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Atkinson, C. (2021). Book review: David Weisburd and Anthony A. Braga (eds), *Police Innovation: Contrasting Perspectives*. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895820912554

Police Innovation: Contrasting Perspectives

David Weisburd & Anthony A. Braga (eds), Police Innovation: Contrasting Perspectives, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2019; 582 pp.: 9781108417815 (hbk), £34.99

Using Police Innovation as a title for a scholarly account of police practice seemed to me, upon first reading, as quite the eyebrow raiser. As a former practitioner in Scottish policing I was always struck by the path dependency and inertia of particular policing practices, and the reluctance to do or try anything new – even when there were recurring problems to address. My initial reaction to Police Innovation, therefore, was to (very unfairly) consider the title oxymoronic. Pleasingly, however, Police Innovation, or to give it its full and more illustrative title Police Innovation: Contrasting Perspectives, challenged my cynicism and provided an engaging and ultimately useful account of change and, correctly, innovation in the landscape of American policing over the past 40 years.

For this second edition of Police Innovation: Contrasting Perspectives David Weisburd and Anthony Braga have expertly executed their editorial duties across the volume. In addition to corralling the contributions of 29 scholars from across the United States and beyond, Weisburd and Braga also provide an excellent introductory chapter on 'understanding police innovation'. In this introduction, the authors assert that it is reasonable to connect the failures and deficiencies of the 'standard model of American police practice', a paradigm particularly centred around preventive patrol and follow-up investigation as initially developed in the 1970s, with a period of innovation, openness and experimentation in the latter decades of the twentieth century (p. 11).

The contribution of Police Innovation: Contrasting Perspectives is located not just in an engagement with the primary subject matter, of innovations and change in policing, but perhaps even more so in the 'contrasting perspectives'. Across 11 substantive sections, covering an array of topics from community policing to the use of technology, the format of the book provides an account from an advocate of the innovation in question and a counter-position from a critic in response. The editors astutely recognise the benefits of this format in helping to identify the advantages and disadvantages of each particular innovation (p. 20). The discussion of CompStat in part IX, comprising of chapters 17 and 18 in the book, provides a valuable indication of the utility of this approach.

Approaching CompStat from the perspective of an advocate, Silverman and Eterno foreground the success and innovative practice that this model pioneered in the crucible of precinct policing in New York. They reflect on the 'significant advances' made in police performance as a result of CompStat, alongside the enabling of both improved decision-making and more effective organisational learning (p. 414). In the subsequent critique, Weisburd et al. are more circumspect, arguing that CompStat masquerades as innovation and reform while reinforcing the traditional model that it claims to usurp. Instead, they argue, CompStat re-entrenches the traditional hierarchy of a command-and-control model. It does so by effectively limiting 'problem-solving', a philosophy upon which the model should be predicated, to specific silos within police management where 'accountability' is performed and such pressures are experienced (p. 424). This dialogue format works well in challenging particular assumptions of issues that can elicit strong opinions on both sides.

The following section, on evidence-based policing, provides an equally enlightening summary of a more recent innovation that has gained significant traction in the United States and further afield. In advocating evidence-based policing Brandon C. Welsh cuts straight to the heart of the central issue: what is meant by the term 'evidence'. For Welsh, the matter is simple: evidence is 'scientific', which is to say that is rooted in 'empirical research in the form of high quality evaluations of programmes, practices, and policies' (p. 441). Evidence-based policing then 'brings scientific evidence to center stage in decisions about which police practices should be used to deal with certain crime problems' (p. 452). In critique, however, Jack R. Greene poses the question 'which evidence?' and, in contextualising crime and public safety as 'wicked problems', develops the claim that more (and more varied) sources of information are required to provide answers. For Greene, such varied contributions, encompassing analytic knowledge but also experiential knowledge of practitioners, community knowledge, civic and political knowledge, and inter-agency knowledge, 'all have a place at the table', and it is unclear as to exactly why one form of knowledge production should be privileged over others (p. 461).

Across all of the substantive chapters, neither advocacy nor critique descends into pure polemic. This dialogistic approach instead provides the reader with a balanced account that is successful in identifying the common ground between the contrasting perspectives. Returning to the discussion of CompStat, for example, both advocates and critics note issues around implementation of this particular model. Silverman and Eterno, for example, caution against the use of CompStat as a technocratic instrument of 'top-down' crime control (p. 412), and Weisburd et al. similarly identify CompStat's problem not as one of philosophy per se, but of implementation as it has diffused across the United States (p. 425). Such typical treatment of issues under examination across this book, however, does rely on the reader carefully weighing each particular case and coming to their own conclusions as to which they find the most convincing. Police Innovation: Contrasting Perspectives, in this way, is not for the lazy reader: it expects some effort to be expended in independently evaluating each of the topics covered.

Police Innovation: Contrasting Perspectives will undoubtedly prove useful and enlightening to both practitioners and scholars in the field of policing. Given the very recent and sad passing of the pioneering police scholar Herman Goldstein Police Innovation: Contrasting Perspectives represents a timely testament to the need for innovation in policing practice, and for such innovation to be subject to robust scrutiny and debate. This book also serves as a reminder of the requirement to openly acknowledge failure in existing practice and, as a result of subsequent innovation, improve policing. This seems to be a position on which Goldstein would undoubtedly approve.