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Jackson, WH and Monk, H

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Police violence at anti-fracking protests: pacifying disruptive subjects

In November 2013 at Barton Moss on the outskirts of Salford, IGas, a company specialising in onshore extraction of oil and gas, began exploratory drilling to test for coal bed methane and shale gas. The possibility of extracting the latter via hydraulic fracturing, better known as “fracking”, quickly became the focus of a local campaign.

A protest camp was built at the site of the well and remained in place throughout the IGas operation, ending in April 2014. Its residents, referring to themselves in many cases as “protectors” rather than protesters, aimed to disrupt the IGas operation by slow-marching trucks in and out of the site. This elicited a tough response from Greater Manchester Police (GMP), who met the protest with a substantial police presence at almost every march and an increasing number of Tactical Aid Unit officers.

There were more than 200 arrests – including the detention of children, pregnant and elderly protesters, and the violent arrest of women – alongside many additional reports of police misconduct related to GMP’s management of the protest.

GMP’s stated aim has been to balance the rights of protesters with those of IGas; the chief constable has publicly expressed his frustration at being “stuck in the middle”. However, those involved in the protests described violent and intimidating policing tactics that have led many to question the police’s independence.

The use of violence in the policing of protest is nothing new in itself. What is arguably both novel and disturbing is GMP officers’ apparent lack of restraint even in the face of live streaming by camp residents and others involved in the marches, as well as close local media attention, and some national and international coverage. The Barton Moss camp did not attract the same level of media interest or public exposure as the anti-fracking camp at Balcolmbe, West Sussex in the summer of 2013, yet the conduct of GMP officers suggests that even if they had, their ability to act with impunity would have been supported by the conditions of the policing operation.

The GMP’s tactics were met with concern by legal observers, journalists, campaign groups and local residents but continued unabated. Towards the end of the drilling operation the number of arrests and the reports of police brutality increased, leading the solicitor representing most of those arrested to state that the Tactical Aid UU officers appear “out of control”.

While the various reports and videos shared online of police violence at Barton Moss suggest there has been a departure from “normal” policing, it is necessary to consider protest policing here and elsewhere in relation to the general function of police.

Keeping the peace

Liberal concepts of policing and the idea of “law and order” suggest that the police are identical with the law, both in terms of upholding it and in the regulation of their own conduct. But the history of policing (along with the contemporary experience of populations stigmatised by class, gender and race) tells us that police practices are designed to conform to and prioritise not law, but order (Neocleous 2000).

Of course, this is not to suggest that appeals to the law aren't central to the public representation of police and policing operations. At Barton Moss, GMP have continually reiterated their commitment to legal regulation in relation to complaints, while at the same time challenging protesters' claims of police violence – as well as blaming protesters for provoking and antagonising officers.

It should not be surprising that police violence is often directed at populations who are viewed as a threat to order. That which we usually think of as “out of control” policing looks very different if we consider the role an “in control” police force plays in a capitalist society.

From this perspective, protest policing needs to be seen as a *pacification* project in which the suppression of a specific protest is not the sole objective. GMP's response clearly aimed to ensure that IGas got its shipment of trucks on a daily basis, and that the exploratory drilling at Barton Moss continued; the use of arrests and restrictive bail conditions had an immediate effect on the camp and its ability to disrupt the fracking operation (Cullen 2014). But such brazen police violence in the face of media attention (social media or otherwise) sends a clear signal to those on the peripheries of the opposition – in this case in the local community in Salford or those concerned about fracking elsewhere – that any protest against the operation of fracking is both illegitimate and dangerous.

In this sense the exercise of police power, and its inherent violence, must be understood as having both destructive and productive dimensions. The suppression of a protest march for example is not incidental but police violence is, and has always been central to the process of pacification in which violence serves a central role in the fabrication of social order (Neocleous, 2000, 2011; Rigakos 2011). In the policing of protest – against fracking, austerity, educational policies, etc – the drive is to produce the ‘responsible’, ‘peaceful’, and ultimately disciplined political subject whose approach to political activism is non-disruptive (Jackson 2013). The violence is aimed within and beyond the specific protest and the production of the ‘ideal’ protester takes place (and indeed is resisted) within the movement and at its peripheries.

In the words of one of the protesters, the “violence, brutality, bullying and general intimidation” used by GMP have “created a climate of fear such that the British people feel unsafe to come forth and air their views” (Salford Star 2014). Police violence, helped by its

framing in a largely sympathetic media, enforces the compliance of protest movements and fuels the public's fear of protesters.

In confronting the exploitation of natural resources (and highlighting the dangers involved therein) through direct action, fracking protesters are stepping outside of the incredibly narrow official understanding of legitimate "peaceful" (read: non-disruptive) protest and disrupting the wider social order, in which capitalism, sustained through a dependence on fossil fuels, is sealed off from any real alternatives.

The camp itself at Barton Moss was a clear sign of "disorder", symbolising an opposition to state-corporate collusion in the economic exploitation of the natural environment and thus the policing operation experienced over those five months of the camp being in place are in line with what the history of policing should have us expect.

Broadly speaking, most representations of police violence reduce it to the work of "bad apples", acknowledging only that individual officers may have over-stepped the mark. The institutional and systemic violence that is, and has always been, at the core of the police project remains obscured. Additionally, a growing number of academics in recent years have been willing to celebrate the transformation of protest policing to a new consensus led model in which the police oppression all too familiar in previous decades has been replaced by negotiation and facilitation. Yet at Barton Moss as well as at numerous other protest events in the UK in recent history there is still more than enough evidence to suggest that in response to political protest very little has changed.

Anti-fracking protests are an attempt to confront what Rob Nixon (2011) calls the slow violence of environmental damage; this attempt is in turn being countered by the violence of the state. We must not however be lured into thinking this project is new, that the use of police violence in response to dissent is evidence of a radical shift in the role of police. The policing of protest, of *disruptive subjects*, is vital to the pacification process that has always defined the role of police in the interests of capital and state.

Instead we need to confront police violence with a broader critical approach to understanding both the destructive and productive effects of the structural and systematic violence through which the current social order is reproduced.

Protests that challenge the current social order and try to disrupt it will always be dealt with in this violent way. Calls for police restraint, or for accountability through official channels, will continue to fall on deaf ears. As David Cameron has said, "We're going all out for shale."

Dr Will Jackson is Lecturer in Criminology, Liverpool John Moores University

Dr Helen Monk is Lecturer in Criminology, Liverpool John Moores University

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