Enacting the sacred: nation and difference in the comparative sociology of the police

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ENACTING THE SACRED: NATION AND DIFFERENCE IN THE COMPARATIVE

SOCIOLOGY OF THE POLICE

Abstract

The Policeman in the Community by Michael Banton is viewed as a seminal work in the

Anglo-American sociological study of the police. This article – which draws on and cites

a personal dialogue with Banton himself - sets this work in context by outlining the

intellectual formation of its author in the 1950s, before setting out the main theoretical

and methodological aspects of this study. It is argued that the idea of sacredness is

established through Banton's Durkheimian approach and anthropological methods and, in

particular, through the dichotomization of Britain and the USA. This is shown to rely

upon a number of key contrasts between nations. As well as arguing that the comparative

method employed is itself productive of the sacred/profane contrast, I aim to suggest how

Banton's ideas have been influential in police studies. However, it is also argued that

Banton is ultimately ambivalent about the value of sacred status.

INTRODUCTION

The Policeman in the Community by Michael Banton is viewed as a seminal work in the Anglo-American sociological study of the police.[1] This article – which draws upon and cites a personal dialogue with Banton himself - employs a combination of sociological history, personal biography and textual exegesis to mount an argument about the role of the sacred in police studies and comparative sociology. The history relates to sociology at the London School of Economics (LSE) in the 1950s, from which emerged the first generation of professional sociologists in

Britain. Indeed the LSE plays a central role in the formation of British sociology, as the first institution where sociology was taught.[2] The personal biography and textual analysis are both linked to one member of that generation, Michael Banton. Best known for his extensive work in the area of ethnic and racial studies,[3] Banton is less widely recognized for one of his earlier books, *The Policeman in the Community*, published in 1964. Yet, in the field of police studies, and specifically the sociology of the police, his work is often cited as significant. It has even been seen as marking the inception of the sociological study of the police, where it has been hailed as the 'the first study of policing by an academic social scientist in Britain, and virtually the first in the world'.[4] It has been called a 'pioneering sociological study' and 'a significant starting point for the British police research tradition',[5] and hailed as the book that laid 'one of the foundation stones of the sociology of the police'.[6] Although there was no uniform or unanimous acclaim for it at the time it was published, there is little doubt that subsequent Anglo-American scholars have seen it as an important book, perhaps even a classic.

In the book, Banton drew on the Durkheimian version of sacredness, and the sacred/profane dichotomy, to account for what he saw as the very different attitudes to and status of the police in Britain and in the USA. I trace the theory and method of *The Policeman in the Community* as a way of examining how the idea of sacred status is sociologically produced. My title draws on Law and Urry[7] who advance the view that the social sciences help to make or enact the very worlds they claim to be describing. In particular, they maintain that social research methods are performative in that they have effects and bring into being what they depict. To say that the social sciences produce or 'make up' social worlds does not amount to a denial of reality, or to see it as only an effect of method. Rather reality is a relational effect, which the social sciences contribute to through charting worlds made up of discrete entities. It is my contention that this is what Banton's use of the sacred/profane dichotomy does, and that is what I aim to show here.

Criticisms of Durkheim's conceptualisation of the sacred date back to the publication of the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* itself. It has been questioned on both theoretical and methodological grounds, and some have doubted whether it is of any value at all.[8] Nevertheless, it has proved to be a remarkably resilient idea, recurring in many debates and used as a staple element of teaching in sociology and anthropology. The pre-eminence of the Durkheimian approach has overridden other ways of approaching the sacred, for example through Freudian psychoanalysis and in fields such as critical legal studies.[9] The idea of the sacred as something set apart and inviolable is characteristic of Durkheim's fondness for dichotomization. That is precisely why the sacred/profane has been treated as problematic and as untenable by analysts who argue that it is not a true duality, and some have tried to complete it by drawing on an implicit third category – the mundane.[10]

Following Durkheim, Banton says that he thinks of the socially sacred as 'that which is set apart and treated both as intrinsically good and as dangerous'. He says, 'I speak of sacredness in sociological terms and I refer to the way people behave towards policemen'.[11] The police are set apart by regulations governing private conduct, plus other limitations (for example, involvement in politics). They are intrinsically good because they symbolise social order, but dangerous because people prefer to keep their distance from police officers - they stand in a position akin to the church and the monarchy in Britain. Thus, the sacred is both venerated and feared. Banton directly compares the police officer to a priest: 'while the role of the priest is in a similar fashion set apart and sacralized, its incumbents are perceived as human beings. People like commenting upon the human characteristics and failings of the priests as well as policemen, as if they felt reassured by these signs that they are no different from anyone else'.[12] However, a concern with or an interest in the failings of police officers and of priests may be due to cynicism, or a view of their essentially mundane character. This reinforces the view that the mundane is rationally a third element that cuts across the sacred-profane dichotomy.

