In the decade since September 11th, there has been a deluge of works on the political responses to terrorism in the United States. The bulk of these works have focused on how the U.S. has responded rightly, or wrongly, to terrorism since this time. Mathieu Deflem’s THE POLICING OF TERRORISM is not one of these works. Indeed, on the surface it does not take an overt position regarding what some see as the massive blunders of the Bush administration’s political response to September 11th, and others see as a largely successful response to terrorism that prevented further large-scale terrorist attacks in the United States.

Deflem does not ignore these debates, and mentions them in several places though his work. However, his primary focus is rather on the question of how policing agencies in the United States, Europe, Israel, and elsewhere are organized to respond to terrorism, and under what auspices such agencies function. The bulk of Deflem’s book thus involves a thorough overview of the organization and strategies of counterterrorism by policing agencies in the United States and globally. Deflem devotes significant attention to the policing of terrorism in the United States, particularly following September 11th, but he also gives ample attention to policing efforts in other countries (in particular Israel, Iraq and Afghanistan), as well as to international policing organizations, such as Interpol involved in counterterrorism.

However, it would be a mistake to read Deflem’s book simply as a thorough description of the policing of terrorism in these regions, even though many will
undoubtedly find the book useful on this account alone. Rather, THE POLICING OF TERRORISM represents a continuation of Deflem’s earlier works, in particular his POLICING WORLD SOCIETY (2002), where Deflem has developed his theory of the “bureaucratization of police” as a means by which to both understand the historical emergence of modern police organizations, as well as a means by which to sociologically analyze their functions and actions within modern states. In the case of terrorism specifically, Deflem (p.19) argues, “Following the work of Max Weber (1922), the bureaucratization theory holds that modern counterterrorist police efforts are autonomously conducted on the basis of professional standards regarding the means and objectives of counterterrorism.” In this regard, Deflem’s argument in setting forth the need for a sociological investigation of the policing of terrorism is that policing agencies in industrial, democratic countries such as the United States [*399] function as more than simply an arm of political administrations or legislatures. “These policing activities take place even where political leaders and legislatures are unable to implement concrete counterterrorism measures,” argues Deflem (p.4), and it is inaccurate to simply read the “war on terror” as an amalgamation of military, intelligence, and policing agencies. Rather, Deflem (p.5) argues that a sociological approach to the analysis of the policing of terrorism “can elucidate what is important and peculiar about police work against terrorism relative to other efforts in the wider constellation of counterterrorism.”

It is within this theoretical lens that Deflem seeks to explain not only how different countries and regions have developed different approaches to the policing of terrorism, but why. His argument broadly is that “variable legal and political contexts are seen to bring about differences and similarities in the policing of terrorism worldwide. In autocratic and highly centralized states, counterterrorism policing is generally subsumed under a national security regime, whereas more autonomy is afforded to police in democratic states” (p.186). Within the policing of terrorism, policing organizations in countries such as the U.S. “have attained a level of bureaucratic and professional expertise that is unprecedented in scale and can, therefore, resist external pressures,” notes Deflem (p.60), including the pressures of politicizing policing activities and techniques geared towards counterterrorism.

Following this argument, roughly half of Deflem’s book is directly focused on changes in the policing of terrorism that have occurred in the United States and internationally as a result of the September 11th attacks. In the case of the U.S., Deflem’s work provides a thoroughly descriptive overview of the dizzying array of changes to existing agencies such as the FBI, as well as the creation of new agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security. He is careful to point out, however, that much of what we think of as new in the so-called “war on terror” post-September 11th, for example, significant provisions in the Patriot Act (first passed in 2001) is rather an extension and broadening of earlier laws and policing activities. In particular, Deflem notes that the FBI’s use of National Security Letters (NSL) and the use of electronic surveillance under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) in particular were in use long before September 11th. What changed, argues Deflem, was rather the scope and use of these provisions.
Deflem’s overview of the policing of terrorism in the U.S. is exceedingly thorough, but he also assesses policing of terrorism in countries other than the United States, as well as international efforts. He devotes a chapter to the policing of terrorism in Israel, a chapter to Europe, a chapter to Iraq and Afghanistan, a chapter to Interpol, and a chapter to the globalization of police counterterrorism. For experts in these areas, Deflem’s work will not likely offer anything new, but for the general reader they provide a good overview of the strategies of police counterterrorism in these countries and agencies. As with his discussion of the U.S., however, Deflem’s discussion of these countries is informed by his theory of the bureaucratization of the police. He [400] argues for example under Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi police functioned largely as an enforcement mechanism for Hussein and his family. Following the invasion of Iraq, the U.S. government sought to train and implement a civilian police force, relying heavily on private contractors from the U.S. to train Iraqi police in modern policing strategies and techniques. That this attempt met with little success is hardly surprising to Deflem (p.181), who argues that “societies that have not reached a degree of pacification are unlikely to develop a regular police force.”

