Predictive Policing from the Colonies to the Contemporary

Modern British policing does not simply emerge in 1829, out of the failures of the nightwatchmen or the reactionary and violent nature of the yeomanry, militia or military forces. Rather, British policing gradually unfolds across both the British mainland and it's colonies over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries. One of the principal logics behind formalising police work, is the requirement for uniformed patrols that not only respond to crime and disorder, but prevent it[1]. This ambition for a force which is preventative required officers to surveil specific areas, monitor certain types of people and draw suspicion from particular activities. Thus, as Patrick Williams states in Amnesty International's Automated Racism report, modern policing has always been predictive.

A history of British policing generally, and predictive policing specifically, in it's colonial context, is not just empirically useful – it is also crucial for understanding how police forces rationalised their predictions. Specifically, the racial hierarchies and stereotypes that shaped colonial governance informed what kind of data was considered relevant for formulating a prediction, and how that data should be interpreted by the authorities. Forecasting crime and disorder became most proscriptive during periods of anti-colonial resistance, as the British administration struggled to determine the location and form of an attack or rebellion. Colonial police officers and administrators like Robert Thompson[2] and Frank Kitson developed a set of guidelines for policing insurgencies[3]. First, a suspect community is identified – this is the section of the population from which the perceived criminals or dissidents emerge[4]. In Kenya, it was the Kikuyu ethnic group, in Malaya it was the Chinese Malay whereas in the north of Ireland it was the Catholics.

Second, a regime of surveillance and monitoring was instigated, this could involve stops, searches and road checkpoints. It could also include the monitoring of mail and other forms of communication. If these forms of surveillance did not prove preventative, then forms of collective punishment of the suspect community were established[5]. In Malaya, what the British called 'New Villages' were set up, in which large numbers of Chinese Malay were surrounded in barbed wire fences, watch towers and armed patrols[6]. In Kenya, thousands of Kukuyu were interned into labour camps in which torture and killings were widespread[7]. In Ireland, indefinite detention of suspected republicans became routine[8].

These forms of colonial policing were far more violent and repressive than those employed on the British mainland. Justifying this use of force required two interconnected explanations. The first, was the argument that the threat of crime, violence and disorder was far more dangerous than that of Britain. Secondly, these threats were emerging from a racialised population, whose moral degeneracy justified both the civilising missions of the late colonial period, and the violent policing that marked the tumultuous end of Empire. The Chinese Malay were framed as political fanatics – 'communist terrorists' was commonly used to label them, alongside 'bandits', 'thugs', and 'gangsters', after the

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[1] Julian Go, Policing Empires: Militarization, Race, and the Imperial Boomerang in Britain and the US (Oxford: OUP, 2024)
[2] Robert Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency: Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam (London: F. A. Praeger, 1960),
[3] Frank Kitson, Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency and Peacekeeping (London: Faber & Faber, 1971).
[4] McGovern, M., and A. Tobin. 2010. Countering Terror or Counter-Productive: Comparing Irish and British Muslim Experiences of Counter-Insurgency Law and Policy. Edge Hill: Edge Hill University
[5] David Anderson, The Histories of the Hanged (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), 77–80.
[6] Karl Hack, 'Malaya – between two terrors: "people's history" and the Malayan Emergency', in Hannah Gurman (ed.), Hearts and Minds: A People's History of Counterinsurgency (New York: The New Press, 2013)
[7] Caroline Elkins, Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya (London: Pimlico 2005),
[8] Pat Conway, 'Critical reflections: a response to paramilitary policing in Northern Ireland', Critical Criminology, 8:1 (1997), 109–121

colonial office banned the use of term ‘insurgents’ as it was deemed to afford the Chinese Malay too much political legitimacy[9].

The Kukuyu in Kenya were pathologized with more animalistic stereotypes, with films at the time portraying the ‘naked terror’ of ‘savage blood drinking rituals’ in the ‘steaming jungles of Africa’. Again, these stereotypes rationalised the system of apartheid imposed by the British in colonial Kenya, and were built upon to justify violent policing as Britain struggle to keep hold of its colonial possessions[10]. Frank Kitson, a senior officer in the British operations in Kenya, was later drafted into the North of Ireland, to assist with repressing the Republican movement for a united Ireland. While stereotypes about the Irish being essentially violent and disorderly, provided, in a similar way to the Malayan and Kenyan cases, a justification for pre-emptive police violence, it’s proximity to the British mainland also enabled the development of models which could be more readily incorporated into policing back home[11].

While Frank Kitson was engaged in maintain order in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, policing on the British mainland was also taking a new turn in the use of pre-emptive measures. The use of the ‘sus’ laws, powers enabling police to search and arrest people based purely on ‘suspicion’ rather than evidence, was being used in cities across England. Fear over an unprecedented crisis of law and order had justified the use of this controversial power, with the expressed intention of deterring acts of street robbery termed ‘mugging’[12].

This new category of crime, borrowed of the US, created the impression that a distinctly new, and different problem of law and order had arisen in Britain – and thus could be attributed to a new and different people. It was young Black men for whom this particular kind of crime became associated, with Black people being the ‘suspect community’ in the application of the ‘sus’ laws. As in the colonies, the predictive policing of ‘sus’ was partly based on police data informing officers where threats of crime were most likely to take place. But racism also played a crucial role in justifying this approach to policing, with stereotypes about Caribbean culture and its propensity for criminality, drug use and harbouring the workshy adding further weight[13].

