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Book Review

Debugging the Techno-Utopian Myth of Predictive Policing

Egbert, S. & Leese, M. 2020. *Criminal Futures: Predictive Policing and Everyday Police Work,* London: Routledge.

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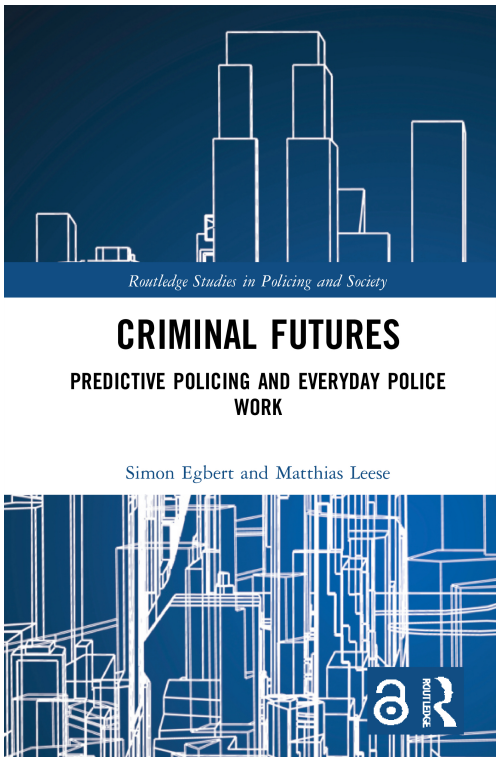

Most people associate predictive policing with science-fiction scenarios, in which officers use complex algorithms to anticipate and disrupt crimes before they are committed (McCulloch and Wilson 2016, 1-2). It is not difficult to imagine police stations equipped with high-tech glass walls displaying the results of complex algorithmic calculations that map crime in the local area like modern crystal balls (Egbert and Leese 2021, 170).

In their thought-provoking book *Criminal Futures: Predictive Policing and Everyday Police Work*, Simon Egbert and Matthias Leese puncture this illusion of predictive policing. Based on comprehensive ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative interviews with police officers in Germany and Switzerland, they provide important insights into the everyday world of predictive policing, which plays out in less high-tech and much messier ways than we might imagine.

The book takes the reader through the history of modern policing and the various transformations and developments within Western police forces that have led to predictive policing. The version of predictive policing addressed in the book stresses the importance of the efficient, targeted and effective

allocation of scarce police resources, based on a data-driven and future-oriented approach (ibid., 26).

In the study, predictive policing is *place-based,* as opposed to *person-based*, which used to be the most common approach in public and scholarly debates. Specifically, place-based predictive policing focuses on identifying where *domestic serial burglaries* are likely to be committed in the near future, based on algorithmic calculations of short-term risk areas (ibid., 29 and 104). This type of predictive policing is very narrow and targets specific types of serial crime and its scope is limited to providing police patrols with the opportunity to act preventively based on alerts generated by algorithms (ibid., 70).

Egbert and Leese study predictive policing through a lens of *Science and Technology Studies* (STS), in which "nothing is purely technical" (ibid., 53). Accordingly, it makes no sense to study the techniques and software used for predictive policing in isolation since they are implemented and adopted in existing *assemblages* of police culture, police patrols, police data, etc. (ibid., 44). The focus of their study is context-specific and consists of a micro-level examination of specific police practices, including the *translation processes* that are an everyday practice in predictive policing. Egbert and Leese identify and scrutinise four distinct translations associated with predictive policing: (1) how specific empiric events translate into police data (Chapter 4); (2) how data is translated into algorithmic analysis (Chapter 5); (3) how algorithmic data analyses are translated into comprehensible action/guidance (Chapter 6); and (4) how representations of algorithmic analysis are translated into police patrols (Chapter 7).

