

## International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy



## Book Review

### **Emma K Russell (2020) *Queer Histories and the Politics of Policing*. Abingdon: Routledge**

**Jace Valcore**

University of Houston-Downtown, United States

*Queer Histories and the Politics of Policing* is the first in a new series in Queering Criminology and Criminal Justice from Routledge that aims, among other things, “to reinforce the importance of queer and intersectional critiques to criminology more broadly” (Russell 2020, p. ii). Emma K. Russell’s book, which analyzes several significant events in the history of police–LGBTQ community relations, is one large step toward achieving that goal. In her book, Russell (2020) aims to: 1) interrogate changing conceptions of sexual and gender identities, violence, and the state and how these conceptions altered the relationship between policing and LGBTQ rights; 2) illustrate the ability of policing to absorb and “deflect critique, re/form, and maintain power;” and 3) “highlight the need to move beyond simplistic narratives of progress or diagnoses of co-option and deepen our understanding of the complex interplay between policing and sexual citizenship” (pp. 8–9). I believe that Russell has achieved those aims and made a strong and positive contribution to critical queer scholarship. Queer criminologists will find themselves nodding along when they find critiques of hate crime law, the consumerism of pride, and liberal rights frameworks woven throughout the book. Mainstream or administrative criminologists will also find familiar points of discussion, such as the impact of video footage on policing, the notion of ideal victimhood, and the concerns of police legitimacy.

Russell used a critical queer lens and interdisciplinary frameworks to examine the LGBTQ–police histories in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia via archival research, analysis of public documents, and semi-structured interviews with key witnesses and participants. Following the introduction, the book includes a brief history of policing in Australia that emphasizes it originated as and continues to be a settler-colonial project that actively works not only to uphold a heteronormative social order but also to repress gender and sexual diversity. In the middle chapters of the book, Russell critiques and analyzes key historic events not by presenting the version told in the popular press, but by explaining both how police powers are maintained through the narratives they provide and how police legitimacy is orchestrated and regained through superficial means. She discusses and analyzes the Tasty nightclub raid that occurred in August 1994 and the weak, vague apology that was given by Victoria Police and readily accepted by LGBT community leaders 20 years later. She discusses the development and establishment of the Pride March and other gay pride events as locations of contestation among both police and LGBTQ people, primarily because of the increased participation of and surveillance by police. This discussion is punctuated by a critique of former Victoria Police Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon’s decision to march in the 2002 Melbourne Pride March, a first for the country. Russell rightly makes a point to

highlight that the queer community is not monolithic, and while recognizable LGBTQ organizations may actively seek protection and acceptance from police, there are countless queer individuals and groups who remain wary and distrustful of both police and the inherent violence of police work. Similarly, police officers working under a community-oriented commissioner such as Nixon cannot be assumed to share her values or perspectives, as is exemplified by the strong criticisms and complaints Nixon received from her lower ranks.

There are numerous strengths in Russell's presentation and analysis, but the overarching point of the book that will certainly stand out to any reader is how police use their considerable powers to appropriate queer history, negate queer pain, and subsume queer people into the machines of the state that have—for centuries—repressed, ignored, excluded, shamed, and even killed them. Russell shows that police and the LGBTQ community have what amounts to an abusive relationship in which the police attempt to dominate and control the narrative, take credit for the sweat and tears of activists, deny claims of victimhood, and make grand, shallow gestures to attempt to erase their past misdeeds. While similar critiques have been made before, Russell takes her critique to a new level with a thorough qualitative analysis that could not have been achieved using traditional criminological theories or methods.

While Russell utilizes a local case study in Australia, North American and Western European readers will recognize the almost parallel histories we share regarding colonial policing and LGBTQ history and will not be able to shrug and say, "that doesn't apply here." In fact, in light of the active resistance to police violence and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests currently occurring around the globe, this book is extremely timely. All global North countries that share a colonial history also share their present conflicts and tensions with expanding police powers that, couched in community policing measures and proactive policing strategies, appear to be increasing—rather than decreasing—violent and forceful state control of communities and individuals who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC). Queer BIPOC people—including not only trans women Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, who fought back at Stonewall, but also queer activists Alicia Garza and Patrisse Khan-Cullers, who co-founded BLM with Opal Tometi—have led the fight against police oppression in the United States. Russell echoes many scholars and activists when she writes that we cannot hope to solve the systemic issues of homophobia and transphobia with police training; the same argument applies to racism. An even stronger point Russell makes is that police cannot fix their image or situate themselves as benevolent reformers without the labor and cooperation of LGBTQ people and the organizations that represent them. This clearly applies to BLM and their supporters who rightfully demand meaningful, structural reform. It is insufficient for police to point to increased diversity in their ranks, community liaison officers, or rainbow-painted patrol cars and claim they have come so far, while simultaneously refusing to change the practices and culture that over-police and under-serve queer and BIPOC communities.

Throughout her book, Russell repeatedly notes that *some* LGBTQ people have managed to be considered good or respectable in the eyes of the police, while many others continue to be excluded. In chapter 2, she asks, "What is gained and what is foregone when queer identities, practices, desires, and struggles are decentered for a focus on recognition for 'ordinary law-abiding citizens'?" (p. 51). The answer is that lines are drawn so that only white, professional, middle-class, homonormative gays and lesbians are readily viewed as victims or citizens worthy of police protection, while LGBTQ people of color, sex workers, homeless youth, trans women, and other "non-respectable" queers remain criminalized. This critique has been aimed at several mainstream LGBTQ organizations that for years have been more concerned with same-sex marriage and anti-violence campaigns that centered on white, "respectable" gays than ensuring housing, healthcare, and employment protections for the most vulnerable queers. In sum, Russell's book goes beyond the headlines and past the popular stories into the nuance and complexity of LGBTQ-police relations. She ultimately arrives at a similar conclusion as thousands of activists around the globe: it may be time to demilitarize and defund the police and instead invest in community-based responses to harm. The time has come for critical queer criminology and abolitionist perspectives to lead the way.

*Correspondence:* Dr Jace Valcore, Associate Professor, University of Houston-Downtown, 1 Main Street, Suite C.340M, Houston, Texas 77002, United States. Email: [valcorej@uhd.edu](mailto:valcorej@uhd.edu)

*Please cite this book review as:*

Valcore J (2020) Review of *Queer Histories and the Politics of Policing* by Emma K Russell. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 9(4): 212-214. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.1596>

Except where otherwise noted, content in this journal is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). As an open access journal, articles are free to use with proper attribution.  
ISSN: 2202-8005

