

“Policing Is Fundamentally a Tool of Social Control to Facilitate Our Exploitation”

AN INTERVIEW WITH
ALEX S. VITALE

The brutality we have repeatedly seen meted out by American police all over the country isn't a bug of our political-economic system — it's a feature.

INTERVIEW BY

Micah Uetracht

The protests that have swept the United States and the world in recent weeks after the police murder of George Floyd have been unlike anything we have seen in at least half a century. And they show no signs of slowing down.

“Defund the police” has emerged as a central demand at these protests. Criminologist Alex Vitale has long made this case, especially in his book *The End of Policing* (which you can download for free from Verso here).

Last week for *Jacobin*'s YouTube series “Stay at Home,” deputy editor Micah Uetracht interviewed Vitale about the basics of defunding the police, how policing has always been a key component of our economic system, and why the ongoing protests are cause for serious optimism in dark times.

You can read a transcript of Vitale's opening lecture on defunding the police here and watch the entire video of both his talk and conversation with Uetracht here. And please subscribe to the *Jacobin* YouTube channel, where we have been hosting an ongoing political education series several times each week, here. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Let's start with a very basic question that a lot of people are wrestling with when they hear this demand to “defund the police.” Obviously many people who are not already on the Left hear a phrase like that, and their mind immediately goes to losing the provision of safety that the police supposedly provide their communities. How do you see that contradiction and how does the Left overcome it?

MU

AV | Part of the problem is that for decades now, communities have been told that the only resource they can have to address their community problems is more policing and more incarceration. Communities that have very real crime and public safety problems are desperate for help, and if the only thing on offer is policing, they'll ask for policing.

Our job is to lay out what the alternatives would look like and give people a sense that they have the power to ask for what they really want. Many people in these communities know that they would be better served by a new youth center with mentoring services or anti-violence programs, but they're told that they can never have those things.

People have insecurities, and we have to overcome this idea that the only way to address them is policing. And we can do that in very specific targeted ways. What I often recommend when I travel around the country talking to community organizations is that we should start with a community needs assessment: what are the public safety needs that you're facing that have been turned over to the police to manage? And once we've identified those, we can start to think about what the alternatives might look like.

We can bring in outside experts; we can talk to people in the community who have been trying to do positive work outside the criminal justice system. And then we've got to demand our local elected officials actually provide those things instead of more policing.

To the extent that local governments can provide us with those things, that's a victory, and to the extent that they don't, it begs the question, "Why not?" What is it about this system we live under that it's unwilling and unable to meet the most basic human needs in our society? That can lead to a deeper kind of analysis and a broader kind of political vision.

Related to that, let's go beyond the need to defund the police. What is the role of the police under capitalism? Many people associate police with people you call when you have an emergency, but you write in the book that their function is quite different.

MU

AV | We've all grown up on television shows in which the police are superheroes. They solve every problem; they catch the bad guys; they chase the bank robbers; they find the serial killers. But this is all a big myth. This is not what police actually do. They're not out chasing bank robbers or serial killers. The vast majority of police officers make one felony arrest a year. If they make two, they're cop of the month.

Police are managing the symptoms of a system of exploitation. That's always been at the heart of American policing and policing internationally.

In the book, I lay out the ways in which the origins of policing across the world, primarily in the early nineteenth century, occur in direct relationship to the three primary systems of economic exploitation during that time period: colonialism, slavery, and the rise of industrialization. Policing develops to make those regimes of accumulation and exploitation possible.

We talk about the London metro police as being the first modern police force and say, “Oh, this is great, policing by consent — it’s a progressive alternative to using a militia.” The model for the London Metropolitan Police was developed by Sir Robert Peele — “Robert,” or “Bob,” hence the “bobbies.”

But nobody talks about what his job was before he came up with the London Metropolitan Police: he was in charge of the English occupation of Ireland, and he developed the Irish Peace Preservation Force as a paramilitary alternative to using the British Army. He used it as a proto-police force, embedding them in local communities so that they could preemptively put down what they called agricultural outrages — peasant uprisings against British landlords starving them to death.

