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BOOK REVIEW

REVIEW OF NEW YORK CITY POLICE CORRUPTION INVESTIGATION COMMISSIONS, 1894–1994 (GABRIEL J. CHIN ED., 1997)

Paul Chevigny*

Introduction

The New York City Police Department ("NYPD") is one of the most discussed police departments in the world. At the present time, for example, its ambassadors, including former commissioner William Bratton, are deployed over the globe, explaining "quality of life policing," and why they believe it works. It is successful, perhaps, because it resembles one of the oldest versions of policing, from which the word "police" itself derives: officials maintain an air of omniscience and a sense of order by pursuing every infraction and tolerating no deviation. Inspector Javert, in Victor Hugo's Les Misérables, is the ideal of "zero tolerance" policing.

Despite the fame and occasional notoriety of the NYPD, there is no serious and systematic work recounting its history.¹ The relation of "quality of life policing," for example, to earlier practices in New York City, as well as other cities, remains a matter of anecdote and sporadic, although sometimes brilliant, journalism. In this respect, history is not very different for New York City than it is for other cities. Until the last generation, police work in the United States nearly passed under the academic radar. This was partly a result of the fact that police in this country have mostly been organized at the municipal level and have always dealt chiefly with the poor. The history of the police was, until recently, viewed as local,

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^{1.} The best written history on the early period is James F. Richardson, The New York Police: Colonial Times to 1901 (1970). Conversely, Gerald Astor, The New York Cops: An Informal History (1971), is exactly what it purports to be.

repetitive, and low-class.2

The material that we have for the history of the police in our cities is largely the chronicles of misdeeds, either those curbed by the police or those committed by the police themselves. Such chronicles have been preserved in some memoirs, but more in newspaper accounts either about celebrated crimes or municipal scandals, which have led to official reports such as those collected by Gabriel Chin in New York City Police Corruption Investigation Commissions, 1894-1994.3 Yet these misdeeds have been a motor of change in police departments, as well as in municipalities generally. So, the reports that Chin has collected are a good part of the skeleton of the history of the NYPD. In his introduction to the volumes, Chin notes the weary saying of New Yorkers that for the past century there has been a big police scandal "every twenty years or so."4 These six volumes constitute the final reports for the most notable of those scandals, which actually occurred more frequently than every twenty years.⁵ The first report, in 1894, was a legislative inquiry headed by State Senator Clarence Lexow, triggered by a series of investigations by private reformers, with resulting newspaper stories detailing vice and corruption in the city. The second, led by city Alderman Henry Curran, was prompted by the 1912 murder of gambler Herman Rosenthal, masterminded (or so it was thought at the time) by NYPD Lieutenant Charles Becker. Seventeen years later, Governor Franklin Roosevelt requested the judiciary to look into corruption in the city's courts. Judge Samuel Seabury published the results of his investigation in 1932, when scandal about corruption and brutality in law enforcement was rising nationally as well.6 In 1949, following a newspaper scandal about corrupt pay-

^{2.} An excellent study of Los Angeles city police, Joseph Gerald Woods, The Progressives and the Police: Urban Reform and the Professionalization of the Los Angeles Police (1973) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California (Los Angeles)), has unfortunately never been published.

^{3.} The series of reports collected by Professor Chin appear in a six volume work, with each volume containing a specific report. In addition, Professor Chin has added a brief introduction to each report, as well as a series introduction contained within volume I. Each of the six volumes will be referred to within this Book Review by either the name of its accompanying report or introduction. See generally 1 New York City Police Corruption Investigation Commissions, 1894-1994 (Gabriel J. Chin ed. 1997) [hereinafter Series Introduction of Lexow Report]; 2 id. [hereinafter Curran Report]; 3 id. [hereinafter Seabury Report]; 4 id. [hereinafter Helfand Report]; 5 id. [hereinafter Knapp Report]; 6 id. [hereinafter Mollen Report].

^{4.} Series Introduction, supra note 3, at ix.

^{5.} As noted by Chin, there have also been other scandals and other reports. See id. at viii-ix.