‘Sus’ laws were disproportionately used in urban areas with large Black populations, who were surveilled and harassed by the stops, searches, questioning and arrests which proliferated as a result. Pre-emptive arrests in the 1970s/'80s, made with no evidence but merely suspicion that a crime might take place, effectively criminalised those who had previously not committed illegal acts. In spring of 1980, the Black-run café in St Paul’s, Bristol, was subjected to frequent raids on the pretence that drugs and alcohol were being illegally consumed on the premises. Despite no evidence being found, the raids continued until a popular rebellion by local residents confronted the police, leading to unrest across the St Paul’s area. By the spring and summer of 1981, thirty urban areas of Britain erupted with popular uprisings. One of the most significant provocations was ‘Swamp 81’ in Brixton, involving over a hundred plain-clothed police officers raiding homes and businesses, as well as stopping and searching anyone who looked like a street crime ‘suspect’[14].

While the community suffered the repression of ‘Swamp’, the head of one local CID adopted a somewhat different perspective on the initiative: “more than 1,000 people were stopped and there

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[9] David French, ‘Nasty not nice: British counter-insurgency doctrine and practice, 1945–1967’, Small Wars & Insurgencies, 23:4–5 (2012), 744–761.
[10] Dane Kennedy, ‘Constructing the colonial myth of Mau Mau’, The International Journal of African Historical Studies, 2:2 (1992), 245.
[11] Gerry Northam, Shooting in the Dark (London: Faber & Faber, 1988).
[12] Simon Peplow, Race and Riots in Thatcher’s Britain (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).
[13] Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1976),
[14] Simon Peplow, Race and Riots in Thatcher’s Britain (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

were just over 100 arrests in the first four days… It was a resounding success"[15]. Predictably, the conflict between the civil liberties of Brixton's local community, and the commitment to harass, interrogate and detain by the local police force, culminated in direct collective confrontation. Days later, a young Black man was arrested after receiving a knife wound. Over 100 youths released a wounded youngster surrounded the police van in which he was being detained until he was released.. This confrontation led to wider rebellions, galvanisinga police response which again, reflected the predictive policing of the colonial era: collective punishment of the suspect community.

In 1982, Sir Kenneth Newman was appointed to lead London's Metropolitan Police. Before 1948, Newman served as a colonial detective with the Palestine Special Branch and later became Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) in Northern Ireland. He was knighted for his efforts in transitioning authority from the British Army to the RUC during the 1970s[16]. Within three years of his appointment, widespread unrest and paramilitary-style policing resurfaced in England's urban areas. By 1985, communities such as Brixton and Tottenham in London saw a police shooting and death during a raid, respectively. Alongside Handsworth in Birmingham, Britain was seeing a resurgence of uprisings.

Following the death of an officer in Tottenham, Sir Kenneth Newman authorized officers to carry firearms loaded with plastic bullets but instructed them not to fire. His management of the 1985 Broadwater Farm uprisings marked the first use of this type of paramilitary policing on the British mainland. The subsequent introduction of CS spray and other strategies further solidified the shift toward a more paramilitary and colonial style of policing in England[17]. More than 200 officers patrolled the Tottenham estate where the uprising occurred, arresting boys as young as fourteen from school grounds and taking them to police stations for questioning. While the press described people involved in the uprisings as 'wild killer ape' and 'dreadful Black visage'[18], schools for children with special educational needs saw pupils arrested on site. Young people on Broadwater Farm faced severe violence and wrongful imprisonment, with some cases taking years of campaigning to overturn[19].

Modern policing's emergence was deeply intertwined with the strategies developed to maintain imperial control over colonized populations. The logic of predictive policing—identifying "suspect communities," surveilling them, and employing pre-emptive measures—was honed in colonies like Kenya, Malaya, and Ireland, where racialized stereotypes justified brutal and repressive tactics. These practices migrated back to Britain, where Black and other racialised communities became the new "suspect communities."[20] While the 'sus' laws of the 1980s were repealed, this approach to policing provided the rationale for later iterations of this predictive approach, in which 'common sense' policing could inform predictions in which the Terrorism Act, Misuse of Drugs Act and Public Order Act could all be mobilised to stop, search and arrest racialised communities considered 'suspect'. Such powers have been bolstered by the data gathering technologies outlined in the Automated Racism Report.

But to fully grasp the racism underpinning predictive policing in Britain, it is essential to situate it within its colonial routes. The application of 'sus' laws and the paramilitary-style policing of uprisings in the 1980s echo colonial strategies, revealing a continuity in how certain populations are policed as

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[15] Bunyan, T. (1981). The police against the people. Race & Class, 23(2-3), pp.153-170.
[16] Gerry Northam, Shooting in the Dark (London: Faber & Faber, 1988).
[17] Erik Linstrum, 'Domesticating chemical weapons: tear gas and the militarization of policing in the British imperial world, 1919–1981', Journal of Modern History, 91:3 (2019), 557–585.
[18] Niki Adams, Chronology of Injustice: The Case for Winston Silcott's Conviction to be Overturned (London: Crossroads Books, 1994).
[19] David Rose, Climate of Fear: The Murder of PC Blakelock and the Case of the Tottenham Three (London: Bloomsbury, 1992).
[20] Jasbinder Nijjar, 'Echoes of empire: excavating the colonial roots of Britain's "war on gangs"', Social Justice 45, 2/3(2018), 147–161.

inherently threatening. Recognizing this historical lineage is crucial to understanding how predictive policing today perpetuates systemic racism. Without addressing these colonial foundations, efforts to reform policing in Britain risk being superficial, failing to identify institutional racism as fundamental to both British policing and wider structures of political power.