Although I suggest later that Banton ends up with a rather ambivalent view of sacredness, generally I am arguing against an interpretation of the sacred derived from his work which has particular implications, even though these not fully explicit in the text itself. Broadly, that reading is one which sees the sacred as something of the past that is being over run by the profane forces of modernity. In police sociology this is more pronounced by others where the police's 'fall from grace' – their politicisation and now mundane rather than sacred status - is a viewed as a consequence of 30 years of social and economic decline.[13] This is characteristic of the 'cultural pessimism' observed by Bennet[14] in which various forms of difference can be seen as, at best, accompanying social decline, or at worst, as the cause of it. It contains a sense that the police (and, emblematically, society itself) have 'fallen' from a semi-golden age of consensus and social integration. This imbues the sacred with nostalgia and makes it seem conservative, antiquated and even anti-modern.

METHOD AND THEORY

To contextualise the discussion of methods and theory in *The Policeman in the Community* and the criticisms made of it, I briefly place the author and the work. Banton has recently described some of his early work and influences.[15] For current purposes, it is useful to add to that only a brief section about his student days. Banton is one of the so-called golden generation of undergraduates from the LSE in the late 1940s who went on to become leading British sociologists. The main chronicler of this cohort and their time at LSE is A.H. Halsey. He says that a 'confused sociological inheritance'[16] was offered to the 1950 graduates. He characterises LSE sociology as a nineteenth century debate between statistical empiricism and evolutionism. Banton too expresses frustration with Morris Ginsberg's Theories and Methods course for concentrating too much on society and biology and leaving little time for Durkheim and Weber. There was little

discussion of Marx. Bulmer[17] points out that people like Ginsberg were more social philosophers than empirical social scientists. Indeed, there was even disdain for empirical research, which was more likely to be found in Anthropology.

At LSE, only Edward Shils emphasised the importance of European social theory, particularly Durkheim and Weber. Halsey comments that Shils, along with David Glass, provided the spur to academic aspiration by conveying the idea that 'sociological research was a living practice as well as a hallowed tradition'.[18] Shils himself pointed out that the post-war cohort were 'the first generation of a real British sociology'.[19] Berating sociologists of the period before, he says they were more interested in societies other than their own, a failing he puts down to an 'inability to embrace the conditions and state of mind of one's fellow man through personal contact and imagination, impelled by curiosity'.[20] Banton also felt the influence of Shils who encouraged him to study anthropology and he notes that, 'As an undergraduate…. I had been attracted by the bottom-up approach in social anthropology and in the field studies of some United States sociologists. Yet most of the teaching in sociology was based on large-scale generalizations about society and relied on a top-down approach'.[21] Perhaps because of the confused inheritance noted by Halsey, the widely discussed analysis of the coronation of the Queen by Shils and Young,[22] which draws on the idea of sacredness, finds no place in Banton. Banton says that though he was aware of Shils' use of the sacred he did not make a connection between that and his study of the police.

Banton says that his research on the police was motivated by a wish to study a relatively closed but nonetheless central institution that had not hitherto been of interest to sociologists. He begins with the observation that, 'Very many people indeed seem to be interested in the police, and the fascination of this occupation must reflect its very central position in our way of life;[23]' it was 'an institution working well', a perhaps telling observation that placed greater weight on the police

role in social integration rather than questions of power and accountability.[24] By the time of its publication in 1964, such issues had become more prominent and there were press stories of police brutality as well as publicity about low levels of police pay, which led to the appointment of a Royal Commission on the police. The Commission's public opinion poll found that 42% of the public thought policemen took bribes and 34% believed that they used unfair methods,[25] neither of which fits the sense of a sacred institution. However, Banton criticises the Commission for relying too much on the public opinion poll, and he set out to produce a sociological account that took a broader outlook.

The approach of the book flows from a view of the police as both a successful and as a closed institution (Banton had been advised that access to the police would be difficult). Alongside the original fieldwork in Scotland in 1960, *The Policeman in the Community* became a comparative study when Banton spent some time teaching at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), which supported short periods of research in North Carolina and in Atlanta, Georgia. If the work was not explicitly planned as a cross-national comparison, Banton does signal that it was a comparative study in other respects. He says that his work is 'a study in occupational sociology... there is no reason to doubt that the comparative study of occupations may reveal many relationships of theoretical interest and of practical significance'.[26] The substantive text, however, makes almost no comparison between the police and other occupations. Two points of possible comparison from the sociology of occupations in Britain would have been the emerging studies of coalminers[27] and of fishermen.[28] While Banton was aware of these studies, he is doubtful whether they would have been significant for his work. Nonetheless, one missed opportunity was a comparison of the degree of isolation of police officers with these other occupations.

The methods employed had the stated aim of collecting basic information on the most visible and accessible parts of the police organisation and to establish what ordinary officers actually did.