Peele goes back to London just as the city is being flooded with folks from the countryside who have been displaced by the enclosures, searching for jobs in the new industrial sector, and he uses the police to help shape that population into a stable, compliant working class. He breaks their unions, he raids their beer halls, he hassles them on the street over boisterous and disorderly behavior — all to fashion a new working class. In the United States, we had our own colonial police forces like the Texas Rangers. We had even earlier forms of policing like the Charleston City Watch and Guard in Charleston, South Carolina, whose primary job in the late 1700s was the management of a mobile slave population.

The history of American policing is always about the interchange of the origins of these three systems. Today, we’re not dealing with slavery and colonialism in the same way. Instead, we have neoliberal capitalism and austerity. That system is producing massive wealth inequalities and the hollowing-out of the welfare state, which is in turn producing mass homelessness, mass untreated mental illness, mass problematic relationships with drugs, black markets for drugs and sex work and stolen goods, that people have turned to to survive in this precarious economy. Policing has come in to manage those suspect populations — really, in their mind, surplus populations. They’re not trying to form them into a working class, they’re warehousing them in our prisons and jails.

We have to understand policing as fundamentally a tool of social control to facilitate our exploitation. So the idea that we’re going to make them nicer and friendlier while they do that task, and that’s gonna make everything okay, is laughable.

If that’s their systemic role, that immediately begs questions about demands to, say, have more black police officers policing black neighborhoods, or hire more police officers from the communities they’re patrolling. If their systemic function is to serve as a control of the labor force, or non-laboring force, then meaningful reform would have to overturning that entire system.

MU

Which then leads to the need to take away their power, to dispossess the police. We need less police; we need them to do less of the stuff that they do; we need them doing it with fewer big guns and weapons of all kinds. The only solution is to actually cut their power and cut their resources.

AV | That’s right. No true progressive movement can flourish in a police state. We have the makings of that here, where the police are injected into every part of people’s lives. Trump just wants to make that

problem worse, but it's really a bipartisan problem. Democratic mayors have fully embraced this program.

Speaking of Democratic mayors, let's talk about the NYPD and Mayor Bill de Blasio. De Blasio endorsed Bernie Sanders, and positions himself as a progressive. But he has failed on that front on many levels. Especially on policing: the NYPD really seems to have the control in New York City when it comes to public safety, rather than de Blasio himself.

MU

And even though he's eating shit all the time with them, there's still this incredible level of rage that's directed at him from the NYPD. Can you talk about the NYPD as a case study in how a police department has gained an incredible amount of power even over the sitting mayor?

AV | I don't want to overstate this idea that they're pulling his strings because in a way, that lets him off the hook. He could do something about this if he wanted to, and I don't think he really wants to. He has capitulated to a certain kind of reactionary politics, this idea that there is no alternative. He is so afraid of disorder. He thinks that any uptick in crime will unleash reactionary forces and will bring back somebody like Rudy Giuliani. And in a way, that's not a crazy idea because Giuliani was brought to office on the wave of the failures of Koch and Dinkins to get a handle on disorder (the subject of my first book).

But what's at work here is a crisis of imagination. He's accepted this idea that the only way to control disorder and crime is to turn this problem over to the police, and once he made that decision, all is lost. Because then he's enabling not just a loss of funds to the police department, and the creation of a repressive apparatus — he's investing in an ideology, this thin blue line ideology that says that the only thing holding society together is the punitive and coercive interventions of policing. Once that ideology is in place, it's impossible to then say, "But we also need social programs," because that ideology dismisses the usefulness of those interventions. So by doubling down on support for the police, he's undermined the possibility of any real progressive alternatives. There isn't a progressive vision that isn't rooted in defunding the police.

[Editor's note: since this interview was conducted, de Blasio has changed his public stance on defunding the NYPD, indicating some level of support for cutting the department's budget.]

This is almost like the problems of a domestic version of President Lyndon Johnson's "guns and butter" approach in the 1960s: some social-democratic welfare programs at home but brutal imperialism abroad. That didn't work out too well.