^{6.} The first national report on abuses in law enforcement appeared in 1931 and

ments from gamblers, Brooklyn prosecutor Julius Helfand undertook not only to report, but to prosecute the crimes. In 1972, prompted again by newspaper stories of corruption, many of which emanated from two police officers whose names have become legend, Frank Serpico and David Durk, a citizens' commission led by Whitman Knapp, at the request of Mayor John Lindsay, reported the results of its investigation. Finally, in 1994, after a spectacularly embarrassing arrest of New York City police brazenly selling drugs on Long Island, a commission requested by Mayor David Dinkins and led by former judge Milton Mollen reported on corruption and brutality in several city precincts. Despite the fact that Professor Chin has edited these reports in six small volumes, reading them is not an intimidating project; the longest report (Knapp) is 264 pages, while the shortest (Curran) is 39 pages (without appendices).

I read the Knapp and Mollen Commission Reports when they came out (so old am I in the pursuit of these scandals), and I looked at some of the others in my own work. But I had no conception of how interesting it would be to read them all in succession. Collectively, the reports give us an idea as to how political scandal and reform are produced in our society. The press is the great engine for creating pressure in these cases, forcing political leaders to take some action, however minimal. In the case of most of these investigations, leaders had something to lose by undertaking them. Judge Samuel Seabury, under the aegis of the governor and the appellate courts, had the greatest freedom and the greatest results. Clarence Lexow, a legislator, was opposed by the governor; it is illuminating to read the 1894 message of the governor vetoing the budget for the investigation, saying that it was "a misuse of public money . . . for the manufacture of political capital or the division of political patronage."7 The legislators were obliged to raise funds from private sources to complete the project. The report was such a bombshell that no one has had the temerity to berate subsequent investigations in such bold terms.

Yet, surely Mayor Lindsay (Knapp) and Mayor Dinkins (Mollen) had reason to be apprehensive about the scandals in their administrations. They may have expressed their fears through budget limitations; both the Knapp and Mollen Commissions had some pri-

discussed such scandal. See generally National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement ("Wickersham Commission"), Report on Lawlessness in Law Enforcement (1931).

^{7.} Lexow Report, supra note 3, at 10.

vate support supplementing the public outlays. However reluctant the mayors may have been, they had little choice but to authorize the commissions. The storms of scandal were so overwhelming that officials looked less guilty by joining the investigation than by fighting it. The mayors also were, no doubt, men of good faith; they genuinely sought to understand the problem rather than avoid it. They did not indulge in a cynical dodge, as Mayor Giuliani did after the Louima torture scandal in 1997, appointing a powerless body and then condemning its conclusions.⁸ All in all, the original publication of these six reports is a great credit to a free press and partisan politics.

Although their embodiment of the political dynamics that produce scandal and reform would be enough to make these reports interesting, in fact, they have broader significance. They are of historical significance in at least two ways. While it is true that some of the problems, especially corruption due to "vice" crimes, are repeated in the successive reports, they also record changes in New York City, its politics, and its police. The reports suggest what the social causes were and are that perpetuate the problems, as well as the sources of change. These may be social—the shift to narcotics as a source of corruption, for example—or they may be quite deliberate—the instruments of institutional reform.

I. ETERNAL CORRUPTION?

All of the investigations before the most recent Mollen Report of 1994 reveal police corruption in enforcing laws against gambling and prostitution. In 1972, the Knapp Commission noted corruption in narcotics enforcement, and by 1994, narcotics graft had completely overshadowed the others.⁹

Commentators on urban history in the United States have remarked that the persistent corruption in the enforcement of "vice" crimes is a reflection of the puritanism and hypocrisy that runs through our law, particularly during periods of reform.¹⁰ Legisla-

^{8.} See generally Michael Meyers et al., Deflecting Blame: The Dissenting Report of the Mayor's Task Force on Police/Community Relations (1998).

^{9.} Compare Knapp Report, supra note 3, at 91-115 (briefly analyzing the problem of police corruption in narcotics enforcement), with Mollen Report, supra note 3, at 16-17 (recognizing that the nature of police corruption has changed, with corruption in narcotics enforcement now representing a significant portion of the corruption problem).