Banton says that it seemed sensible to do this because little was known about the police at the time and he felt there was a need for descriptive data to identify the problems. Thus, he tried to 'clarify what the ordinary policeman did most of the time and how he did it.... [and to compile a] systematic examination of the commonplace events of everyday behaviour.' (1964: x) In 1960 he conducted eight group discussions with sergeants at the Scottish Police College, with the aim of exploring 'differences in the social position of policemen working in country districts and the city and to see what effect these differences had upon their job satisfaction'. (1964: xi) Later he interviewed police recruits to 'get some impression of what they expected [of the job]' (1964: xi). Finally there was a study of the organisation of an urban division, which consisted of an activity survey that was undertaken specifically for Banton's research. There was also some observational work, which Banton estimates at about 30 hours in total.[29]

Banton received more 'open-ended' co-operation from police departments in the USA and probably as a result the bulk of his observational research findings relate to that.[30] He estimates the time spent with the US police as around 200-250 hours. While he never refers to this as participant observation, it seems to be the major source of his descriptions of policing in the US chapters rather than interviews or questionnaires. He says, 'At the Scottish Police College I conducted group discussions which were recorded on tape and transcribed. A survey of two days activities was conducted in C division of Edinburgh City Police, as explained on p.12 [of the book] this was specifically for my research. I spent a little while out on patrol with police, perhaps thirty hours in total; I did no formal interviewing of individual policemen either in Scotland or in the USA'. Observation was therefore more extensive in the USA and this undoubtedly shaped Banton's perceptions of the different role and status of the police in the US, especially when compared to the more formal position in Scotland. The particular difference in observational work is significant because it unbalances the methodology and creates a space between the two countries; it is in this space that the sacred emerges.

Banton's findings and experiences with the Scottish police could have led him to terms other than sacredness. For example, they might have been described as 'closed' and the public view of them as 'respected' or 'valued'. Banton does not agree with this view and that is why the much greater observational time spent with US officers is important to my argument. Differences in inter-personal relations between the police and members of the public shaped his view of the sacred/profane character of police work: As he says, 'My impressions of the job's profane character were probably drawn quite a lot from how policemen talked of their office and their attitude towards, e.g., getting a free or a cheap coffee in a cafe. A higher standard was expected of police in Scotland, by both the public and the police themselves because the two sets of expectations interacted'.

Theoretically, role theory was central to the conception of the study (indeed the following year Banton published a book on *Roles*[31]). As we saw in an earlier comment about social position, Banton's orientation was to identify the relationship between private and occupational roles: 'A man's occupation is coming to be the role which most determines his other roles and his position in society. It is often of particular significance for his wife...' (1964: xiii). He draws from this that it is the policeman's participation in society that most effects styles of working. The stress upon roles is twinned with ideas about social control and social density. Social control, Banton argues, depends on more than the police. It relies on many agencies as well as informal controls. 'The only long-term solution to the problem of police discretion is for the police and the public to share the same norms of propriety. Some modern tendencies, as I have indicated earlier, are making this ideal more and more difficult to realize.' (1964: 146) He argues that denser social relations exist in villages and small communities, where greater inter-personal contact also leads to more role definition (for instance, conventions about proper behaviour for married women). Conversely, less dense social relations occur in cities, with less inter-personal contact. Thus,

small communities exert greater social control. Like Durkheim, Banton sees this as stifling because of the narrower role definitions of appropriate behaviour and recognises that the social mobility associated with cities and urbanism creates greater individual autonomy. However, unbounded freedom is just as unattractive as dull restraint. Consequently, this entails an emphasis on the necessity for a moral framework rooted in the values and social bonds of community. In this more 'conservative' sense, Durkheimian sociology appears to be a distinct reaction against the individualism, rationalism and secularism of the enlightenment.[32] Banton's ambivalence about sacredness probably emerges from his sympathy for both sides of the argument, though his conception of social control does indicate a semi-nostalgic appeal to core and coherent shared values and a sense that modernity itself tends to undermine this.

In its somewhat eclectic mixture of orientations and methods the book is probably typical of the social anthropological tradition of the time – a stress upon direct observation and a non-theory led approach – that was noticeable in some of the teaching Banton received at LSE. This, with his interest in roles and sacredness seems to have guided the study in particular directions. It focussed upon officers on the beat, not management ('street cops not suite cops'); of roles, not police-public interactions; and it became an observational study that helped to institute participant-observation as a principal or key method for later studies of the police.[33]

NATION AND DIFFERENCE

The idea of sacredness is essentially derived from a cross-national comparison between Scotland[34] and the USA and the dichotomised view of their social conditions, which in turn shapes forms of police behaviour and public attitudes towards them. To make Banton's dichotomization plain, Table 1 sets out the contrasts he draws between the two nations.

[Table 1 about here]

The characterisations of Scottish and American societies and their consequences for police work are diametrically opposed. It is through this dichotomised view that the sacred operates as way of capturing the differences that Banton observed – working from a key assumption that primary national differences shape corresponding and marked differences in policing. As Banton says: 'The extent to which the British police are regarded, and regard themselves, as different from other institutions is not fully apparent to anyone who knows only the position in Britain and has nothing with which to compare it. I came to feel that the police were a sacred sort of institution in British social life after experiencing the very different situation in the United States…. not only are the British police as an institution somewhat sacred, but the British constable's role seems sacred compared with other occupational roles and compared with that of the patrolman across the Atlantic' (p.237). The relative openness of the USA, especially less deferential attitudes to the police, sets up a series of dualities between it and Scotland: open/closed, disrespectful/deferential, mobile/hierarchical, and all of these can be mapped onto another one: profane/sacred.