In this regard, the strength of this book, beyond its thorough description of the policing of terrorism, is the fact that it lays out a theory of policing within the context of terrorism in the late 20th and early 21st century. If it is the case that degrees of autonomy and professionalism of policing organizations are reflective of relative levels of democracy, using these indicators one should be able in some sense to “measure” gradients of autocracy or democracy according to the levels at which policing organizations are able to resist or operate independently of political and other “external” pressures. It is within this context that much of Delfem’s descriptive work takes on a more nuanced and sometimes ambiguous reading.

That the U.S. is an example of this relative autonomy and professionalism of policing organizations involved in counterterrorism is made clear throughout the book. What is less clear is whether this autonomy is not in fact being challenged, usurped, or simply replaced, particularly following September 11th. For example, Deflem notes that while the FBI took on many of the domestic surveillance responsibilities in its enhanced focus on counterterrorism following September 11th, he also notes that the Bush Administration authorized the use of a secret domestic surveillance program under the National Security Agency beginning in 2002. This so-called “Terrorist Surveillance Program” was not only later found to be unconstitutional in 2006, more to the point it represented a displacement of the traditional role of policing agencies in conducting domestic surveillance in lieu of that of an intelligence agency more directly beholden to the executive branch of government.

Indeed, embedded through Deflem’s book are references to laws, policies, and practices in counterterrorism where policing agencies have been displaced, or alternatively where their roles have been expanded to such a degree that it begins to blur the line between civilian and military and foreign intelligence roles. For example, Deflem (p.39) notes the litany of “counterterrorism measures initiated by the
executive branch . . . [lacking] congressional oversight” including the authorization for the use of “coercive interrogation techniques,” particularly for prisoners transferred to Guantanamo Bay. Elsewhere, Deflem (p.76) notes that “The NYPD also assisted in interrogations of detainees in Guantanamo Bay and in Afghanistan.” How then does this speak to Deflem’s thesis as to the autonomy and professionalization of policing agencies?

In this regard, Deflem’s argument about the bureaucratization of police is more [*401] convincing insofar as he suggests that such organizations strive for autonomy, but this does not mean that policing agencies are not beholden to political and ideological precepts at the risk of professionalism or law. Indeed, while his work suggests that policing organizations in democratic societies are more able to resist political pressures, he does not provide many concrete examples of how or where policing organizations (particularly in the U.S.) have actually parted ways with political pressures. It was surprising, for example, that Deflem did not discuss the complaints by FBI agents regarding their observed abuse of detainees at Guantanamo Bay by military interrogators. Similar examples of policing agencies parting ways with “political pressures” in the context of the “war on terror” exist, and Deflem should have investigated these further in light of his theory.

On the other hand, Deflem does mention examples where policing organizations have in fact put politics before professionalism in systematic ways. The Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) of the FBI between 1956 and 1971 illegally monitored and infiltrated a variety of political and social movements, including the Civil Rights Movement. The U.S. Senate’s “Church Committee” (1976) later found that “COINTELPRO began in 1956, in part because of frustration with Supreme Court rulings limiting the Government’s power to proceed overtly against dissident groups.”

To be clear, Deflem hardly defends COINTELPRO, Guantanamo Bay, or other examples of police activity that may constitute (in his term) “extra-legal” activities. The larger ambiguity, and perhaps what makes this work both engaging and problematic, is that Deflem provides or alludes to examples where policing organizations are not autonomous or professional, particularly following September 11th. Can we infer from this that the U.S. is in some sense becoming more authoritarian or less democratic? Deflem does not answer this question, but his thesis leaves room for this possibility.

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