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Exploring the Myth of the Bobby and the intrusion of the State into social space

Abstract This paper aims to increase the reader's understanding of how the notion of the 'bobby on the beat' has been elevated to iconic, if not mythical, status within British policing. In doing so, the article utilises the semiotic idea of myth, as conceptualized by Roland Barthes, to explore how through representations of the 'bobby on the beat' police officers have been projected in a more avuncular re-assurering role to a public fearful of crime, which fails to do service to the signifying practices that accompany and embody the visible police patrol. Indeed, police patrol work secures social space for the State and although it does re-assure anxious members of society that their social world is safe and secure, for others, it further illustrates how their social space is fragile and troubled. On another level, the 'bobby' narrative has also been harnessed as part of a broader mythologizing of 'Englishness' and quintessential British characteristics.

Keywords Policing •Semiotics of Social Space • Myth •Roland Barthes

Introduction

In Britain, policing has long held a sacred position within the cultural construction of the nation [34; 35; 39; 47]. This sacredness is epitomised in the image of the British 'bobby on the beat' [39: 1-3]. The 'bobby' has been used in images and official texts to represent an idealised view of policing that in turn has been promoted as a symbol of reassurance for the community at large [34: chapter 3; 39: Chapter 1; 56]. These representations have also been utilised to service a mythological construction of a quintessential British cultural identity. Using the concept of myth, as articulated by Roland Barthes [4], this article attempts to

provide some analysis of this active mythologizing of the British bobby. In doing so, the article argues that the figure of the bobby has been presented in a soft avuncular light, which has elevated the bobby to mythical status that goes beyond just securing public consent for the visible presence of police officers within social spaces.

The article proceeds as follows: Part 1 presents the analytical framework from which the subsequent arguments are rested. Part 2, details how public policing is represented through the prism of the visible foot patrol to provide a descriptive analysis of how the narrative of the 'bobby on the beat' has been constructed and utilised as means of securing legitimacy and consent for policing in the United Kingdom. Using the work of Roland Barthes, part 3 takes the analysis a stage further by moving from simple narrative construction to argue that the 'bobby on the beat' has become so iconic that it has been harnessed as part of the cultural myth of 'Englishness' or 'Britishness'. This mythologizing further strengthens the role of the 'bobby' as a tool to sustain frameworks of legitimacy and consent for policing. [1] Despite the fact attitudinal surveys [for example see, 7; 41] have informed us that the public want to see more 'bobbies on the beat', the paper concludes, that policing remains for some an intrusion into the local social spaces. This increased presence has taken place in unequivocal positive terms of reference and without any serious analytical discussion of their role.

1. A proposed analytical framework

Semiology is a useful tool allows us to examine the continued cultural reproduction of the 'bobby on the beat' and the role the representation of the 'bobby' plays within the policing of

[1] It is the idea of consent and legitimacy that are profound concepts within the discourse of policing. They shape the organisational framework and are interwoven within police practices. From a Durkheimian point of view they are themselves 'sacred' concepts [14].

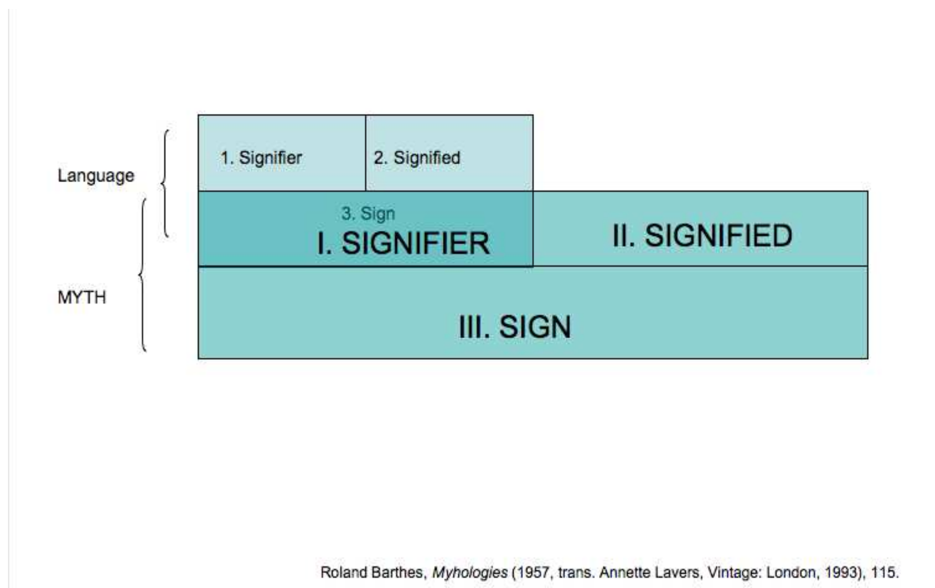
social space. However, before undertaking such an analysis it is necessary to establish an analytical framework from which to proceed.