MU

AV | This is a big part of historian Stuart Schrader's book, *Badges without Borders*. He actually goes into the Vietnam War policy strategies and shows the direct connection between the development of counterinsurgency technologies and ideologies in Vietnam and similar developments in American

policing. American police were driven by the same kinds of considerations: these are dangerous populations that cannot be trusted to govern themselves, so we have to come in and shape them in such a way that capitalism can make life better for everyone.

Julian Go, a sociologist, just published a piece that shows that the development of police militarization in the United States at the turn of the previous century was directly tied to things like the United States' intervention in the Philippines. There's this kind of homology, this similarity, in which police forces in the United States view immigrants and African Americans as a colonized population to be controlled by the police, and that the most problematic departments are those with the largest demonized suspect populations.

Hearing about these ties won't surprise anyone who's been out on the streets recently. If you are at a protest on the streets of a major US city and you hear flash-bangs and are getting shot with rubber bullets, it feels like a war zone. Can you talk a bit more about that tie between domestic police forces and imperialism abroad?

MU

AV | I give an example in the book about the formation of the first state police force, the Pennsylvania State Police, about 120 years ago. There were a series of uprisings in the coal and iron fields of Pennsylvania during that time; this is the early period of industrial unionization. Coal owners and the iron factory owners couldn't get a handle on this, and they tried to enlist local police. But the local police were either unable or unwilling to control the strike activity.

They went to the governor, and the governor said, "Let's create a semi-private state police force called the Coal and Iron Police." Basically, the coal and iron companies could hire anyone they wanted and pay a one-dollar fee to the state government, and they'd get a state badge. They went out and did massacres, and it was horrible. So the governor said, "No, we can't do this; we're going to create a modern professional state police force."

What was his model? The United States occupation forces in the Philippines. He actually imported personnel and technology directly from the Philippines to develop a set of counterinsurgency strategies to put down the strikes — ideally with less violence and killing to build more legitimacy. The workers called them the "Pennsylvania Cossacks." This has been the history of American policing, these back-and-forth exchanges.

Today we've got police that look more and more like the military, and a military that looks more and more like a police force in a lot of ways. So much of the policing in places like Afghanistan and Iraq is about holding urban space and has a policing-like function. We hear sometimes from returning veterans who see what's going on in the United States and say, "When we were in the Army, we would never have been allowed to use force like that under the circumstances. Our rules of engagement were much tighter than what American police rely on."

We've seen this militarization of hardware, and the purchasing of that hardware through federal grants, through Homeland Security grants. Part of this has been to stimulate a new domestic market for military producers. So it's not just casting off the military's waste to local police departments, it's creating new demand.

But it's also about the expansion of a whole military mindset for police. Warrior-style training, the increase in the number of paramilitary units, and the way that has shaped the functioning of gang units and gun interdiction units, and narcotics units who see themselves as Rambos, banging down doors and crashing people into walls. Anyone who thinks that implicit bias training is going to fix that is fooling themselves.

Can we scale down policing without simultaneously scaling down the overall power of capital? I assume we can't just have a movement that fights to reduce police budgets without also scaling up the social-welfare state, building the power of the labor movement.

MU

AV | I've never argued that all of our political energy should go into a campaign to dial back the police. That would be a mistake. We need to build in our communities and we need to build in our workplaces. But on the other hand, too many of our movements are single-issue movements.

The labor movement has given police a pass; it hasn't made connections to the ways in which our overreliance on policing undermines our ability to be successful in other movements, not to mention the direct repression of our movements that comes from that policing apparatus.

It's not enough to talk about economic justice or even racial justice in the abstract. We have to understand the way our overreliance on policing undermines all the rest of those movements.

Unions should not be making partnerships with police. Our single-issue movements and other movements should not be ignoring the criminal justice system. We have to integrate that analysis into all the work that we do. And if we have any hope of building a multiracial workers' movement, criminal-justice reform has to be a central plank of that, because for young people of color, they often experience the state more through policing than from a boss.

How should the movement for defunding the police confront the entrenched power of police unions, who stand in the way of even the most basic reforms? And how does our fight against such unions relate to accusations of our being "anti-union"?

