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POLICE IMAGE AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S ATTITUDE

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Amongst the institutions concerned with social order, the police, whose traditional role is to impose the law and keep the peace, is possibly the most interesting one to study; the direct, constant contacts its members maintain with the public place it in the front rank of such institutions.

By observing how the police are judged, assessed, accepted or rejected, we can see how the acceptance of social constraint is affected by the manner in which it is exercised. At the same time we can observe the more general problem of the police function within the social framework. This is a topical problem at a time when we are witnessing the development of two apparently contradictory phenomena:

- a change in the role of the police, desired both by the authorities or the public and by the police themselves, towards greater emphasis on crime prevention and less on repression, and a broadening of police activities to cover tasks and missions of social and even educational aid;
- criticism, amounting even to stigmatization, of the police institution and its individual members.

The criticism increases in volume and force when voiced by young people in spite of the special efforts made by the representatives

of the law to better the quality and the effects of their contacts with the young. Are these efforts sufficiently developed? Do they bring results? Are they noticed by the young? What in fact is the cause of their animosity towards the police force or its members?

In an attempt to find answers to these questions the "Centre d'Etude de la Délinquance Juvénile" in Brussels has undertaken a study of the police image amongst a sample of Brussels high-school students and a survey on the attitude towards the police and the latter's image amongst a group of young delinquents (2).

The police image amongst young people in Belgium.

A first objective of the "Centre d'Etude de la Délinquance Juvénile" was to study the police image amongst a sample of Belgian high-school students (3). For this, a questionnaire was used with two attitude scales and various questions of opinion.

Since the sample was limited, the following conclusions, in the form of comments, have only an indicational value. These conclusions show that the police image amongst the high-school students of our sample, mostly belonging to the middle class, is somewhat the same as what we know of the police image in public opinion in general.

(2) POTVIN, J.P.; TISSEYRE, C.; "Attitudes des jeunes envers la police", Centre d'Etude de la Délinquance Juvénile, Brussels. To be published around Jan. 1977.

(3) POTVIN, J.P.; "Image de la police chez les jeunes"; CEDJ.; Bruxelles, 1974, 159 p.

These young people recognize the utility and necessity of the police and justify their acceptance of this institution by its role as protector of individuals and society against criminality. They recognize this necessity strongly enough not to oppose an increase in the numbers of police.

The "political" side of the image, connected with the use that might be made of the police by those in power, is absent amongst the majority of the young.

In the view of the young people, apart from road traffic, the main tasks of the police are surveillance and pursuit or arrest of offenders. Therefore, the profession of policeman has its disagreeable and dangerous side and almost all the young people are in favour of the police being armed and of being better paid than they are.

On the other hand, in spite of the many different tasks carried out by the police, young people do not believe that policemen perform any work of a social aid nature amongst the population. They tend only to bear in mind the preventive protection role of the police and the coercive and repressive aspect of its activities.

Further, they think that police surveillance leaves something to be desired, that the police are never there or arrive too late when they are needed, and that on the question of pursuit and arrest they concentrate only on serious affairs and forget about the others, especially when they concern complaints made by the victims of minor offences.

From this largely arises the negative image of police efficiency amongst young people.

They partially explain this lack of efficiency by the lack of professional conscience, incompetence and the low intellectual level of police officers in general. This lack of qualifications, in the opinion of the young, is due largely to low standards of recruiting and training of policemen. The profession is not highly thought of; for many young people, it is a profession which a man goes into when he does not know what else to do.

Police activities are seen as directed essentially towards repression; the behaviour of individual police officers and the contacts one can have with them are seen in the same way.

Young people do not doubt the honesty and integrity of policemen as individuals, but it is towards these same individuals dressed in a uniform and invested with authority that the reproaches are made. In a uniform, the honest man becomes an unjust and indifferent authority.

He is accused of being overbearing, sometimes vulgar, vexatious, inflexible, but above all, of lacking understanding, closed to any communication and to any attempts at explanation or justification, especially when enforcing the law.

He is also accused of undue suspicion and discriminatory behaviour towards certain categories of persons when these persons are not a priori to be suspected more than others of having broken the law. According to the young people, the exaggerated surveillance or even persecution affects mainly hippies or vagabonds (in the opinion of 80% of the young) and youth in general (in the opinion of 50% of the young), whereas only 7% feel that it affects citizens in general.

This opinion of young people on the discriminatory behaviour of the police originates in the identity checks they are sometimes subjected to.