Two elements of Table 1 – prestige/status and role definition – are especially significant for the sacred/profane dichotomy. Banton argued that the Scottish police behave impersonally, act deferentially and rely upon 'presence'. Their role is more clearly defined and their authority is based upon accumulated respect and public support/esteem. Control and order are established by a tradition of respect for the police as agents of social control. 'The British constable often finds that he needs to do or say relatively little, the mere presence of the man in the blue uniform being sometimes sufficient to make people stop fighting or to quiet down someone who was highly tensed' (1964: 227). In contrast, police work in the USA is of 'low prestige' and officers cannot rely upon the authority of the badge/the uniform. As they lack unequivocal public support, they also rely on the regular use of violence. Because, or in spite of this, they adopt a more familiar

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and less distant style with the pubic. Because they are less set apart and more likely to mingle freely with the public, this puts them at greater risk of contamination or corruption, and when that occurs it confirms their profane character.[35] In turn, these distinctions in prestige and roles are due to stark differences in population growth as well as more obvious class and racial divisions in the US. This led Banton to maintain that it is more difficult to establish norms of conduct in the US where, furthermore, there is a more individualistic outlook, and a lack of conformity is seen as an expression of that.

In the book, Banton noted that the police objected to the BBC TV series 'Z cars' by claiming that 'because of the importance of their occupation in society it should not be shown in an unfavourable light' (1964: 238). An additional comment made in response to me makes clear that the media itself expressed different attitudes to the police in the US and Britain in ways that also reflect a sacred/profane outlook.

> Possibly the first time I switched on the television in the US I saw a sequence I found difficult to interpret. There were two men in uniform behaving very foolishly and getting into very silly scrapes. After a while I discovered to my surprise that they were supposed to be policemen, and that the programme was entitled 'Car 54 where are you?', the despatchers despairing call to the problem car…. It was an introduction to a totally different set of attitudes. These and similar experiences gave me a different perspective into attitudes in Scotland. My friends and colleagues had thought I would not be allowed to do research on the police; they were untouchable (and research was profaning). The contrast between the pro-police and the anti-police attitudes… was much sharper then than it is now. Ordinary people knew little about the everyday reality of police work. The middle ground between pro and anti has since been filled in, partly through the influence of TV. The first Z cars series started in 1961. When Dixon of Dock Green started I do not

know; I suppose it represented the police as human rather than as sacred.

The lower status of police work in the US is due to the need to convince public bodies to fund policing and assess claims for that against other priorities and concerns. In this, Banton saw some signs that the police in Britain were facing an 'American future' and might become detached from their role as symbols of the public good. His perception is that a growing tendency to regard the police like any other organisation would undermine sacredness.[36] He says that, 'police actions are increasingly subject to interested scrutiny. Police organisation and practice are more and more being examined by rational and commercial standards of efficiency, cost control and personal management' (1964: 241). This trend has a wider import in signalling a creeping profanity spreading towards the centres of society, hitherto insulated from it.

> Institutions like the monarchy and the church in Britain, which epitomise fundamental social values are removed from the ordinary realm of secular evaluation. For example, satire of them or objective study of their effectiveness is often deprecated most strongly. In British society with it stress on order, the police seems to be one of those central institutions; in the United States, with its stress upon progress, private industry moves up in importance, while the police and civil service move down (Banton 1964: 236).

These national differences are a comment on the diverse nature of social solidarities in a small, more traditional and possibly rather conservative country, against a larger and cosmopolitan nation. Banton alludes to the different ways in which the Scottish or British police implicitly subscribe to 'queen and country', seeing themselves as part of the social fabric or 'social glue' that binds the nation. The more regionally or locally based and organised US police lack this identification.[37] Thus, it is unsurprising that the institutions Banton compares the police to are the monarchy and the church that may also be regarded as standing in this quasi-transcendental

position over society. Hence, in Banton and in some later works that share his general orientation, there is an implicit semantic and associative chain that links, on one side, sacredness with the public-the police-the state-social order-high prestige-social cohesion while, on the other hand, the profane is constituted through the private-individualism-the market-business/commerce-lower social integration-lower prestige.

The differences between nations are located in a wider sociological cosmology. In the contrast between Britain and the USA, Banton's account contains traces of the Parsonian interpretation of Durkheim, including a tendency to see correspondences or parallels between the sacred beliefs of simple societies and profane outlook of modern societies. The theoretical problem of the 'neo-Durkheimian ritualist school' is exemplified by Shils and Young's view of the coronation as a sacred affirmation of the value integration and moral cohesion of British society. As Abercrombie et al[38] point out, there is no evidence for the assumed value consensus suggested by Shils and Young and they underestimate political opposition from a class-conscious working class. In Shils and Young's study, terms such as consensus and integration are used loosely and the notion of secular ritual is vague; they do not acknowledge that some rituals may heighten tension and conflict (e.g. a crowd at a football match, or a carnival) rather than create unity.[39] Many of these criticisms could also be applied to Banton's use of the sacred.

