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### Haia Shpayer-Makov, *The Making of a Policeman: a Social History of a Labour Force in Metropolitan London, 1829-1914*

Aldershot, England, and Burlington Vt., USA, Ashgate Publishing Ltd.  
2002, ix + 293 p., ISBN 0-7546-0337-7

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- 1 When I received this book for review, I wondered whether the author could say anything new about London's Metropolitan Police. Haia Shpayer-Makov has said new things, because she has approached the police from a new angle: recruitment and retention of a labor force. Other historians have noted the high standards the founders of the new police set in 1829, and they have addressed whether the men carried out those standards. Shpayer-Makov, though, asks several new questions: Did the leaders get the sort of men they wanted? How could they retain reliable officers when police work combined strict discipline, long hours, difficult and dangerous work, and low pay? How did policemen themselves respond to the demands placed upon them at wages below those of skilled artisans? To answer these questions Shpayer-Makov explores sources from 1829 to just after World War I, but the heart of her research is a collection of service records of Metropolitan Police officers from 1889 to 1909, the only surviving set of these documents. From these she can follow the long or short careers of individuals, learn their place of origin and occupation, and track disciplinary infractions and health. She analyzes these statistically to develop patterns and follow the careers of officers from different backgrounds. Consequently she can reach generalizations about what type of men made

the police a lifetime career, the impact of their work on their health, and what type of officer was likely to reach higher supervisory ranks.

- 2 Shpayer-Makov discovers that while the Commissioners thought agricultural workers made the best policemen, steady and reliable, most of the men who joined were from cities outside of London. The major problem until the later 19<sup>th</sup> century was high turnover, discouraging to leaders who believed that it took about five years to make a good policeman. Men who left on their own will tended to be from more skilled occupations, with a background of better work before joining the force. In the early twentieth century, though, economic pressures encouraged more of these men to join the force. Veterans tended to be men from unskilled or semi-skilled backgrounds, for whom the police service was an avenue of upward mobility. The Commissioners were right to seek agricultural laborers, for they tended to stay longer in the force, valuing the job security the police offered. The downside of such recruits was the often-criticized plodding, unimaginative Bobby, who in many cases was barely literate even in the early 1900s. Although men from poorer backgrounds remained longest in the police, those from better-off backgrounds who did remain were most likely to rise through the system into the higher ranks. Officially the Metropolitan Police was a meritocracy, uniquely so until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and promotion was based on performance. However, it is not surprising that better-educated men should become supervisors, since the positions required bureaucratic and managerial skills the typical Bobby did not develop. A few from unskilled backgrounds did reach high ranks, holding out the possibility for aspiring men, but usually reaching that level reflected factors that existed before men joined the police. This is the nature of meritocracies: the starting point is not even; enough disadvantaged people can succeed and thereby legitimate the system, but most of the successful already have certain advantages. For the great majority of men who made the police a career, security was a more important element than mobility.
- 3 Not only does Shpayer-Makov develop a sociological profile of the police as a work force, she also investigates aspects of police culture. There are three aspects she covers: the ideals the Commissioners sought to instill through training; the behavior men learned from veterans on the beat; and oppositional attitudes developed in response to strict discipline and low pay. Police leadership had high expectations for low-paid, indifferently educated men: physically strong and healthy (and taller than average), «cool, smart, self-reliant, penetrating temperate, forbearing...», able «to take orders and yet exert their own faculties», with «an honest character of their own, while up to other men's tricks», according to Harriet Martineau. [quoted, p. 72]. The Commissioners emphasized training the men to reach this ideal, but until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century most training was military drill for purposes of crowd control, with only a brief part of the training period dedicated to behavior on the beat. Even this was mostly remembering laws and instructions. *Being* a policeman was something the new recruit had to learn from veterans on the job, a process during which he not only learned what exercising his discretion was about, but also he became integrated into the police culture of his station house, including solidarity with his fellow officers. The form this subculture took, which can not really be recreated today, reflected the nature of the neighborhood where the Bobby patrolled and what his fellows considered the best way to relate to the citizens living there. Though Shpayer-Makov does not dwell on this aspect in detail, she implies that it is here that some of the contradictions of the ideal developed – middle class critics saw policemen as rule-bound and dull; working class critics charged that they were arbitrary and corrupt. The third

element, complaints about discipline and low pay, was shared by men from all over the Metropolitan district. Most who objected voted with their feet, but those who stayed protested and attempted to organize. The Commissioners refused to have anything to do with trade unions and dismissed men who tried to organize. Having asserted their power by getting rid of the agitators, they did respond to many grievances, especially after World War I, and were particularly concerned that conditions of work not drive too many men away.

- 4 To combat turn-over and dissatisfaction, the Police Commissioners developed a uniquely paternalistic labor system based on high standards and strict control, but which rewarded its workers with promotion according to merit, a pension plan, and sponsored leisure time activities. Not all their plans worked out as expected, but the Metropolitan Police proved to be a pioneering example of «welfare capitalism» without allowing unionization, a system that would not become popular with private industry until well after the police initiated it. Although appointment and promotion by merit were part of the founding principles of the new police, one of the most desirable parts of the job, the pension, developed slowly from inadequate to substantial, in a period when very few workers had any pension at all. Police leaders carefully monitored men's leisure activities: supervisors chose wholesome books for station house libraries to promote morality, and they emphasized suitable games and sports that would contribute to the men's strength and health. Though some people complained that they could have only supervised leisure (e.g., even off duty, police were not supposed to socialize in pubs), the recreation programs helped promote policemen's commitment and solidarity. The men also found ways to shape the activities according to their own preferences, such as football over rugby.
- 5 The Metropolitan Police was not a total institution, but it came close to dominating the lives of its members. Like any such institution, though, there were cracks which members could take advantage of – sometimes in violation of rules and policy, other times as modifications of paternalistic controls and demands. More dangerous was direct confrontation with the authorities over job conditions, but even if individual protestors sacrificed their jobs, the policemen gained outside support and eventually response from the leadership.
- 6 Shpayer-Makov's «social history of a labour force» is a thoughtful, innovative, thoroughly-researched approach to a subject most of us thought very familiar. A review can not do justice to her awareness of nuance and complexity: she is careful to qualify generalizations. This book will appeal primarily to academics, because it is written in a dry social-science style, but it is a valuable study which greatly expands our knowledge of a quintessentially English institution.

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