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Black Police, White Society

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BLACK POLICE, WHITE SOCIETY. BY *Stephen Leinen*. New York: New York University Press. 1984. Pp. ix, 280. \$20.

Stephen Leinen's *Black Police, White Society* seems torn between the author's desire both to create a sociological study and to tell the story of a group of individuals with a unique perspective on society and race relations — black officers of the New York City Police Department (NYPD). The combination works at times, but Leinen's book does suffer when he tries to do too much with this complex subject. The dichotomy of the book is a reflection of Mr. Leinen's own background. While he is a member of the sociology faculty of the City University of New York, he is also a member of the NYPD.

Black Police, White Society is based on a study conducted by Mr. Leinen, consisting of a series of interviews with forty-six black police officers in New York. Women were not involved in the study to avoid a set of "additional 'gender-related' problems that would have greatly complicated the organization, analysis and presentation of the book" (p. 6). Subjects were selected based on a willingness to respond to the survey. Most were introduced to the author by seven black officers with whom he was already friendly, and thus those officers formed the original nucleus of the study. Leinen admits his study population is *not* a random sample (p. 3), and there is little doubt that the selection method detracts from the study's validity as an academic survey. The responses of individual officers, however, are made no less interesting or insightful by the flaws of the study itself.

Leinen divides the book into three main parts. The first section gives a historical overview of discrimination, its effects on black police officers and subsequent attempts to fight it, both politically and in the courts. Leinen also presents officers' perceptions about the factors affecting discrimination. He relies heavily on extensive direct quotations from the interviews of the black officers. Interestingly, the officers' perceptions are that civil rights cases have had a substantial impact on behavior, even when the actual court judgment had no direct impact. The responses center on the deterrent effect of such judgments:

You know conditions today were forced on the department. . . . The department and the mayor were afraid of repercussions. Complaints of discrimination might leak to the newspapers. Civil suits might be brought against the city and this would hit the city where it hurt the most, in their pocketbook. Basically, the department didn't want any waves so a lot of concessions were made. [P. 44.]

The second major section of the book discusses working relations between black and white police officers. Leinen divides his sample into three groups and then analyzes the reasoning behind their various reactions to black/white working relations within the NYPD. The first two groups are made up of the officers who think that working relations within the NYPD have either improved or remained constant.

The third group believed "factors other than race influence [working] relationships" (p. 96). For example, race relations could vary depending on the type of work an officer was doing. Detectives, whose work requires greater cooperation, viewed race relations within the department as more congenial than did their uniformed counterparts. Since Leinen subdivides his small survey sample, a subgroup contains as few as nine officers. As difficult as it may be to draw generalities from the survey as a whole, any conclusions based on only nine officers' opinions must remain the views of nine individuals and not representative of any meaningful group consensus.

The final portion of the book is devoted to relations between police and the black community. The author examines the traditional causes of conflict between blacks and police. These causes are discussed in the context of the large influx of black officers, and the issue of how they should be assigned relative to the black community.¹ Leinen also looks at what the police role in the black community is, and what it should be. Again, the real interest lies in the words of the officers themselves. One officer's frustration about an unyielding system shows an example of the insight these policemen have:

Cooperation from most people here is poor, very poor. People will run over a dead body just to get out the door before the police come so they won't have to answer questions about what happened. . . . The policeman generally is not in a good position to be sympathetic to what he sees. He has a very limited knowledge of human behavior. His attitudes about people here develop from these kinds of experiences. He finally says to himself, if he's worked here long enough, "Why should I care when the people don't care." [Pp. 200-01.]

Yet Leinen incorrectly attempts to translate individual frustrations into a sociologically significant result.²

Leinen's conclusions seem to bring in ideas that only tangentially deal with the survey responses. He puts heavy emphasis on the black patrolmen's group, the Guardians, as a force that mitigated discrimination (pp. 11, 55, 85, 245-46). The group is barely mentioned, however, in the quoted survey responses (pp. 45, 74). Leinen also praises Neighborhood Stabilization Units ("NSUs"). These are police units specially designed for community interaction. They not only emphasize better relations with the black community, but like detective teams, the atmosphere also promotes better race relations within the police force. Although the concept sounds quite laudable, the units are not once mentioned by survey respondents.³ The black perspective

1. For an early example of conflict over police assignments, see J. WECKLER & T. HALL, *THE POLICE AND MINORITY GROUPS* 8 (1944).

2. *See, e.g.*, p. 7 (suggesting that, although the study group was chosen on the basis of "availability," the results have implications beyond the NYPD).

3. The silence may be attributed to the fact that none of the officers surveyed belonged to an NSU. *See* p. 7.

on this partial solution certainly would have strengthened Leinen's arguments.

In the end, the real interest of this book lies not in its dubious research results, but rather in its presentation of personal impressions. The constant stream of voices that pour from the book's quotations paint a vivid picture of a variety of black policemen. Thus, what is retained is one black officer's impressions about white officers in Harlem,⁴ or an officer's explanation of why, unlike their white counterparts, those blacks who attain supervisory status can not help out the blacks on the lower rungs of the police hierarchy.⁵ If the study is too undisciplined to make any real sociological conclusions, the specific images left by the quotations are enough to make the book worth reading.

4. I get the feeling that most of these guys are probably okay when they're not working. But as soon as they put on the uniform they become monsters. There's a certain change in attitude towards black people that develops in the street. It's like Harlem all of a sudden becomes their own private plantation and they are the overseers.

P. 146.

5. "He's like a raisin in the white ice cream. Everything he does is put under a microscope, and if he's looking for a slot himself, he certainly can't have charges of reverse discrimination being made against him. If this happens, he goes nowhere." P. 72.