As the depiction of the US indicates, the other of sacredness – profanity – is associated with a less integrated and more pluralistic society. For Banton, factors that contribute to cultural secularity are, 'the size of the nation; the rate of social change; the relative inefficiency of some of the social machinery, as reflected in crime and corruption, which discourages any traditionalistic acceptance of the existing order; the variety of minorities with different values; the belief in economic liberalism; the depersonalized nature of many social relations in the big cities; and so forth' (1964: 236). Hence, the sacred is seemingly a characteristic of simple and undifferentiated

societies (a criticism also made of Shils and Young's view of social cohesion). This is the narrative of decline: less homogeneity and the decline of community, tradition, authority and hierarchy are identified as the cause of social discord. This is what endows the sacred with its backward looking quality; it is always seemingly fading away or located in the past. Its downfall is associated with difference and individualism, a less deferential society, and forces such as permissiveness and mediatization.[40]

Since Durkheim was not particularly concerned with how sacredness is acquired or identifying its source, it is understandable that Banton does not pursue these issues either. But it does create a difficulty: where is sacredness located? The quality of sacredness is attributed to a particular occupation – policing, or more accurately, to the public police. In Durkheim, the quality of sacredness is not intrinsic to an object but bestowed by collective forces. Thus, sacredness cannot be linked to policing per se. However, if the police acquire or are bestowed with sacredness because they are symbols of society's regulatory and ordering mechanism, does that mean that other bodies that do this are necessarily also sacred? If sacredness is closely tied to social order, this is clearly problematic in societies where the prevailing order is markedly unequal, especially where the legitimacy of that order is questioned. The paradox here is that Scotland could be argued to be more orderly than the USA, but also as less open to social mobility. So order and legitimacy can conflict, though for Banton it seems clear that the role and perception of the police as sacred is more linked to social order itself. Alternatively, if sacredness is derived from the occupational restrictions placed upon the police (to try to keep them free from corruption) then the quality of sacredness is organisationally or occupationally produced and, in theory, any occupation that places personal restrictions could be sacred.[41] There is therefore room for some doubt about where the sacred is located and what it is derived from. The answers to these doubts are not to be found in Banton, or in a good deal of other sociologies of the police, though Loader and Mulcahy[42] have sought to link it to a sensibility about nation and community.

While there is little or no history in the book, there is an implied, albeit brief, Whig history of British policing that suggests that the pacification of the population and the gradual winning of consent, particularly through their performance on crime, led to the police's increased acceptance and esteem. For Banton, the urban police became more popular as they dealt with a wider range of classes and were no longer seen as just controlling the lower classes: 'A hundred years ago they must have been chiefly concerned with lower-class crime; as they have come to oversee more middle- and upper-class persons they must have been forced into a more classless, separate and 'sacred' position' (1964: 240). The popularity of the police is based on an assumed relation between national character and the police model – i.e. self-control and self-restraint. The police are identified with a consensual society and seen as both causes and guarantors of that. As one critic observes, 'In Banton's (1964) organic community, the police officer was a major contributor to social integration, performing varied functions interdependent with communal survival'.[43] It is a construction of an idealised national character that Banton contributes to orthodox histories, a discourse of consent in which policing is seen as having a 'special symbolic character',[44] with the police as impartial referees and representatives of a congenial, neutral bureaucracy, and as symbols of national unity. Critical and revisionist histories of policing naturally present a very different picture and, consequently, have little or no time for the idea of the sacred, seeing it as little more than a gloss or a veneer. It is a mystique that is either wrapped up in the nature of the occupation, or employed to cloak the role with an apparently special status.

SOCIOLOGICAL ENACTMENT OF THE SACRED

Banton's book has been significant in the sociological study of the police, not least because it begins to identify the particular occupational world view that officers are said to be socialized into and share as an *esprit de corps*. Some of its main elements are an outlook that views 'the job'

as special rather than mundane, a vocation or a calling and not a just a career, and as uniquely risky and dangerous. Along with some of the personal restrictions that Banton noted (though these have changed considerably since the 1960s), this outlook contributes to - or constitutes - a sense of being apart from the rest of society. Features of police talk such as secrecy, telling 'war stories', seeing the public as ingrates, a belief in teamwork and the value of knowing who you can trust are ways in which the police 'narrate' their sense of self- and collective identity These stories are part of the collective fabric that is co-woven by the police, popular fictions and dramas, biographies and 'heroic tales' of Scotland Yard – and my contention is that police sociology should be added to that list. The view that the sacred is bestowed by social collectivities means that Banton (and others) generally have not considered that elements of the culture described may itself be producing or enacting what is seen as distinctive about it – its special or sacred quality. In other words, the feeling of being set apart and having a unique calling could be key ways of capturing the sense of group or occupational identity that police officers take to be their raison d'etre.[45] While it is to Banton's credit to initiate this line of thought and identify what would come to be called police culture, there are at least two difficulties with it. One is that sacredness and studies of police culture share the same problem – how to explain variations in them across time and space. The second is in the construction of the collective, which can all too easily rest upon an assumed or unquestioned 'sameness' that is only revealed when difference (most notably in terms of gender and ethnicity/race) 'enters' the organisation, as if these things were 'outside' at the outset.