^{10.} See Paul Chevigny, Edge of the Knife: Police Violence in the Americas 117-44 (1995); Robert M. Fogelson, Big-City Police 108-111 (1977).

tors could not vote against a law that condemned vice. However, in practice few cared to control it, except perhaps in the case of narcotics, which presents more serious problems of control, as well as greater monetary temptations. The result has been that purveyors of vice have paid off officials for protection from the laws. As this is written, in 1998, we are in the midst of a scandal, relatively minor compared to the six in the volumes under review, in which New York City police received sexual payoffs in return for protecting brothels in midtown Manhattan.¹¹ Despite the hypocrisy and corruption, vice laws have continued on the books. Reading these six reports together with Professor Chin's introduction, it is difficult to escape the sense that ambitious reformers needed the vice laws, and the scandals they generated, to justify their work. Professor Chin recites the list of investigators, prosecutors, and commissioners who built their reputations through these six investigations, attaining judicial posts and higher office.12

Officials, not just in New York City, but in other cities, even when they had no interest in reform, still needed the vice laws for the corrupt revenue they produced. A Los Angeles politician, Wilbur LeGette, long ago opined that "[t]he purpose of any political organization is to get the money from the gamblers."13 It is interesting to note that as vice enforcement against gambling has faded, the government has started to run its own lotteries. Corruption was so general in New York City that the police took bribes from a wide range of businesses outside the illegal vice rackets. Almost any trade that was tightly regulated, as many were and still are in New York City, was fair game for graft in return for overlooking minor violations. The Knapp Commission reported that police were taking payoffs from bars,14 and the Curran and Lexow Commissions, much earlier, said that police took bribes to overlook evasion of taxes on liquor.¹⁵ An interesting example is the tow-truck business, a natural for graft because on most occasions when tow-trucks arrived at the scene of an accident, the police were already in control of the situation. Since the business was highly competitive, there was a strong temptation for tow-truck operators to pay off the po-

^{11.} Dan Barry, Police Used Brothel So Often, Madam Got Worried, N.Y. TIMES, July 18, 1991, at A1.

^{12.} See Series Introduction, supra note 3, at xiii-xvi.

^{13.} Woods, supra note 2, at 315.

^{14.} See KNAPP REPORT, supra note 3, at 2.

^{15.} See Curran Report, supra note 3, at 15; Lexow Report, supra note 3, at 19, 39-40.

lice for the privilege of being the first at the scene. Both the Helfand and Knapp Reports, nearly twenty years apart, record this enduring racket.¹⁶

The most interesting aspect of official graft in businesses that were not condemned outright as forms of vice is that it had the effect of drawing gangsters into the businesses. For example, years ago, many night clubs in New York City had a reputation for being run by "shady characters." This stemmed, in part, from the fact that the night club business was so highly regulated that it was almost impossible to run a club in a completely lawful manner. The business thus attracted people who knew how to cut corners and pay protection.¹⁷ Police graft tended to turn legitimate businesses into rackets.

Some of the sources of graft thinned out as the hypocrisy about vice weakened over time. The Knapp Commission, in a move characteristic of the 1970s, recommended the legalization of gambling and an end to Sabbath closing laws, which were an additional source of payoffs. The Knapp Report was also cautiously critical of the way prostitution and narcotics laws were enforced. Although gambling is now not strictly legal in New York, enforcement at the local level has largely disappeared. Corruption due to drugs, however, has grown apace.

Any reader of these six reports must ask the question whether the problem of corruption in the police is inevitable, and whether the labor on the periodic reports, therefore, has been largely in vain as an instrument of reform. The problem of tow-truck graft, after all, was reported in investigations eighteen years apart.²⁰ Upon analysis, these reports, for the most part, cannot answer that question because of the limitations in their conception of the problem.

II. THE NARROW FOCUS OF THE REPORTS

Evidence of the distortion created by the methods used in these reports can be found by looking at the connection between corruption and brutality. In 1994, the Mollen Commission made a

^{16.} See Helfand Report, supra note 3, at 94-95; Knapp Report, supra note 3, at 158-62.

^{17.} See generally Paul Chevigny, Gigs: Jazz and the Cabaret Laws in New York City (1991).