However, according to young people, the hostile attitude of the police is directed especially towards suspects and the guilty, and it is disturbing to note that only 16% of the young persons in our sample did not believe that the police use third-degree methods to obtain confessions.

However, the hostile attitude of the young is mainly restricted to criticism, sometimes dislike or mistrust, but it does not necessarily go as far as constant disparagement or antagonism. It is superficial rather than deep-rooted and the opinion of the young is often shaded with understanding.

Still, they do not seek closer contact with the police: they would refuse, for instance, to have the latter mixing in their educational activities except for such things as teaching the highway code in schools, or to have police officers taking part in their leisure-time activities.

They feel that the police are not qualified for this or they claim that the police would make use of their acceptance by the young in order to keep tabs on them.

In any case, in this study as in others, it appears that the police image is essentially influenced by contacts with the representatives of the law. Amongst young people who have been placed in a victim's situation and have been helped by the police the image has often been seen to improve; amongst young people who has been subjected to identity checks they have considered as harassing, the image deteriorates.

The attitude of young delinquents towards the police in Belgium.

A second objective of the "Centre d'Etude de la Délinquance Juvénile" was to examine the attitude of young delinquents towards the police, measure the influence of the contacts with the representatives of the law on their social integration, and to assess to what extent certain schemes, such as the creation of police youth squads with police-women included, improved the quality of police-delinquent contacts.

To this end, a sample of 60 young delinquents was interviewed. These were young people about 16 years old who had committed one or more serious offences, been arrested and questioned by the police, appeared before a juvenile court and sent to an institution for at least six months.

These were young delinquents in the most classical sense. Most of them were characterized by the following: poor schooling and scholastic failure; attempts to hold a job and failure due to absenteeism, indiscipline, refusal to work ...; a poor socio-economic background; family or educational deprivation or disturbance, and in most cases previous sentencing to some institution or other as a result of administrative measures concerned with parents or minors, or upon parental recommendation, etc.

Essentially, the crimes with which they were officially charged were theft (90%), running away from home (60%), indiscipline (40%), morals (20%), drugs (3%), etc., the most frequent combination being flight from home accompanied by theft.

The young delinquents in our sample had, in general, a good acquaintance with the various squads or divisions of police, even if it concerned such squads or divisions with limited duties. But a good number seemed to consider other professions to be part of the police force, such as prison guards, detectives, inspectors in the big stores, or even judges and magistrates, which points to the fact that certain delinquents do not see a difference between the police and the judiciary, both being involved in the same procedure and both exercising the same repressive functions. This does not imply that the delinquents' image of judges was the same as that of policemen. The police officer came in at the first stage: it was he who arrested them, took their statements and drew up his report

for use by the judges; and the delinquents thought the police charges were the main, if not the only, determining factor in the judge's subsequent decision.

The youngsters' resentment was, therefore aimed at the police officers and not the judges "who had no responsibility for what happened" and who appeared as "secondary" elements whose attitude was governed by what was in the police report. If the judges were described as "good" or "bad" by the young people, it was not because of the decisions they took since such decisions were in a way dictated to them, but because of the impression they had left with the young people of listening to them attentively and understanding them or not.

What appeared more significant in this knowledge the young people had of the various divisions of police was that none of them referred to the juvenile police squads although there were such squads in all the big centres.

Many of our delinquents had in fact been involved with these services but were not aware of it, either because it was usually regular police officers who had arrested and questioned the young offender and it was only afterwards that he had been handed over to the specialized services of juvenile police, or because the members of these services - especially the policewomen - had been perceived as "social investigators" whose duty it was to make an evaluation or social report on him, which he might have experienced many times in his career as a delinquent.

Young people's recognition or lack of recognition of the juvenile police is a problem, as is the way the latter should be used - at what stage should they enter the picture and what should be the task of the officers, some of whom have had training as social assistants and find it hard to reconcile the social aspect of their mission with the repressive one?

The ignorance of the existence of a juvenile police division by the delinquents was confirmed several times during the interviews; they were asked whether they would be in favour of the creation of such a branch of the police and the big majority of them answered in the affirmative. Many of the younger ones and those who had been apprehended for the first time felt that policewomen would be better in this role; the more hardened ones considered that only male police officers should be in the youth services and they should be young themselves, others that they should be chosen amongst the older policemen; to justify their opinion they all referred to actual experiences with policemen or to parental images. They all felt that the juvenile police should differ from the others in being more understanding, less severe, willing to drop charges. In their minds, to be an understanding police officer meant coming to an arrangement with the offender, giving warnings but not starting up the machinery of the law, explaining what they had done wrong but not punishing.