In the Durkheimian sense of sacred things as representations fashioned by society itself, the sacred is always a construction. However, if, as I am arguing, a sense of sacredness is produced 'internally' by police officers themselves – and augmented by the observational and ethnographic methods of police sociology - this sets upon its head conventional understandings of the sacred, based on Durkheimian sociology. The sacred in this case would not be something that is

bestowed by the collective conscience on to particular objects (this is how Manning[46] sees it in his analysis of the symbolism of police rituals). It is, rather, a quality that inflects an occupational milieu and is produced by its narration by those inside that environment, or closely linked to or studying it. The observational method that Banton used in part (and which has subsequently employed in numerous ethnographic studies of the police) with all its well-known attendant dangers of 'going native', may itself be a stream for the tales that frame ideas about police culture. The awe and esteem of the symbolic centre that the sacred is associated with might be a product of co-narration by sociologists who help to construct these stories by re-presenting them as the result of having got close to the police and depicting their world view. But what such methods may gain in fidelity and depth of understanding can be paralleled by a loss of perspective. Perhaps a sense of this is evident in the observation that there are other sides to the story which are not present but exist only as a shadowy or ghostly trace. In *The Policeman in the Community,* that other side is the community, which is seen largely through police eyes. Sociologists inevitably take a sceptical and analytical attitude to the stories we hear, and I am not claiming that there is any simple reproduction of police narratives, Analytic attention would be required to the processes by which police and sociological perspectives inter-mingle.

Two final points can be added regarding Banton's use of the sacred. He notes that there exists a view of the police as either angels or devils. This goes beyond the idea that sacred objects are simultaneously venerated and feared since Banton admits that some people saw the police as having fascist leanings and as enemies of the working class. However, this observation did not raise questions for him about their sacred status. The dimension of class begins to trouble the implicit image of a cohesive nation with shared values. It raises issues about conflict and dissensus in Britain that is largely missing from *The Policeman in the Community*. Furthermore, it may be the case that findings based on one city in Scotland cannot be generalised to stand in for the whole of Britain, just as observations made in parts of the US do not represent policing

practices in all of that country. Interestingly, in another reaction to my argument, Banton says that he encountered nothing that fitted the image of the sacred when he moved to Bristol:

> Before I left Scotland for Bristol in 1965 I saw in a TV programme English policemen parading in the station and then being marched out by the sergeant in files to their beats. It seemed very military. The police in England have changed enormously since then but I never encountered anything on arrival in Bristol that fitted with any view of the police as sacred. Rank-and-file hostility towards police management, evident in the humour (e.g. what is the difference between a superintendent and a supermarket trolley? A trolley carries less food and drink but has a mind of its own) has increased, and reports from the Met have reminded me of these tensions as I encountered them in Detroit in 1971.

The ambivalence about the sacred that I have read in Banton is not about the concept itself, or the viability of the sacred/profane dichotomy. Rather, he is concerned with the implications of sacredness for society. He suggests that sacredness is a double-edged sword; while it makes the police a valued national institution, it can also make them too distant from other sections of society. Towards the end of the book, Banton expresses view that the British police may be too socially isolated from the public and that this has negative consequences. These include the sense that they have become a bit too much of a special institution; that chief constables are too independent; that the public is too dependent on the police; that they are too rigid and resistant to organisational change; and that they are averse to and resentful of public criticism. All of this creates a strong sense of 'them' and 'us' and reinforces the sense of a supposedly distinct culture and ethos. In contrast to the sometimes dystopian view of the USA and the Americanisation of British culture, Banton now registers a sense that the US police are more flexible and open. In this broader view, sacredness contributes to, or makes, Britain seem slightly archaic when compared with the USA. The police's seemingly hallowed position signals how relatively closed

the social structure in Britain is and, by extension, how traditional it is, unlike the more modern and meritocratic USA. This is important because it points to a concern that became more pronounced in Britain in the 1960s about widening opportunities for social mobility.

The criticism made of Banton's application of the sacred might be a reason why his use of it in relation to the police has remained somewhat apart from other sociological discussions of sacredness. However, even if that is the case, Banton's work has been influential in setting out a way to conduct sociological studies of the police. Critical approaches to the police and processes of social control tend to see the notion of sacredness as a kind of mystification, serving the interests of particular occupational or social groups. I have also suggested something like this, though I hope not in any simple or functionalist manner. Rather, through an exploration of Banton's methods and theories I have advanced three main arguments. One is that the sociological theorising he drew upon, and particularly the sacred/profane dichotomy, produced the stark dualisms that Banton set out and that such dichotomisation tends to overstate the differences between nations and forms of police conduct. The police sense of themselves as apart from society (whether through a seeming combination of veneration and fear as in Scotland, or because of suspicion about their trustworthiness as in the USA) can only be seen as a expression of the sacred/profane because of the national differences that the work rests upon. But even if that was valid, Banton ultimately expresses a degree of scepticism about the value of sacredness and suggests that a more open and mobile social structure may be preferable, though he does not follow through the consequences of that for policing.