Broadly, Semiology constitutes a science of signs in terms of how phenomena are signified within social contexts [4]. Semiotics, in this sense, offers an approach for researching and analysing systems cultural meanings. In such contexts, semiotics alerts us to how meaning-making (discussed in more detail below) involves the active use of language and visual images [3]. [2] To paraphrase Manning [36: 25]: 'semiotics is primarily a mode of analysis that seeks to understand how signs perform or convey meaning in context'. In unpacking the idea of meaning-making, semiotics also works to uncover the myths that lie within these processes [44: 69-71]. It is this idea of 'myth' and 'mythologizing' that is the primary concern of this paper.

It is in his work Mythologies [4] where Barthes best conceptualises myth. Here he argues that myth-making is an instrumental part of the broader semiological system. For Barthes [4: 137] myths help describe how any phenomena in society can be presented through language and imagery as natural givens, rather than a result of contingent histories and politics [4: 137]. In supporting the work of Barthes, Woodward [57: 250] observed that myths often work to offer us 'idealised images of perfection to which we should aspire'. Barthes also observed that myths are often de-politicised, objective and are not fixed: 'they come into being, alter, disintegrate, and disappear completely'. [4: 144]. Importantly, as Barthes argued, 'myth is a system of communication, which is a message' and is also part of the 'mode of signification' [4: 131], which is now illustrated in figure 1.

[2] Lidichi [32: 174] has also noted that they can also be 'the mental representation of a thing'.

Fig 1: The 'Tri-dimensional production of Myth



In illustrating how myth is 'tri-dimensional': the subject –has a signifier, a signified and a sign, figure one illustrates how the process of signification produces myth [4]. In this context, the sign is understood in terms of the relationship between or the union of a sign-vehicle (an expression or form such as a word, sound, or coloured light) and the signified - the notion or content conveyed by the sign vehicle [4]. Barthes [4: 138] explained:

> 'it can be seen that in myth there are two semiological systems, one of which is staggered in relation to the other: a linguistic system, the language (or the modes of representation which are assimilated to it), which I shall call the language object, because it is the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system; and myth itself, which I shall call metalanguage, because it is a second language, in which one speaks about the first.'

Signification refers both to the processes by which events, words, behaviours, and objects carry meaning for the members of a given community and to the content they convey. The signification process is one whereby objects communicate certain meanings [36]. Second level signification takes place at the connotative level. In these terms, it is an amplification of the first system (at the denotative level) in prompting us to understand something in certain

terms [4: 140-158]. A phenomena, therefore, is mythologized through the meaning articulated through the process of how the phenomena itself has been signified. Once the concept becomes a signifier of a broader idea, its status as myth becomes its ‘ultra-signification’. In simple terms, phenomena, therefore, have both a literal meaning and a signifying one that both projects and amplifies myth [32: 164].

It is also noteworthy that a Barthesian approach often takes a position grounded in structuralism – the same sign conveying similar meanings to all readers [40]. What is clear though is that signs can be interpreted differently by different audiences [13]. In this sense, people are creative and active subjects. So, even though everything can be taken as a sign [15], the bobby, as will be described here, conveys different meanings to different audiences.

