencing page twenty-seven and the call to critically examine these tactics, that neither model has proven to increase public safety and often has the reverse effect. With protests against police brutality now having occurred in every state, often in multiple cities per state and multiple protests per city, these three pages provide a guide to thinking before we speak on the nature of these events as they unfold. Vitale, reminding us that it is the duty of police to not punish an entire protest because of the acts of a few should resonate well with those who subscribe to only blaming “a few bad apples” for police violence. The timeliness of these three pages alone brings this book toward the level of “must-read and recommend to others”.

In a book this thoughtfully constructed, diligently researched, and which fuses together arguments made by critically acclaimed authors who have previously written on racist and classist histories of policing (see Alexander, 2012; Davis, 2017; Kendi, 2017; Waquant, 2009), calling attention to any perceived weaknesses, at least in this reviewer’s opinion, is no easy task. There is one decision by Vitale that I shall discuss as what *worked the least* rather than something that *did not work*.

The title, *The End of Policing*, is more radical than the essence of Vitale’s conclusion. He does not argue for the end of policing but rather a retooling, reformation, reimagining, or even an “end of policing as we know it”. In concluding Vitale notes that, “Policing needs to be reformed” (221), not ended. He dedicates this final chapter to solidifying his overall message, that “Communities deserve protection from crime and disorder but we must always demand those without reliance on the coercion, violence, and humiliation that undergird our criminal justice

system.” (228). This nuanced definition of what the end of policing means to the author, while still coming from a place of radical change, is by no means a call for abolition as the title might imply.

While catchy titles are necessary, the meaning of this title compared to the nuanced analysis of its pages may turn away those that need to read it the most. Like calls to dismantle the police and the 8CantWait action plan set forward by Campaign Zero (2020), the radical and catchy title contains a substance that is more reformist than abolitionist. As Vitale himself said in reference to his title, “The book is really about trying to lay out a process of interrogating out over-reliance on policing...and reduce that reliance” (Vitale, 2017). Vitale here provides a frame of reference to continue his call for critical analysis of policing from page twenty-seven, the spirit of which has recently been echoed, albit in a more abolitionist tone, by Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Many people who think police abolition is crazy actually live in a world where the police have effectively been abolished already” (see Klein, 2020, 0:37:10).

Ultimately, the importance of the book is the timeliness and timelessness of its critical analysis of the system of policing in the United States. Vitale, in his structure, writing technique, and diligence of research stands as a guide for critical theorists seeking to write for wider, non-purely academic audiences. The quality of this book truly lies in the structure that facilitates the vast amount of research done by the author. Beginning each section with a critical historical analysis forces the reader to come to grips with how our current reforms have failed in such a powerful and convincing manner the likes of which have not been seen in criminal justice research since the “nothing works” of Martinson (1974)<sup>2</sup>. In the end, Vitale’s proposed “dismantling” of policing systems comes across as both palatable and deeply logical. His arguments ultimately echo the words of Davis in *Are Prisons Obsolete* when she calls on the reader to imagine alternatives to incarceration “Demilitarization of schools, revitalization of education at all levels, health systems that provide free physical and mental care too all, and a justice system based on reparation and reconciliation” (Davis, 2003, p. 107).

## REFERENCES

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<sup>2</sup> The irony of which isn’t lost on this reviewer. Despite a similar despair expressed at the future of the state of current reformist policies at their times, these two individuals could not be further apart on their proposed pathways forward.

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