Second, I suggested that his method and especially observation in terms of the time spent on patrol with police officers, helped to fashion a 'cop centred' narrative. Banton's approach set the scene for many subsequent ethnographic studies of police work and from those a perspective about a unique police culture emerged. While questions have been raised about whether the

distinctiveness of that culture has been over-stated, my main point is about method. In particular, I have suggested that the very sense of a unique culture is the product of co-enactment between sociological researchers and police officers in the field and that Banton's influential work set the scene for that.   Finally, I have raised issues about comparative sociology. While I cannot generalise about comparative methods in their entirety, the underlying problem that I have pointed to can be depicted as the 'container' view of society. In this, society is equated with nation and the two are elided in assuming internal sameness and lack of differentiation in the comparison of national entities. Observations of variations in police conduct within and across both the US and Britain would have put the idea of the sacred in a different light, as Banton's comment about policing in Bristol suggests. However, as this is missing from *The Policeman in the Community*, the book does tend to support an interpretation of it in which pluralism and difference are seen as the cause of the decline of the social cohesion possessed by societies with sacred objects. Banton's eventual ambivalence about sacredness shows him edging away from that. In drawing attention to it, I have tried to show that there is cause to be appreciative as well as critical in revisiting a foundational text.

NOTES

[1] M. Banton, *The policeman in the community*, London, Tavistock, 1964. I am indebted to Michael Banton for generously taking the time to answer various queries about his research and for his comments on an earlier version of this paper; some of these have been incorporated into the discussion

[2] M. Bulmer (Ed), *Essays of the history of British sociological research,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985. R. Kent, *A history of British empirical sociology*, Aldershot, Gower, 1981.

[3] For an assessment of his intellectual legacy see R. Barot, 'Reflections on Michael Banton's contribution to race and ethnic studies', *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* 29: 785-96 (2006)

[4] R. Reiner, 'From sacred to profane: the thirty years war of the British police', *Policing and Society*, 5: 121-28 (1995)

[5] R. Reiner, *The politics of the police*, Brighton, Harvester, 1985.

[6] S. Holdaway, 'Culture, race and policy: some themes of the sociology of the police', *Policing and Society*, 5: 109-20 (1995)

[7] J. Law and J. Urry, 'Enacting the social', *Economy and Society*, 33: 390-410 (2004)

[8] WSF Pickering, *Durkheim's sociology of religion*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984.

[9] For a review of some other uses see M. Rosati, 'The making and representation of society', *Journal of Classical Sociology,* 3: 173-196 (2003)

[10] WEH Stanner, 'Reflections on Durkheim and Aboriginal religion', in M. Freedman (Ed) *Social Organization*, London, Frank Cass, 1967.

[11] Banton, 1964, p.237. In referring to police*men*, the book reflects the predominant gender roles and norms of the time it was written. To retain the context of Banton's work I sometimes also refer to policemen

[12] Banton, 1964, p.237

[13] Reiner, 1995. For a more dystopian narrative of decline see R. Reiner, 'Policing a postmodern society' *Modern Law Review*, 55: 761-81 (1992)

[14] O. Bennet, *Cultural pessimism: narratives of decline in the postmodern world*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2001.

[15] M. Banton, 'Finding and correcting my mistakes', *Sociology,* 39: 463-79 (2005)

[16] AH Halsey 'Provincials and professionals', in M. Bulmer (Ed), 1985, p.153

[17] Bulmer (Ed), 1985

[18] Halsey, p.185.

[19] E. Shils, 'On the eve', in M. Bulmer (Ed), 1985, p.171

[20] Shils, p.168-9

[21] Banton, 2005, p.465

[22] E. Shils and M. Young, 'The meaning of the coronation', *Sociological Review*, 1: 63-81 (1953)

[23] Banton, 1964, p.viii-ix

[24] Though he did add that, 'there were already signs which led me to believe that social tensions associated with police-public relations might well be on the increase' (1964: ix). On this point, Banton further notes that, 'I thought the police were working as well as the church, the civil service or the shipbuilding industry…. (I could have added the universities!). I certainly thought that the social isolation of police officers was greater than it needed to be. I had heard stories of chief constables of the county forces who wanted explanations of village policemen if they failed to attend church on Sundays, etc. Of course, I was aware of police accountability as an issue, but thought that would require a different study and a different approach'. This and all following unreferenced statements by Banton have been obtained through personal communication with him in the course of researching this article.

[25] Banton recognises that his research had been based 'chiefly on observation of police conduct in a relatively law-abiding Scottish city and among above-average American police departments.' He says that, 'I have not been able to study what happens in situations where policemen are subject to strain and provocation, and [I] can say little about the sorts of incident that attract newspaper publicity', Banton, 1964, p.xii

[26] Banton, 1964, p.xiii

[27] N. Dennis, F. Henriques, and C. Slaughter, *Coal is our life*, London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1959.