1.2 Representation & Meaning

Before proceeding with analysis, it is perhaps necessary to define two other key concepts: representation and meaning. Firstly, meaning-making involves processing and interpreting cultural symbols, particularly in terms of encoding cultural knowledge and social practices within our cognitive thinking [19]. In this sense, meaning-making embodies the ideological, sociological and the political [19]. For the analysis presented here, meaning-making is an intrinsic part of the mythologizing process at it is embedded within the process of signification (as shown in figure one above). In this context, it is second level signification that classifies and shapes meaning to the phenomena being mythologized. Today, within the context of late-modern society, meaning-making can also take place through advanced mediated communication [see, 5; 8]. We can also take an interpretive view of meaning-making in the sense that meanings can be interpreted differently by different people [19].

Secondly, it is through the process of representation that meanings are produced and re-produced through the use of language, discourse and images at the second level of

signification [19]. [3] Representative practices are the vehicles that significant meanings are carried. The assumption here is that human conduct, by its very nature, is not only expressive but it is also one that is guided by representative practices that articulate and justify institutional practices [19].

The use of representative practices is an essential component in projecting the public image of policing; particularly in the projecting legitimacy. Indeed, policing is an occupation littered with images and texts that instil and consolidate the institutional memory of what their mandate should be about. In this sense, police institutions justify themselves through the use of symbols, images, strap-lines and narratives that promote an idealised image of their mission [36; 37]. In this sense, policing is an interpretive system. Manning [35] took this articulation of discourse a step further in arguing the illusion of order is an essential part of policing and is consolidated via 'organisational-dramaturgical' constructions. Goffman [16] for example argued that all occupations are engaged in idealized forms of their work.

Policing is awash with metaphor and drama [35]. The symbolic actions of the police include, leading the search for missing children, protecting vulnerable adults and solving unaccounted deaths. Consider, for example, how police investigations often start with a media conference. Consent, in this sense, is manufactured through employing the 'rhetoric of control' [37] where deference to police expertise and authority is offered. We should then, not doubt the capacity of the public police to diffuse certain meanings within the fabric of social life and impress them upon the public as an imagined embodiment of the state that refracts the ideals of consent and legitimacy. It is from the need to consolidate these ideals that the myth of the 'bobby' has developed [34].

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[3] For Lemert [1979; cited 36: 30] discourse, 'relies always on non-cultural material and natural (bodily) supports (or signifiers; phonetic signals, graphic marks) to produce cultural ideas (signified).' For Foucault, however, it is better to consider the idea of discourses as systems of knowledge. Overarching discourses such as those of health and education inform social life in society.

2. The social construction of the 'Bobby'

'The *police are the public and the public are the police'*

[An often quoted so called Peelian principle, cited in 26: 35]

This section explores how the narrative of the 'Bobby' has been constructed and how it has come to take a sacred position within UK policing discourse. In the first instance, we can turn to McLaughlin [39] who has previously offered some general analysis on the 'Bobby' and how the narrative of the bobby became located within the broader British cultural psyche. In this sense, he illustrated how the 'bobby' has come to represent one of the key symbols of British policing. In this light, the status of the bobby was celebrated within in post-war English life [34: 3] to become the icon of the so called 'golden age' of police legitimacy and high tide of consent in the 1950s. In this imagined world, the 'bobby' was the reassuring symbol of a safe and tranquil in the world [1: 3]. However, while there has been a perpetual effort to invoke an 'apple pie' golden age of policing [56], the 1950's were also a period of intolerance and parochialism; particularly towards ethnicity, diversity, homosexuality, race and gender relations. Such intolerances were inherent within the informal control methods that pervaded social and public spaces during the period. Therefore, any representative practices that claim the existence of a golden age disguise their conservative origins by appealing to some mythical and nostalgic sense of community. The recollections of Loader and Mulcahy's [34] respondents clearly situate the bobby on the beat at the centre of a 'mythical community'.