^{18.} See KNAPP REPORT, supra note 3, at 90, 151.

^{19.} See id. at 19.

^{20.} See supra note 15 and accompanying text.

point of describing the link between brutality and corruption;²¹ one hundred years earlier, the Lexow Commission saw the connection in "that the police formed a separate and highly privileged class, armed with the authority and the machinery for oppression and punishment, but practically free themselves from the operation of the criminal law."²² The implication is that both in the case of corruption and of physical abuse, the police set themselves up as an authority independent of the rest of the justice system, with the powers to decide who shall be punished, in what way, and for what offense. Moreover, when this extra-legal system is accepted by patrol officers and superiors, it creates a parallel system of impunity, in which everyone is implicated, and no one can effectively report unlawful acts. Thus, one problem feeds the other.

The four reports between the Lexow and Mollen Reports missed the connection because they concentrated on "police corruption" in a narrow sense, without its larger implications. Chief Counsel Michael Armstrong implied as much in his foreword to the Knapp Report. The reports may have failed to find better solutions to the problem of "police corruption" because they focused too narrowly on the problem in isolation and because their proposals for reform were thus restricted by that narrow focus, as well as by the way the investigations were conducted.

Many of the reports limited their recommendations to reforms within the police as a route to greater honesty, a course which has not been fruitful.²³ The Lexow Report, for example, recommended that the direct management of the NYPD be removed from the partisan commission that was then nominally in control of it and, instead, be concentrated in the hands of a chief of police.²⁴

After executive power was actually centralized in a single commissioner, eleven years later, the Curran Report blamed most of the problems on poor management by the commissioner individually and demanded that he be replaced (which was not done).²⁵ By this time, the defects in the oversight of police conducted by the police themselves should have been tolerably clear. The Curran Commission reported that complaints of corruption were simply referred to the officer complained of for his comments; the commission

^{21.} See Mollen Report, supra note 3, at 44-50.

^{22.} Lexow Report, supra note 3, at 31.

^{23.} The Mollen Report, discussed *infra* this Part, is an exception, and the Seabury Report, which is in a class by itself, is discussed *infra* Part III.

^{24.} See Lexow Report, supra note 3, at 59.

^{25.} See Curran Report, supra note 3, at 3.

sion recommended that "[a] small secret service squad, composed of men other than policemen, should be employed by the Commissioner to secure evidence against corrupt police officials."26 In eighty-five years, that recommendation has never been implemented. The Knapp Commission recommended that there be command responsibility on the part of superiors for the actions of officers and that the Internal Affairs Division, which investigates corruption within the NYPD, be reorganized.27 This was done, and yet the Mollen Commission, twenty years later, reported very similar problems in the internal investigations of corruption,28 which was (and still is) viewed by superior officers as an embarrassing problem that they would prefer not to think or talk about. Corruption investigators get no thanks for doing a thorough job and senior officers, when they cannot avoid the problem, tend to "solve" it by making isolated arrests that may obstruct access to a larger network of corruption.

Sometimes, the reports have recommended systematic changes that are promising. The Knapp Commission advocated lateral entry to the supervisory ranks,²⁹ which would have tended to break down the old-boy secrecy in the NYPD. This has never been done. The Mollen Commission recommended the more basic reform of using an outside investigative body to monitor police corruption in the NYPD.³⁰ The history of the recurring malaise in internal investigations makes clear that this is a minimal reform, yet as of this writing Mayor Giuliani has bitterly resisted any such proposals.

A further limitation on the effectiveness of the reports is that most of them have focused on the punishment of individuals for violating the laws against corruption. Such a punishment perspective has often disabled the report from taking a larger view of reform. Thus, the Knapp Commission wrote proudly of the numbers of indictments that had issued from its work and offered as a principal recommendation the appointment of a state special prosecutor for corruption.³¹ The worst offender in this respect is the Helfand Report, which discussed nothing but scandal about gambling corruption, and seemed to recommend almost nothing but more vigorous enforcement of the criminal laws, including the gambling

^{26.} Id. at 6.

^{27.} See KNAPP REPORT, supra note 3, at 13-16.

^{28.} See Mollen Report, supra note 3, at 70-109.