[28] J. Tunstall, *The fishermen*, London, MacGibbon & Kee, 1962

[29] Banton's incomplete account of his methodology probably accounts for some confusion among interpreters of his book. In Manning's overview of police research, he lists interviews, observation and questionnaires as Banton's methods, with observation as the major data source. Manning further distinguishes users of this method between 'active' participants and 'passive' observers, placing Banton in the latter. In discussing sponsorship, funding and legitimation, Manning points out that most studies originated from highly respected universities (he lists MIT among them). P. Manning, 'Observing the police: deviants, respectables and the law' in J.D.Douglas (Ed) *Research on Deviance*, New York, Random House, 1972. However, in revisiting and adding to Manning's table, Reiner, (R. Reiner, 'Assisting with enquiries: problems

of research on the police', *Quantitative Sociology Newsletter*, no.22: 37-67 (1979)), p.40 indicates some differences:

> I have also reclassified his [Manning's] placement of Banton's 1964 book as primarily an observational study. I believe that Manning's judgement must be based on his list being restricted to studies of the <u>American</u> police. Banton's work is a comparative study of the British and American police, and taking it as a whole it is clear that the major data sources were interviews and questionnaires, not observation. (In a personal communication, Michael Banton has concurred with this view.) (Underlining in the original).

In this article, I clarify this further, drawing on Banton's own comments about what time he spent observing the police in Scotland and the USA.

[30] Banton is satisfied that he received the co-operation he sought in Scotland, but he does observe a clear national difference. While US officers invited commentary on what an outsider thought of them, 'in Britain outsiders are not thought to be in any position to pass judgement upon police efficiency', Banton, 1964, p.239.

[31] M. Banton, *Roles: an introduction to the study of social relations*, London, Tavistock, 1965

[32] L. Ray, *Theorizing classical sociology*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 1999

[33] The significance of this point is that only some parts of the police organisation are brought into view through the methods employed. Banton was aware of this at the time and does acknowledge that 'the approach adopted...tends to reflect the police view of public relations and does not adequately explore the attitudes and experiences of different groups within the public', Banton, 1964, p.xii. In a reaction to me, he argues that given the dearth of sociological work on the police it was important to get a study done. For overviews of police research see, P. Manning, *Police Work*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1977, and Reiner, 1979 and 1985.

[34] A surprisingly common aspect of the commentary on the book is the way in which it is read as a study of the English police, or taken to stand in for British policing as a whole despite the fact that the research was clearly conducted in Scotland.

[35] Banton repeats virtually the same formulation while reviewing several books on the police in the *Times Literary Supplement* (22 July 1977, p.889). He observes that the British police rely upon impersonal authority to represent themselves as serving the public good, while the New York police are a product of conflicts that divided people and find it more difficult to be seen as impartial servants.

[36] The duality between the state and the market is a reason why a number of police scholars have characterised the police in quasi-sacred terms to critique neo-liberal, market-driven ideologies towards the public sector. See, B. Forst and P. Manning, *The privatization of policing: two views*, Washington DC, Georgetown University Press, 1999, E. Girling, I. Loader and R. Sparks, *Crime and social change in middle England*, London, Routledge, 2000, I. Loader and A. Mulcahy, *Policing and the condition of England*, Oxford, Clarendon, 2003, as well as Reiner, 1995.

[37] Ironically, it is the supposed localism of the police in Britain – and their autonomy from central government and mundane party politics – that is viewed as the basis of their hard-won legitimacy, see M. Brogden, *The police: autonomy and consent*, London, Academic Press, 1982, and Reiner 1985.

[38] N. Abercrombie, S. Hill, S and B. Turner, *The dominant ideology thesis*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1980

[39] For a discussion of different types of crowd behaviour including peaceful ones, see G. Gaskell and B. Benewick (Eds), *The crowd in contemporary Britain*, London, Sage, 1987

[40] Bennet, 2001

[41] For a view that journalism is a sacred occupation see T. Broddason, 'The sacred side of professional journalism', *European Journal of Communication*, 9: 227-248 (1994). Broddason maintains that occupational sacredness derives from the mysteriousness of exclusive knowledge

and the nobleness of self-sacrifice. He argues that journalists fit this as they can be seen as performing a service of vital and sometimes hazardous need; as working long and irregular hours; and because the media itself performs a socially integrative role. Much of this is of course precisely what is claimed for the police, the monarchy and the church.

[42] Loader and Mulcahy, 2003

[43] Brogden, 1982, p.202

[44] Brogden,, 1982, p.174

[45] Cf. C. Shearing and R. Ericson, 'Culture as figurative action', *British Journal of Sociology*, 42: 481-506 (1991)

[46] Manning, 1977.

TABLE 1 Banton's contrasts between the two nations

Scotland	USA
6% population growth in past 20 years	Population doubled More racially/class divided – so difficult to establish accepted norms of conduct. Plural values; a settler nation
High social density	Lower social density
Police identify with whole system/institution	Police seen in business-like terms
Behaviour associated with role, i.e. expected ways of behaving	Behaviour seen as an expression of individuality rather than performance of a role; conformity is deplored
Social relations occur at a distance – police are socially segregated	Less prestige accorded to police; less segregated police role
Police act impersonally, they behave in role; the uniform acts as a guarantor of status/authority	Police act personally, they are more familiar with people – even friendly; role on the job is less clearly defined
Prestige is accorded to the role; authority is embodied in the uniform	Conduct is less confined
Police act deferentially but rely on 'presence', so little action	Police can not rely on the authority of 'the badge'. More individualistic and non-conforming; fewer laws and regulations governing behaviour
Police find difficulties in mixing socially because this can be tainted by their occupational role; moral rectitude	Private roles are less contaminated by occupational role

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