For McLaughlin [39: 9] the narration and eulogizing of the British bobby was personified in the iconic character 'Dixon of Dock Green'. In Dixon, we find the 'warm natural humour and common sense' of a friendly and familiar bobby on his beat [39: 14]. As Wakefield [56: 10] argues this image has been unabashedly utilised in policing circles to appeal to the notions of legitimacy and consent and to front the clarion call for more 'bobbies

on the beat'. Indeed, according to McLaughlin and Murji [38] the Dixonian image was promoted by the Police Federation in campaigns that depicted him as the archetypal police officer. For example, Dixon featured in their prominent advertisement in The Guardian on 6 October 1993 opposing the police reforms recommended by the Sheehy Inquiry [cited in 56]. [4] He remains an enduring character within police institutional discourses and policy making circles. Thus, the appeal to the bobby on the beat, underpinned by such narratives casts a long shadow across policing and has collectively driven the idea that policing, as a project, is undertaken with the consent of the public they serve and the idea that police officers in the UK really are 'citizens in uniform' [49]. The creation of the narrative also began right from the foundation of the Metropolitan Police in 1829 [1; 12]. However, doubt has been cast about the originality and even the historical efficacy of Peel's principles themselves. [5] and the accepted view that the police were needed to respond to increased levels of social disorder and were a welcome presence on the streets of London has been historically questioned [53; 54].

As crime and policing took centre stage within public policy in the United Kingdom, recent UK Government administrations renewed their appeal to the reassuring image of the 'bobby on the beat'. Indeed, with the crime victim becoming the focal point of government concerns, the rhetoric of Peel has been a useful tool in the broader appeal to recapture some imagined past. With the avuncular and consensual 'bobby' offering a security blanket for a frightened public, the recent Labour government enhanced the status of the beat officer [23], who they re-cast as a highly skilled specialist deserving of proper training and support [23: 51]. As was noted at the time, it would be the 'police constable who will continue to play the

[4] It was explicitly recommended in the HMIC commissioned report Open All Hours [45] that the police could capitalise on such imagery.

[5] The Home Secretary, Sir Robert Peel, generally recognised as the father of policing, has had a number of policing principles attributed to him. While the nine principles were not penned directly by Peel, they were surmised from some of the many speeches he made by police historians in the twentieth century. They are today regularly described as Peel's Principles and remain at the heart of the conventional policing mission [30].

pivotal, problem-solving role' [25: 51]. [6] For Savage [49] front line police officers were 're-cast' and 're-invented' as forms of 'community leaders' in place of their traditional form as 'Omni-functional generals'.

While alleviating the 'reassurance gap' became synonymous with responding to public demand for 'more visible, accessible and responsive policing' [56: 9], it has not just been about increasing police numbers. It has been about utilising police officers time more efficiently to ensure officers can exert their presence more broadly over different spaces. Moreover, to appease the seemingly and 'almost insatiable demand from the public for a visible policing presence' [42: 160] citizens have been encouraged to become 'active' partners [see, 7]. [7] This vision is captured in one passage from a Home Office white paper:

> 'Having dedicated teams of police officers and community support officers, working in concert with wardens and other members of what is sometimes referred to as the 'extended police family' to provide a visible and accessible presence in communities . We want such teams to develop a genuine sense of being responsible for and 'owning' their local areas. This means the police involving communities in negotiating priorities for action and, together with partners and the communities themselves, finding lasting solutions to local problems'.
>
> [23: 48–9].

Four years later the vision was pursued again:

> 'Effective and responsive local policing of communities is vital to provide a successful police service that delivers what the public needs. It is the bedrock of policing, with patrols that provide visible reassurance to communities, act as a deterrent to criminals and offer a critical way for the public to keep in touch.'
>
> [25: 13]

[6] Along with the development of the National Reassurance Policing Plan [43], the government projected itself a responding to the ubiquitous public demand for more visible police patrols.

[7] While it is clear that we have witnessed, on the one hand, a fragmentation of policing away from the overarching influence of the public police we have also witnessed a countervailing re-appropriation of policing by the public police in new forms [28]. The 'new' visible presence of the public police in local neighbourhoods was manufactured though Neighbourhood Policing Teams (NPTs) entering the stage in 2006 [24].

These are not recent trends, rather they are a re-invigoration of a well-trodden path. Indeed, as Bahn [2 cited in 40: 1093] had previously noted, 'the feeling of security and safety that a citizen experiences when he sees a police officer or patrol car nearby'. Throughout their thirteen year tenure, the Labour administration constantly sought to return public policing back to its 'first principles' of beat, patrol and crime prevention. Yet, the Labour government also transformed the disciplinary and legal framework of police officers. It gave them new powers through the criminalisation of hitherto informally controlled acts of deviance such as Acceptable Behaviour Contracts, Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, Dispersal Orders and Parenting Orders to name but a few. [8] Together, these have skirted the boundaries of consent and human rights by challenging police legitimacy among those parts of the community that might come into contact the police through the implementation of one of these orders. They have also increased the intensification of State control over social space, while the discourse of policing has remained rested upon the political imperatives of legitimacy and consent. In unpacking these concepts further there are a number of factors worthy of our consideration.

