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## Windmills as Ogres, Communities as Chimeras: Several Thoughts on Neighborhood-Driven Policing (NDP)

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"And the end of all our exploring/Will be to  
arrive where we started/And know the place for  
the first time."

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*,  
*Little Giddings*

This is a story of competing nostalgias,  
each yearning for something that never was, and  
perhaps can never be.

Professional policing was in the first  
instance an ideal, something proposed to replace  
the very thing we now propose to replace it with:  
neighborhood-driven policing. The police literature  
calls that earlier version of NDP "political" policing,  
but at least superficially, it shared many aspects  
with the notion of community policing. Among  
those aspects were decision-making by local elites,  
who are organized into a formal structure with  
informal connections; informal influence over the  
police who patrol the particular area; police  
responsiveness that is relatively independent of  
hierarchical orders, as befits "servants of the  
people."

Against this backdrop, the claim that NDP  
represents "the promise of shared governance"  
will need to be tested and verified continuously.  
The negatives that attended the political era of  
policing included a raft of pathologies that we  
hope were particular to the early industrial age. The  
institutions of representative government had been  
captured by machine politics and the spoils system,  
both based upon principles of exclusion. In turn,  
exclusion required group identity and power blocs  
at the local level. Such blocs were formed, *ipso  
facto*, by natural grouping related to immigration

patterns. Whoever could "deliver" the bloc vote  
of a particular group received power from the  
winning political machine. The ability to receive  
services under that system did not rest upon any  
fair claim of citizenship or residency: it hinged  
on the degree to which one courted, paid, and  
obeyed the local ward heeler. Touted as a  
democracy, American cities functioned formally  
with a republican government that was only  
nominally democratic: where the soles hit the  
bricks, neighborhoods were medieval fiefdoms.  
The fundamental improvements of capitalism  
meant that the serfs were no longer tied to the  
land, but neither did they enjoy the slender benefits  
of *noblesse oblige*.

Anthropomorphism has long been a  
marvelous tool of informal education, illustrating  
complex stories and concepts by abstracting them  
into accessible human terms. Its value in policy  
terms may be more dubious. Levin and Myers  
present "the neighborhood" in fundamentally  
anthropomorphic terms: "the neighborhood  
leading itself and deciding its own fate." The  
history of small-scale democracy holds a number  
of warnings against unrealistic expectations in  
this regard:

- Not all neighborhoods are created  
equal; the critical element of  
neighborhood empowerment varies  
tremendously, from inner-city ghettos  
poor in human capital to elite gated  
communities that for the most part do  
control much of their own fate;
- Not all organizational efforts are  
sustainable, whether Saul Alinsky's  
or Officer Friendly's (Yates, 1973;  
Sadd and Grinc, 1993a, 1993b);
- Not all organizational efforts are  
benign, as witness the ongoing efforts  
against gangs in many urban

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neighborhoods (and even Indian reservations);

- Not all allegiances are to the geospatial neighborhoods in which people find themselves, a fact that has been a continuing bane to community organizers in the inner-city neighborhoods that "Broken Windows" spurned as unsalvageable; people do not want to invest in such neighborhoods, they only want to get out of them;
- NDP competes historically with the challenges to fundamental expectations of citizenship, from Jim Crow to the California Walkman and Bensonhurst.

"The community" is neither a singular anthropomorphic entity nor a polymorphous network. While Levin and Myers prudently note that NDP constitutes a middle ground on a continuum of abstracts, we are still far short of a workable model for the concept. The most likely predictable outcome is that NDP follows the path of crime prevention and community policing; it will be strongest in the neighborhoods that need it least, and weakest in those that need it most.

The NDP concept asserts a small-scale democracy in the midst of a republican social and governmental context. In that regard, a neighborhood with NDP almost represents a 21st century utopian community. Assuming that the multiple local interests can move beyond the memory of segregated and "defended" neighborhoods (and the specter of vigilantism), the fact remains that local laws, ordinances, and expectations are subject to state and federal oversight. While in the authors' idea model the police would be arbiters in times of conflict, there will be times when neighborhood consensus will be in conflict with established law. The federal

Constitution, and individual state constitutions, provide "floors" of rights that neighborhood sentiment and consensus cannot waive. The police will be caught in those situations: despite whatever moral authority the neighborhood bestows, the legal authority of the police derives from the state.

History provides some dubious *döppelgängers* for the NDP Board: local school boards, and civilian review boards of the police. A local board is a source of power: sources of power attract those who want power. The Jeffersonian ideal of an informed yeomanry as the engine of government has never materialized: it was strangled at birth by machine politics, the upscale, legitimized version of a gang. Local boards will be the focus of local power struggles over specific issues. In important ways, the rule of law--the overriding authority of the state and federal institutions--has evolved to serve as a leaven against the pendulum swings of political dominance. There is at least an outside possibility that the police will find themselves in opposition to the wishes of a board (and a community) that has the impression it can give them direction in areas beyond their actual governance.