The Raw Illusion

One of the book's strongest and most important contributions pertains to the first translation, i.e., generating police data. As is often the case, the situation looks very different behind the scenes, and Egbert and Leese reveal some important details regarding the shortcomings of police organisations. The authors show in detail how the data is processed and subsequently emphasise that police data never consists of neutral representations of the world. "The raw illusion" of police data constitutes a highly persistent myth within (and outside of) police forces, one that Egbert and Leese challenge, citing an arsenal of STS scholars, e.g. Kaufmann (2018), Bowker (2013) and Gitelman & Jackson (2013). They describe the process of translating empirical events into police data as follows: "Creating crime data means trying to fit messy and ambiguous empirical reality into predefined bureaucratic classification systems" (Egbert and Leese 2021, 73). Only fragments of empirical reality are entered into police databases, and the selection process is based on tacit perceptions of what may

be useful to officers at a later date. This process of choosing relevant bits and pieces is determined by implicit and explicit prejudices and stereotypes, which are then replicated in the data.

Egbert and Leese also identify a misalignment between officers on patrol and the operators of predictive policing software (ibid., 82). The patrol officers' documentation of events during their shift is often characterised by "sloppiness and bypassing" – not due to malice, but as a result of time constraints and a lack of understanding of the bigger picture. In addition, there is often a delay in making entries in police systems, which means there is a need for comprehensive and time-consuming quality-control mechanisms for data-driven policing strategies. From the perspective of the operators of predictive policing, the messiness of police data is in direct conflict with the "need for speed" and for complete datasets. This can easily lead to bypassing and function creep on the part of the operators, for whom it is a priority to obtain data as fast as possible (ibid., 69).

Scientification Meets Professional Discretion

Throughout the book, the authors regularly describe patrols as a fundamental crime-prevention measure. The underlying assumption of predictive policing is that patrols should not be random but targeted in ways that reflect the crime risk level of each particular area based on scientific calculations (ibid., 147).

What happens when the scientific strategy and the sophisticated calculations of the data processors meet the operational culture of officers on the beat? "Not much" is the short answer. In practice, the alerts provided by predictive policing operators have minimal impact on officers on the ground, who pay little heed to the alerts and go about their business as usual (ibid., 158). When addressing the fourth translation from analysis into police patrols, Egbert and Leese flesh out, in an intriguing manner, the organisational conservatism and practical resistance toward both change in general and new technology in particular.

The authors describe this tension as a matter of striking the right balance between *science* on the one hand (represented by the algorithmic analysis) and *craft* on the other (represented by the professional discretion of police officers) (ibid., 153). They also argue for greater emphasis on the science aspect, as a result of the focus on predictive policing: "The more precise analytical prescriptions for patrols are, the stronger the devaluation of discretion and the stronger the potential clash between craft and science will be" (ibid.: 150). This quote seems to illustrate an optimism regarding the successful implementation of predictive policing, which is seemingly founded in a presumption of a particular form of *organisational rationalism*, in which the patrol officers are

expected to adjust their professional ethos in response to scientific progress and new technology.

Understandably, predictive policing operators express a feeling of powerlessness regarding their tangible impact on how patrols carry out their everyday work (ibid. 152), as well as in relation to providing evidence for predictive policing's impact on crime (Ibid. 164). However, the trust in and power ascribed to analytical findings and technics fade significantly when the perspective shifts from operators/analysts to patrol officers, and I would be more skeptical towards the claimed devaluation of the rather persistent professional discretion along the enhancement of algorithms.

The million-dollar question is: will predictive policing fulfil its promise to reconfigure how the police work in practice? Further, will predictive policing, as is often assumed, change the relationship between the police and the public (for better or for worse)?

Gundhus et al. note that increasing reliance on technological devices during patrols fundamentally changes how police officers interact with the people they encounter – from actively engaging in dialogue to passively waiting for an alert to pop up (Gundhus et al., 2019: 108). This book does not explicitly address the various potential changes in the nature of patrols, including those stemming from predictive policing. As such, a greater emphasis on the voices of patrol officers might have been rewarding and could have facilitated more detailed discussion of whether and how patrols could be reconfigured to incorporate a greater emphasis on predictive policing.

Based on the analysis by Egbert and Leese, the promise and expectation that predictive policing will reshape policing practices in radical ways seems to be overstated. One of the book's most important contributions is, therefore, its invitation, based on a comprehensive empirical study of the gaps and cracks in everyday policing, to adjust the expectations placed on predictive policing. The rhetoric of a "technoscientific miracle fix" (Egbert and Leese 2021, 166) should be dropped and predictive policing positioned as a *supplement* to existing strategies. In other words, it should be seen as just another tool, one that at best adjusts practice rather than revolutionising it (ibid., 209).

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