2.1. 'Unpacking the Bobby': Policing as an Instrument of the State

In orthodox terms, the discourse of policing by consent legitimises public policing as a public service. Yet, as Manning [37] asserts, the police 'represent the appearance of civil society or governance in everyday life'. In other words the state maintains narratives of policing to keep a hold over the use of force and maintain social order. The analysis of policing as an instrument of state intrusion into social space has been somewhat marginal within the policing literature and has remained within the domain of those influenced by critical

[8] There are also a well-established collection of regulatory measures available for social landlords and estranged partners.

criminology [see 52; 50; 51]. Scraton [50], for example, paid particular attention to how marginalised communities in the UK were policed in the 1980s and in doing so emphasised how the authoritarian character of policing took the form of surveillance and moral discipline [see also, 11; 17], with police officers upholding the moral authoritarian imperatives of the state whilst protected by the thick descriptive shroud of the myth of consent. In short, for critical criminologists the call for more police is based upon a perceived need for a visible sign of order in seemingly orderless communities. There is merit in their arguments, particularly in demonstrating how policing can be transposed onto society to support political imperatives. Today, we see problems arising out of blending intelligence led policing with the gentler approach of reassurance led policing [45].

It was Bittner [6] who identified the conflicts that lie at the centre of the police role in that officers have to manage the maintenance of social order with crime prevention and crime investigation, with conflict prevailing from the integration of these three requirements. But citizens are also active performers and social action is dramaturgical as we adapt to the social contexts we find ourselves in [16]. Therefore, perhaps, it is wrong to overstate their passiveness, even in face of such a pervasive discourse. However, It is perhaps just as important, therefore, to acknowledge that actor's performances (both police and citizen) are enacted within a 'physically and symbolically bounded space' [9].

2.2 The Spatial and temporal aspects of Policing

The narrative of the bobby on the beat has been made physically possible by assigning police officers to a fixed system of beat and patrol [34: 80]. The tactic of beat and patrol is a technique that involves movement around an area for the purpose of observation, inspection or security and one that allocates officers between spatial areas [56: 39]. In practice, the visible patrol holds a certain symbolic power in as it secures social space and territory [22].

As he notes [22: 175]: 'The control of space is a fundamental constituent of social power. In attempting to exercise their power, police officers seek to act territorially, to enact meaningful boundaries to restrict and control the flow of action across space'. Moreover, it is the police who symbolise governmental presence by attending, monitoring and protecting functions of government such as at elections, courts, inaugurations and events that celebrate the cultural uniqueness of society [37]. It is the police who regulate freedom to protest and speech through policing public demonstrations. Therefore, enforcing the idea of police officers as the signifiers of social order and regulators of the behaviour of citizens. Indeed, policing from its inception has involved the 'unprecedented regulation of social space' [39 :3] particularly in working class areas [53]. The problem with this active ownership of social space by police officers is that its make use of social labelling of certain parts of community. As Bittner [6] observed, the role of 'order maintenance' places undue attention upon criminals, deviants, immigrants, young people and other marginalised groups that have become to use Lee's [29] phrase 'police property'.