^{29.} See KNAPP REPORT, supra note 3, at 32.

^{30.} See Mollen Report, supra note 3, at 148-58.

^{31.} See KNAPP REPORT, supra note 3, at 260-64.

laws.³² While the prosecution of corrupt officials was necessary, of course, it could not be the principal way of reducing police abuse, which would have to come through institutional changes and reduced temptations.

The concentration on the punishment of individuals has sometimes effectively limited the focus of reports because the reports cannot reach beyond those, few or many, against whom investigators are able to obtain evidence. Thus, the Knapp Commission specifically stated that it was "unable to develop hard evidence" against anyone above the rank of lieutenant and that it had no resources to investigate officials outside the police department.33 Similarly, the Mollen Commission was cautious in saying that its mandate was limited to the police and that it could not determine the full scope of corruption and brutality even inside the NYPD.34 While this caution is understandable within the framework of the investigations—as we would not like to see these bodies make accusations against individuals without evidence—that framework has created the impression that we are dealing with a problem that is specific to the police, and perhaps especially to the rank-and-file. Given the pervasiveness of corruption at the time of the Knapp investigation, in retrospect, it seems unlikely that money was not being paid, perhaps through the police, to other sorts of officials, and it is very difficult to believe that high ranking police officials were not involved. If there were no such wider connections, in the department and the larger society, the persistence of massive corruption would be nearly incomprehensible.

The punishment perspective, moreover, has led to side-effects of doubtful desirability. Some individuals were scapegoated, as Professor Chin points out in his introduction.³⁵ Resistance within the NYPD to the scandal investigations was so intense that the background of witnesses was commonly raked over until the police and local prosecutors could find something with which to charge someone in the effort to taint the investigation. There may be no "frame-up;" the charge may be literally true, but of the sort that would not have been discovered, or if discovered, would not have been prosecuted without the investigation. Thus, witnesses for

^{32.} See generally Helfand Report, supra note 3.

^{33.} See KNAPP REPORT, supra note 3, at 3.

^{34.} See Mollen Report, supra note 3, at 9.

^{35.} See Series Introduction, supra note 3, at xxiv.

these reports have been charged with everything from perjury to murder.

Both the Knapp and Mollen Commissions succeeded in their investigations by turning officers against one another—by catching an officer in a corrupt act and getting him to collect evidence in return for leniency in prosecution. Although this practice is probably unavoidable in the United States' system of prosecution, it is certainly odious and it is not something that we should happily look forward to as an instrument for controlling law enforcement abuses. While such practices may have to be used in the short run and in the individual case, the creation of suspicion and distrust cannot be the best way to root out corruption. We look forward to a situation where police officers not only do not expect to take graft, but where society as a whole does not expect to take or offer graft as well. This may seem a naive hope, but some of the experiences in these investigations, notably in the Seabury Report, suggest that it is not utterly utopian.

III. SYSTEMIC CHANGE AND THE SIX INVESTIGATIONS

The Lexow Commission's proposal that the department be managed by a single official was adopted, for better or for worse, and still prevails today. At present, the police commissioner answers to the mayor, and the two systematically resist any intrusion by other political forces.

A major change has been the minimization of outside political interference in the appointment and promotion of police officers. The Lexow and Curran Reports both criticized political interference and payoffs in personnel decisions, and the Lexow Commission recommended a better civil service.³⁶ The Curran Report also noted the poor pay of police officers and the poor quality of recruits.³⁷ These are problems that have largely passed away; police are recruited, protected, and decently paid through civil service standards. The greatest change is one that affects much more than the police and is, by this time, invisible to the average citizen, as well as to the average lawyer: the transformation of the criminal justice system, at its lower levels, from a racket to a system which, whatever its defects, can at least be viewed and criticized as an attempt at a system of justice. Through all six of the reports there are

^{36.} See Lexow Report, supra note 3, at 47-51; Curran Report, supra note 3, at 29-32.