MU

AV | I am a fourth-generation unionist. The Vitales were coal miners in southern Illinois. I just finished a long stretch on the executive committee of the Professional Staff Congress, including six years as a vice president. I am a unionist and as part of the union movement. I don't think that we should take the position that police can't have unions. Workers are going to have unions, and we don't want to be in the business of undermining the right to unionization.

However, we should tightly restrict the ability of those unions to be political actors. One of the ways to do that is to make their endorsements and campaign contributions toxic. This is happening in New York: half a dozen or so elected officials in New York City have recently taken their past donations from police unions and written checks to

mutual aid projects and bail funds with that money. That is a sign of success for us. We need to out all those politicians who take that police union money, and we need to say that you can't be our friend if you're taking that money.

And let me tell you, a lot of people taking that money try to say that they're our friends. Some of them are black and Latino, some of them are working class. We have to put a stop to that. In California, they've actually established a database that shows which politicians have taken money from which police and corrections unions. We need to do more of that work around the country.

We also need to intervene with mayors and city councils over collective bargaining agreements between the police and local cities. We need to hold politicians accountable for the kinds of perks that are often built into these union contracts. It's not about busting the union, it's about limiting the scope of its power.

Should we be trying to shift social consciousness to care less about blue-collar crime and more about white-collar crime, which may have more societal consequences? How should we talk about the executive class's looting in the United States?

MU

AV | The looters arrested for looting Target forgot to incorporate as a private equity firm! [Laughs] Yes, we need to rethink fundamental notions of justice and accountability in our society, so that we understand these things in relationship to questions of harm.

Obviously, if someone steals my bike, or robs me, that's a real harm to me, and we need to do whatever we can to reduce those harms. But when a bank repossesses my house, redlines my community, steals my wages — that's also a harm. And that harm is often inflicted simultaneously on millions of people, so that the cumulative harms are so much greater. When a chemical company poisons the environment, that's also a harm, but we think of these harms differently.

Whenever politicians want to frame something as a crime problem, we need to be looking at what they're covering up and what they're enabling, because they're using that to serve a political project. Just like Nixon in the 1960s created the War on Drugs not because he gave a damn about drug overdoses — it was a rancid, racist strategy to bring historically white Southern Democrats into the Republican Party in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. So he creates all kinds of new federal crimes and sets out to prosecute them.

We need to have a complete rethink not just of what is a crime and not a crime, but also of how we deal with that crime. I don't think just finding an executive here or there and putting them in prison for polluting the environment is the way to fix this problem, because it's not systemic. It doesn't deal with the extent of corporate power. We have to rein in corporate power systematically. We have to rein in the power of the banks, the power of the polluters, and that requires a much broader politics.

What do you think of the demands that are being put forward at the recent protests?

MU

AV | I'm not out in the streets around the country, and I think we have a lot to learn about what the sentiment is on the streets. But I have been watching what I can and looking at signs and talking to some people, and it's clear that these protests are not just about policing. These are large multiracial gatherings, and I think that those streets are filled with Bernie supporters, people who are concerned about Medicare for All, who are concerned about wages and working conditions, and that policing has just been the trigger to ignite this movement.

When we look back at the riots and uprisings of the 1960s, we don't talk about them today as just an issue of policing. We understand that policing was often the trigger, but it was not what was really driving this rage and desire for change. That's true today — this is about the failure of political leadership of both political parties. It's about a kind of generational fear for the future, about the environment, about economic inequality, the depression, and the sense that there's no one out there articulating a real way forward — not these big-city mayors, certainly not Trump, but also not the mainstream leadership of the Democratic Party.

The streets become the only avenue to express this outrage. The question to me is, will it be sustained and will it be channeled into more organized movements with specific demands, so that we can start really building political power rather than just creating a climate of crisis, which is important but not sufficient?

You advised the Bernie Sanders campaign on its criminal justice platform. Do you see hopeful signs within this small but important new crop of democratic-socialist elected officials around the country?

MU

AV | The initial response at the national level was not good. I criticized it in the *Nation*. Even our allies like Bernie Sanders said, "We need more investigations." We don't need any more investigations. The cops have already been arrested and fired. These investigations have been shown to be ineffective. But there is a deeper set of movements underway in Washington, and people like Rep. Ayanna Pressley and others have put forward some pretty good documents that talk about dialing back support for criminalization.