In this connection, most of the delinquents tended to consider their own behaviour excusable and often said they "could not understand why what they had done had been made into something so serious". They rarely saw themselves as fully guilty even if the deeds which had justified their arrest were attempted murder or gang rape for example. They present themselves either as victims of their lack of education or as victims of circumstances, or in the case of theft - even when important and oft-repeated - they easily and it would seem sincerely, justify their "right" to take the vehicles, goods or money they want (stealing from the rich is not really stealing, stealing in a big store does not harm anyone, stealing a car (for joy-riding) cannot be serious since it is returned to its owner eventually, stealing money when they "really need it" is justifiable, etc.) A good policeman who understands young people should let them explain, and try to "understand why" they acted as they did and their misdeeds would then, in their view, be excused.

In confirmation of the fact that the young delinquents do not see themselves as offenders or criminals, it was ascertained that they recognize almost unanimously the utility and necessity of the police institution. No more than other young people, they cannot conceive how one could do without the police; their opinion is justified by the protection the police afford against criminals and criminality.

However, more often than other young people, delinquents bear in mind only those police activities that are connected with repression: their main task is to pursue and arrest offenders, keep an eye on the

young, find runaways, etc. Also, more than the other young people, they express doubts as to police efficiency, on the grounds of the lack of professional conscience amongst police officers and the poor organization of the police service. Their low opinion has its origin mainly in two facts:

- the exaggerated surveillance young people feel they are subjected to in cinemas, dance-halls, bars ... and the numerous identity checks when the police "should be doing more important things ...";
- when "on the run" many young delinquents are not apprehended by the police in spite of "provocative" behaviour on their part. By "provocation" they mean letting the police see them, going up to policemen and engaging them in conversation for no reason. Many young people imagine that because they are on the run all policemen have been alerted and are looking for them. The fact that they are not apprehended immediately, even after an identity check, leads them not only to believe in the inefficiency of the police but reinforces the idea that they can easily commit an offence without being discovered.

The absence of guilt feelings and the poor opinion of police efficiency, no doubt connected with the considerable amount of hidden delinquency, may explain their surprise when they are finally arrested: many of them were not expecting it and resent it as an injustice. They explain that they were caught "through their own fault", "because they made a mistake", "because they had been pushing it too much and in the end they become known", or because someone had told on them. They conclude

that when they are finally arrested the police should at least "give them a chance".

However, though the fact of being arrested is felt to be an injustice, the young people do not necessarily resent the police officers personally for this, admitting that "they have their job to do".

The resentment comes when the arrest takes place in particularly disagreeable circumstances, and their chief reproach concerns the publicity given to the arrests and the assimilation to criminals and "hooligans" (with brutality, threats, sarcasm, insults, intimidation ...). The public array of force (the "black maria", the siren, groups of policemen, guns ...), the public arrest by uniformed police, having handcuffs put on them, have a profound effect on the young, especially if their family or acquaintances are present (neighbours, members of the family, workmates or schoolmates ...).

The delinquent may be so ashamed that, for a long time and throughout his stay in an institution, he wonders how he can ever go back home or appear in front of his workmates when he is freed.

Publication in the local papers of his arrest and the facts surrounding it may have the same effect.

When he leaves the institution where he has been confined, the young delinquent may in fact avoid his old area and haunts and go

directly to places frequented by the underworld where, in spite of himself he will be drawn into a career of delinquency.

We have mentioned the importance the young delinquents attach to the police reports and charges. It is at this stage that they have the impression their future is at stake, hence the importance of the way their first interrogations are perceived and experienced.

The chief complaints of the young delinquents are directed against:

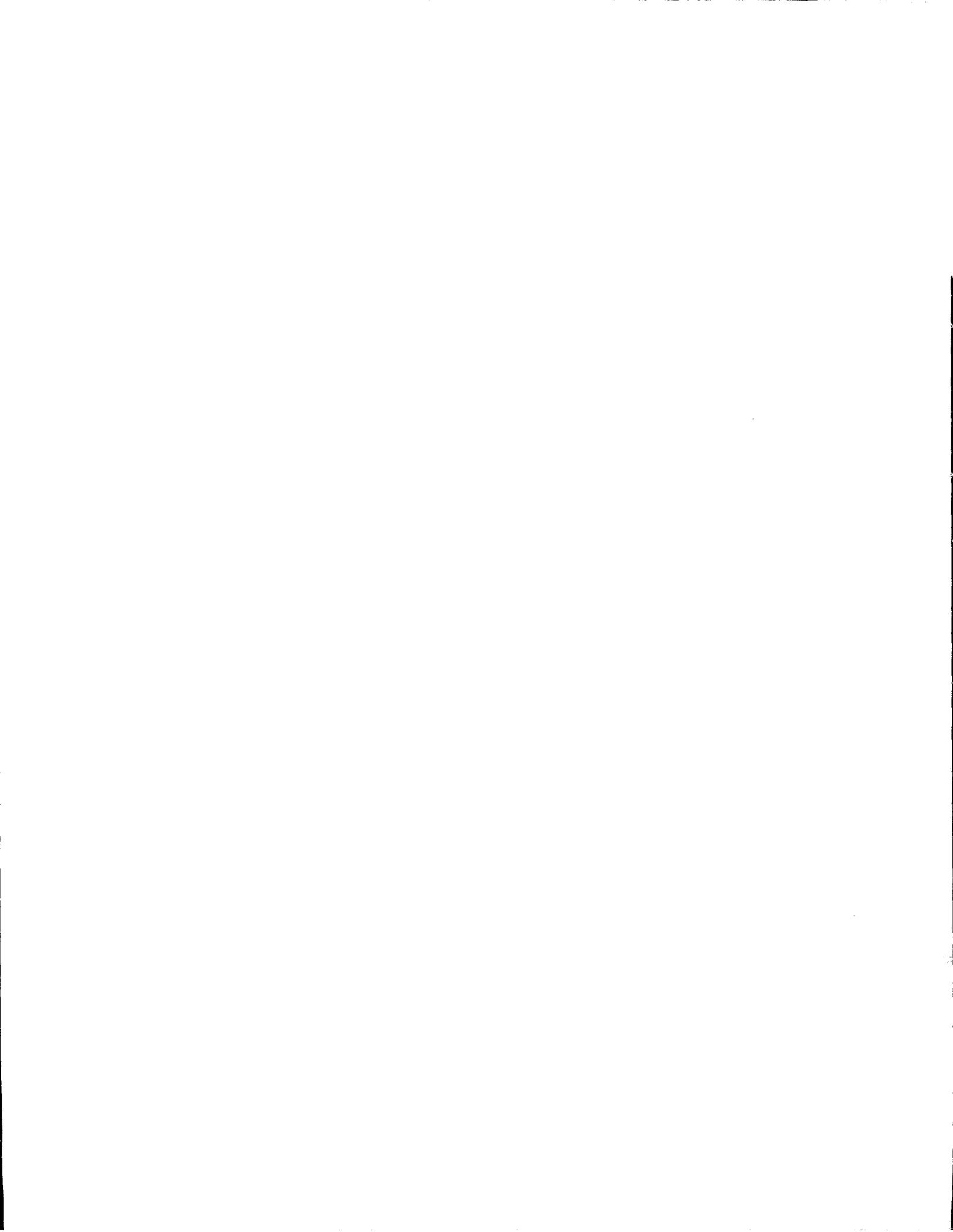
- the waiting period before the questioning which can engender nervous crises, states of despair, feelings of rebellion;
- custody (Which may last 24 hours) during which they are not allowed to communicate with their family;
- blackmail-type behaviour on the part of the police: threats to make them confess (threats of beatings, of having them placed in the worst institutions, of making them "pay for the others"...) or promises that are not kept (promises to release them if they confess...);
- the attempts of some policemen to make them confess to offences they have not committed. Young people often accuse the police of trying to charge them for all the offences for which they have not found a suspect;
- the attempt to make them denounce their friends;

- certain techniques used in the questioning (the police keep repeating the same questions, confront them with other delinquents, use several police officers at one time to question them, tell them that the others have already confessed);

- police brutality. There certainly have been cases where the young have been treated brutally by police officers, but many of them admit that the police only become brutal in response to brutality or provocation on their part. In other cases, it appears that the young, consciously or not, seek "correction" or brutal treatment on the part of the police.

On the other hand, the kindness shown by certain police officers and the understanding they show in their dealings with young people, but especially the impression they give of wanting to help them, are never forgotten and in most cases give good results during the questioning itself. Of course, police kindness can be construed as two-faced ("the police try to soften you up to make you confess more easily") and it is then refused by the young delinquent who adopts, as a result, an aggressive attitude towards his interrogators.

This research will be published next year.



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