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**Locked up, coerced, removed: space as an instrument of separation and social control in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries**

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### Julian Go, *Policing Empires: Militarization, Race, and the Imperial Boomerang in Britain and the US*

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## RÉFÉRENCE

Julian Go, *Policing Empires: Militarization, Race, and the Imperial Boomerang in Britain and the US*. New York: Oxford University Press, c. 2024. XVI + 370 pp. \$29.95.

- 1 Julian Go, whose earlier work on colonialism included comparison of the British and American empires, has changed how we will look at the history of policing in the UK and the United States. He challenges the accepted origin stories of the London (1829) and New York Police (1845) as civil police, distinguished from the military by civilian control and prevention of disorder rather than reacting with maximum force. Go's understanding of colonial conflicts leads him to argue that policing in both places, as imperial metropolises, owes much of its origin and later development to military-style strategies and tactics for control of colonized non-white subjects. The colonial element in the first two police forces shaped later forces in both Britain and the United States. The military component of colonial policing contributed from the beginning to the militarization of domestic policing directed against racialized groups – whether the Irish of the middle 19th century, later Eastern and Southern European immigrants, or African Americans and African British people today.
- 2 Earlier comparative studies of the development of the modern police emphasized differences between British and US policing. Go stresses their similarity through borrowings from colonial police practices in both places. These include personnel with colonial policing experience, attitudes toward the policed, weapons, and tactics such as surveillance methods, crowd control techniques and specialized counter-insurgency

squads. He traces their development from the beginning of the two forces to today. He calls this transfer of colonial policing to domestic policing the “imperial boomerang:” that is the metropolis creates police forces for colonies, the colonial experience shapes them, and that experience returns to shape domestic policing. He is not arguing that all aspects of the military in themselves influence policing, but specifically military means of controlling resistant non-white colonial subjects or rebels against client states. The police act like what the Black Panthers called in the 1960s, an “internal army of occupation.”

- 3 This outline of Go’s argument oversimplifies a highly complex and nuanced study of comparative history. He describes militarization as an uneven process, varying through time within each nation, and increasing or decreasing according to the perception of threat from a racialized other. In the later 20th century militarization reached its height and American and British policing converged as each society confronted fear of crime and social protest.
- 4 Go clearly illustrates the militarization of crowd control and surveillance, but how did it affect ordinary police patrol work? American police training (Go does not indicate if the British training is similar) has increasingly inculcated a “warrior mentality”, the expectation that encountering citizens, particularly members of the racialized other, is a life-threatening experience. This attitude encourages aggressive police behavior, but in turn angers the people who are policed. This anger has been the immediate cause of riots which are met with military tactics and hardware. Such was the experience in colonies and at home.
- 5 As well-developed and comprehensive Go is, there are still questions about the argument worth considering. The colonial roots of domestic policing are more direct and obvious in the UK, metropolis of the empire, than in New York City until the American empire developed in the early 20th century. The imperial context for early New York policing is more of a stretch than for London.
- 6 Go suggests that because New York adopted the basic features of the London model, its early policing also reflected colonial patterns. New York created a very militarized first police force in 1844, formed by anti-immigrant nativists to control the Irish. “No Irish need apply” to that force, and the men wore blue uniforms and were armed with rifles. However, within a year, New Yorkers voted the nativists out of office, and created an unmilitary locally-controlled police at first without uniforms and weapons. There was a trend toward militarization in the 1850s, but it seems less an imperial boomerang effect than simply reaction to police inefficiency and fear of crime, blamed on the Irish. Through the 19th century I would argue that the New York police reflected domestic ethnic prejudices more than colonial precedents. Colonial influence did appear in the early 1900’s when professionalizers like August Vollmer, whose experience included fighting Filipino “insurrectos,” injected a colonial-based military element into the ideal of an efficient police. Go does say that the mid-nineteenth-century creators of New York’s police were not always “conscious of the coloniality of that force (London), and did not intend to emulate colonial forces”(p. 99). This point is good example of how he anticipates objections.
- 7 When Go turns to the south, he is at the heart of “cotton colonialism”. In so far as slavery was a colonial institution the impact of British colonialism on this American police force was direct. Policing was intended to control the large population of slaves and free African-Americans. The police were originally heavily armed slave patrols,

part of the state militia. These patrols were a legacy of the British Caribbean colonies. They were replaced by New York style police in the 1850s. Reflecting the force's slave patrol origins, Savannah, Georgia included mounted units in its new police force, an innovation in the United States. Also in Savannah, the men carried pistols and a truncheon at a time when New York police were did not yet carry firearms.

- 8 The influence of colonial policing on creating modern urban police is most obvious in the UK. The British had a full-fledged formal empire, of which London was the capital, when the new police were were created. Sir Robert Peel and his first two police commissioners had direct Irish experience. The Irish migrants to Britain were clearly formerly colonial subjects.
- 9 Go quotes many commentators expressing their fear of this "other" as a criminal class. Nevertheless, English leaders had more to fear than the Irish. The London police were established in a period of political turmoil surrounding efforts to secure the right to vote for members of Parliament. The middle classes allied with workers to demand the franchise. The strategy of the first police leaders was to win the support and respect of the middle classes, to legitimize the police in their eyes. It was not until after the Reform of 1832 granted middle class British citizens the right to vote that they could be sure of this support. Not gaining the suffrage themselves, members of the working classes continued to agitate for political representation, achieving it only in 1868. English workers as well as the Irish posed a threat that was more political than racial or ethnic in the early days of the police. The development of police in the national capital was a response to a major political upheaval. By the 1850s political agitation declined and the police had won middle class support and some fragile working-class acquiescence. This does not make the police any less rooted in colonial practices, but suggests that politics more than racialization may have been the crucial context.
- 10 Militarization increased after the mid-19th century. The Irish returned explosively with the Fenians in the later 1860s, which was definitely an anti-colonial movement that led to increased armament of the police and political surveillance. Political fears returned in the face of major political protests in the 1880s, leading to more militarization under Commissioner Charles Warren. Racial fears arose in the later 19th century because of the Eastern European Jewish immigrants who flocked to the East End of London. This new concern led to use of surveillance tactics which originated in India and other colonies. Race clearly emerges as the primary concern after the post World War II immigration of people of color from the former colonies.
- 11 Go mentions that "imperial boomerang" can also be called "imperial feedback" (p. 17). Feedback seems a more nuanced concept, because it is more complicated than throwing a boomerang, hitting the target, and returning. Feedback is a better description of the interaction of colonial and domestic policing: metropolitan authorities send officials to colonies to police the subjects; experience modifies police tactics; these tactics are picked up again by metropolitan police forces, who also may modify them, to use against domestic "subjects". There is more nuance in feedback than boomerang.
- 12 Despite some questions, this is a major and necessary book for anyone seeking to understand the origins and development of modern policing in Britain and the United States, and how colonial experience shaped ideology, strategy and tactics. Go seeks to dethrone the civil policing model, which he considers a "performance" of policing to win legitimacy (p. 8). He has given us a new angle for viewing police development in the two countries.

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