I think they need to come out more forcefully right now and say, "We've got to get rid of the cops' office; we've got to get rid of Operation Relentless Pursuit, which is flooding seven US cities with more federal agents and more funding for police. We've got to repeal the FOSTA-SESTA law that criminalizes sex work." There's a lot of very immediate, specific interventions that the Democrats in Congress could be supporting, rather than calling for more investigations.

But I think there is more hopefulness at the local level. That's where a lot of the struggle needs to happen, both in the sense that policing in particular is primarily a local matter, but also in the sense that we're not going to win this in an abstract, national, ideological campaign. We have to win this battle in specific communities, around specific community needs. We have to convince people that we have a program that's going to make their lives safer, better, healthier, more secure.

We have a lot of local politicians, many of them associated with DSA but not all. I am a big fan of State Sen. Julia Salazar, with whom I chat every once in a while. She understands, as a lot of these other folks do, that public safety doesn't come at the end of a police handgun. It comes from building community infrastructures that build people up, that create stable families and prevent the theft of wages and homes. Just last week, in the last couple of days, a group of over forty candidates for City Council in New York City signed a document pledging to campaign on a platform of cutting the NYPD budget by a billion dollars.

This is a sign of the kind of emergent politics that we're seeing in New York, and many other parts of the country. There are active campaigns underway in dozens of cities across the United States to defund the police, and it's those kinds of movements that have to become part of our overall political repertoire.

If we successfully defund the police and we have the money to do something else, what is a concrete example of something we could create to actually strengthen public safety in a real way?

MU

AV | It's a whole diversity of things. It's about creating a mental-health infrastructure that includes peer-to-peer mental health services. Or we have state-funded centers, but they're using a model that is embedded in specific community needs, and the community is part of the process. We could have community-based anti-violence centers that address problems of domestic violence and youth violence, of disputes between people in the community. These could be government functions, they could be nonprofit functions, or they could be some kind of hybrid. We just need to have control over them as much as possible.

I've been going through this ritual every night since these protests started. I start scrolling through Twitter at 10 or 11 PM, and everything I see is the most horrifying police violence imaginable. Each city has some new level of barbarism from the police that I find hard to believe that human beings are engaged in.

MU

This is depressing, obviously. But last week, I went to a protest that started in downtown Chicago. To get there, I biked by army humvees that were deployed by Illinois's Democratic governor, J.B. Pritzker. Actual soldiers in fatigues were in the streets. And all of these average people with cardboard signs were walking past these soldiers, obviously knowing the soldiers could, at the drop of a hat, mow them all down and end their lives.

These people had surely seen those videos I watch every night, too, and probably experienced that brutal crackdown themselves. And yet they were still coming out in the streets to make these demands.

That was such a hopeful experience for me, because it seemed to indicate that no matter the level of police militarization, no matter the fact that there were actual soldiers in fatigues in the streets, people were still showing up, refusing to be cowed. It's an incredible testament to the resiliency of people at these protests, and a reminder that no matter how big the guns are that these cops are outfitted with, no matter what kind of insane weapons they have, the police have been unable to stop the snowballing of a mass movement.

AV

You left out the risks with COVID–19 that you’d think would keep people at home. Yet people are ready to fight. People are not going to put up with this, and if Trump tries to further militarize the situation, I think that will just make the protests dramatically larger.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex S. Vitale is professor of sociology and coordinator of the Policing and Social Justice Project at Brooklyn College. He is the author of *The End of Policing*.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Micah Uetricht is the deputy editor of *Jacobin* and host of Jacobin Radio's podcast *The Vast Majority*. He is the author of *Strike for America: Chicago Teachers Against Austerity* and coauthor of *Bigger than Bernie: How We Go from the Sanders Campaign to Democratic Socialism*.

FILED UNDER

UNITED STATES

LAW / POLICING AND REPRESSION

POLICE REFORM / 2020 RACIAL JUSTICE PROTESTS