There is also a tension between the locally-determined direction of the neighborhood-based police and the central functions of recruitment, hiring, training, promotion, and retention. The larger issues of recruitment and retention that have affected police agencies in the recent decades (particularly the core cities) will also play out at the neighborhood level. Either the strong neighborhood entities will skim the cream of the police department's personnel (another parallel with the schools) or they will face the possibility that they must direct officers whose expectations of the police role is in conflict with neighborhood expectations. Issues of transition will need to be addressed to insure continuity of effort, as veteran officers move upward in the organization (or

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outward to new opportunities in other agencies) and are replaced by those just beginning their careers and their learning curve. The legacy of successful community programs has been mixed in this regard: some manage the transition well, but many founder when the individual who was the driving force behind the success leaves.

Finally, there is the issue of "getting from Here to There." As we have seen across several generations of police reform, Peel's second principle--"The ability of the police to perform their task is dependent on public approval of their existence, actions, behavior, and on the ability of the police to secure and maintain public respect" (Peel, 1882 [1901; 1997:8])--is a complex dynamic, easily undermined by the flagrant actions of a few. Often, however, it has been the police themselves who have spurned the legitimate interests of the public in favor of the police subculture's mythological and self-perpetuating image of crime-fighting. Neighborhood-Driven Policing would certainly move the relationship in the right direction, if it can be properly implemented and sustained; we need to be skeptical about the ease with which the transition will be accomplished.

Peel's first Principle is more central to the debate than the abbreviated seventh Principle offered by Levin and Myers: "The basic mission for which the police exist is to prevent crime and disorder as an alternative to their repression by military force and severity of legal punishment." (Ibid.:8) It is this tension--between prevention and suppression--that most marks the line of demarcation between success and failure. This first Principle sets the groundwork for the next three, demanding public approval of the police mission, secured by the police themselves, by means inversely proportional to "the use of physical force and compulsion for achieving police objectives" (Ibid.:8). Peel's Principles were articulated as part of the debate to establish a

civilian police force, before anyone knew exactly what a "police force" would be. Today's reform movements arise within the context of a police tradition nearly two centuries old. The common police-centered identification of the work as "law enforcement"--that is, suppression of crime through arrest-based deterrent--has long since swept aside the preventive role.

Though there are important exceptions (individuals who understand the need for a broader mission and a deeper set of tools), thief-taking remains the primary goal of police action as defined by most police officers. Persons present themselves for police employment with that goal and expectation (many swimming resolutely against the current of good advice given to them by academic advisors and even senior police officers) to "help people" by "catching bad guys." They are hired, trained, and socialized by officers of the preceding generation, who likewise presented themselves to the field with those expectations. Many successfully take on additional missions, but always as something extra; some never manage to break out of the enforcement-only mind-set.

Reforms such as Neighborhood-Driven Policing either have to be approved by the existing culture--cops as "the public," with the reformers playing the role of the "new police"--or have to bypass it completely and start from scratch. The very few experiments in the latter, such as Lauderhill, Florida (Scott, 1998), are neither well-documented nor strongly advocated within the field. The successful programs that have occurred have depended upon both champions and generous budgets. Though often used as templates for similar endeavors in other communities, they do not transplant well, and often do not survive changes of administrations. Those changes, in turn, can be deadly for subsequent attempts at reform and improvement, as the community side

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undergoes a form of innovation fatigue. After seeing numerous police programs wrapped in wonderful promises arrive, swirl around, and die when the funding ran out, even the capable people (the natural allies of the police in the neighborhoods) become cynical about new police promises, withholding their commitment until something demonstrates to their satisfaction that it will not be just another woof 'n whinny show (Sadd and Grinc, 1993a, 1993b).

The "close links" to the neighborhood envisioned by NDP are still dependent less upon the technologies available and more upon the sustained, consistent investment by the community. It is that latter which may prove chimerical. This legacy of community policing and crime prevention endeavors is that the community has accepted the police role as "law enforcement expert," and does not expect to have to "be the police" in Peelian terms. Communities will come together to deal with crises, but with the expectation that they can go back to their customary lives once the crisis has been resolved (Yates, 1973).

There is an old joke about an indignant worshiper confronting his deity over the latter's failure to save him from a death by drowning, despite the worshiper's steadfast and strongly pronounced faith that the deity would save him. The deity replies: "I sent you the warning message on the radio; I sent you the neighbors in the car; I sent you the neighbors with the boat; I sent you the rescue team with the helicopter...." (A pithier win-the-lottery variant of the story concludes, "Nasrudin! At least buy a ticket!"). Neighborhood-Driven Policing runs the risk of being the deity, constantly (and fruitlessly) importuning its clients to take that one, simple little step for their own salvation.

Neighborhood-Driven Policing is an ideal, something already in place in some communities, and perhaps forever beyond the reach of some


others, with vast middle ground. Before it can be implemented, both the police and the community will need to be roused from their comfortable expectations based upon the old policing models. Sharper definitions of community roles, actions, and responsibilities must be carved out before the community can step into its new relationship: many of the things it will be expected to do overlap, parallel, or encroach upon matters traditionally handled by organizational hierarchies. The old guard will fight the changes, and there will be predictable, unforeseen problems to be dealt with when good intentions miss the mark. In short, Neighborhood-Driven Policing represents a good idea--an advancement in police-community relations, and very possibly a better foundation from which to meet the challenges of the future--but it is one that requires considerable work and clear-headed evaluation (and revision) to make it a reality.

## Endnotes

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