^{37.} See Curran Report, supra note 3, at 23-29.

accounts of frame-ups or false charges. In later reports we read, for example, of "flaking" people by planting narcotics to justify an arrest³⁸ or using other devices to make a charge stick or to meet a quota.³⁹ But in the earlier accounts, such practices amount to a system of oppression. The Lexow Commission reported that the police brought charges against people, especially those least able to defend themselves, solely for the purpose of extorting money in exchange for having the charges dismissed. The commission charged "the existence of a powerful conspiracy in the neighborhood of Essex Market police court (on the Lower East Side-PGC), headed by politicians, including criminals, professional thieves, police and others who lay plots against the unwary "40 This system, or one like it, persisted for decades. The Curran Commission reported that detectives staged crimes in order to shake down the victims for the return of their goods, and that police witnesses could be induced to "throw a case" for a price.41

The Seabury investigation addressed precisely the problem of the lower criminal courts being run as an extortion racket by the magistrates, lawyers, bondsmen, and police. Here is how the game worked. An ordinary person was arrested for a low-level crime. For example, a respectable woman was charged by the police vice squad with prostitution. The police then refused to permit her to make a telephone call until she made an arrangement with one of their selected bail bondsmen. In return for most of her assets, the bondsman got her released and offered to "fix" the case for her, warning her that if she tried to defend the case any other way she would be convicted. She was tried, defended by a lawyer she had never seen before, and, if the fix was in, she was acquitted. Everyone was paid off, including the prosecutor.⁴²

Samuel Seabury, as a judge appointed by the judiciary at the request of the governor, was not limited by local politics to looking into "police corruption" or any other separate part of the problem; he was supposed to solve the problem as a whole if he could. In his report, Seabury discussed the police only in passing, along with magistrates, lawyers, clerks, and bondsmen. Seabury did not recommend any reforms in the police as such; he merely recom-

^{38.} See KNAPP REPORT, supra note 3, at 28.

^{39.} See Series Introduction, supra note 3, at xvii-xxi.

^{40.} Lexow Report, supra note 3, at 43.

^{41.} See Curran Report, supra note 3, at 8, 16.

^{42.} See SEABURY REPORT, supra note 3, at 21-24.

mended that arraignments never be held in station-houses.⁴³ He recommended that the magistrates' court be abolished and replaced by a centralized criminal court and that the bail system be reformed to permit parole release for some defendants and cash bond release for many others in non-serious cases.⁴⁴ He also recommended that the assistance of the lawyers who "hang around the courtrooms"⁴⁵ be replaced by Legal Aid and a panel of lawyers selected by the appellate courts.⁴⁶ All of these reforms were implemented, while at the same time the old, slack type of district attorney was being replaced by ambitious incorruptibles like Thomas Dewy and Frank Hogan.⁴⁷ The result has been that criminal court as an extortion racket has utterly disappeared and with it a large source of corruption of all sorts, including police corruption. In the daily work of the lower courts, with a few exceptions, no one expects graft, and no one offers it—the utopia I mentioned a few pages back.

The Seabury investigation is an object lesson in institutional reform. The best of blue-ribbon commissions cannot solve problems unless they are given the power to solve them. Seabury had a very broad mandate and the backing of the governor and the appellate judiciary, none of whom were interested in preserving the status quo in the criminal justice system. Other commissions have not had such a broad mandate or such uncompromising support. Investigations which concentrate on "police corruption" to the exclusion of other problems may expose some problems and may bring some criminals to justice. However, the work is very likely to be repeated, especially if the investigations concentrate on the sins of individual police officers, and even more so if the investigations are limited to exposing the sins of low-level police officers.

Viewed as an isolated problem, police corruption and its attendant abuses can perhaps best be controlled by an oversight body independent of the police, as the Mollen Commission recommended.⁴⁸ But the history of these six investigations tells us that we ought to stop looking at police corruption as an isolated problem and see it as one that reaches to other officials and to the larger society.

^{43.} See id. at 202.

^{44.} See id. at 164, 182, 202.

^{45.} *Id*. at 217.

^{46.} See id. at 220-21.

^{47.} See generally Lawrence Fleischer, Thomas E. Dewey and Earl Warren: The Rise of the Twentieth-Century Urban Prosecutor, 28 Cal. W. L. Rev. 1 (1991).

^{48.} See Mollen Report, supra note 3, at 148-58.