The debate over the value of police foot patrol has raged, virtually unabated, since the 1960s [56]. According to a British Crime Survey (2002/3) report on public attitudes to criminal justice agencies, 17% of the survey participants thought that patrolling on foot should be the main priority, 15% felt it should be the second priority and 20% ranked it as a third priority [56: 22]. Moreover, participants in the Annual London Survey 2004 indicated, from a list of 28 measures to improve community safety, 'More police around on foot' was ranked highest by a considerable margin, selected by 65% of participants, (MORI, 2005 cited in 60: 22]. However, as Wakefield [56: 10] observed, the public's knowledge about policing is variable and inconsistent, and social survey respondents are frequently asked hypothetical questions about which they have little experience. In addition, as Wakefield [56] rightly points out, whilst foot patrol is generally popular, it is not universally welcome: particularly

amongst some groups where increased foot patrols are seen as threatening and evidence of being over–policed. [9] Yet, beat and patrol remains presented in an avuncular way through the prism of the bobby with increases in patrolling are justified as a response to perceived threats to the 'community'. Therefore, although it does re-assure anxious members of society that their social world is safe and secure, for others, it further illustrates how their social space is fragile and troubled. As social spaces, particularly urban ones, are being subject to intense pressures of limited affordable housing, employment, inward immigration and the pressures of market capitalism [20] and as a result of these pressures, crime and repeat victimisation increase, the fear of crime has becomes heightened. The answer seems to be more intensive policing.[10]

To sum this section, the expressive and continued re-production of the myth of the bobby is aimed at preserving the police mission and mandate through invoking the idea that the bobby represents consent and legitimacy. The unifying theme that one finds within the 'bobby on the beat' narrative is that the appeal to the 'bobby' is a logical response for a more visible police presence demanded by a rise in the fear of crime. The public, in this sense, have been weaned on a narrative that eulogizes the 'bobby on the beat' as a totem of legitimacy and consent. If we delve a little deeper into this narrative we find that the bobby has also taken on a mythical status.

3. From narrative to myth

The powerful representations embodied in narrative of the 'Bobby' have helped elevate it to a mythical status within the sentiments of the British public as part of the broader cultural

[9] There is evidence of lower satisfaction rates among ethnic minority groups and the least affluent and healthy segments of society.
[10] The Coalition Government (in power since 2010) also appears committed to increasing the visibility of policing in local neighbourhoods. For them, the discourse of Robert Peel remains a basis from which their discourse is built to evoke early and continued concerns that policing should be undertaken only with the consent of the people whilst at the same time being committed to cutting funding to police services.

construction of Englishness and Britishness [39]. In turn, this mythologizing has further amplified the notion of legitimacy and consent for policing more broadly. By drawing upon Barthes's work on 'myth' we can examine this proposition.

In a literal sense, the bobby is just a label given to uniformed police officers who are assigned to beat and patrol duties. In Barthesian terms, however, there is a clear difference between this literal meaning and the cultural signification of the Bobby. The Bobby, in this latter sense, has become more than a signifying alibi of policing by consent. The bobby has been elevated to become the iconic image of both policing and 'Britishness'. Newman [cited in 39: 2] argued that the 19th and 20th centuries witnessed a systematic effort to constitute a mythological Englishness. Loader [33] writes that there is something symbolic 'about the relationship between the police and dominant forms of English national identity' that embodies the natural temperament. In this respect, consider the observation that the image of the:

> 'Bobby on the beat' can be found in virtually every tourist gift shop in London in a bewildering number of formats: postcards, key rings, puppets, dolls, teddy bears, coffee mugs, T-shirts all carry this instantly recognizable image of the English police'
>
> [39: 1]

Within these 'gifts' the Bobby is part of a broader cultural narrative representing 'the embodiment of [the English/British] national temperament' [39: 6]. The iconic depiction of the bobby is presented against a backcloth of a nostalgic view of 'England' in the context of a 'mythological sense of shared community and identity' that in turn is powerfully symbolised in the notion of the unarmed 'bobby' [Taylor, 54; cited in 34: 71]. In essence, the bobby refracts the mythological British/English characteristics of fair play, decency, self-restraint,

pragmatism, sense of duty and team spirit [39: 3-7]. The bobby (in his Dixonian image), in such contexts, is seen to be socially responsible and moral incorruptible; quintessential and the ‘epitome of Englishness’ [39: 2]; walking his beat on ‘long hot summer days’, and on the ‘village greens and quiet meadows’ of England [39: 10]. For McLaughlin [39: 2] then, the bobby stands, at ‘the very centre of popular [British] cultural imagination’.

Hawkes [21: 131] noted that myth is a ‘complex system of imagery and beliefs which a society constructs in order to sustain and authenticate its own sense of being’. In Barthesian terms, we can locate ourselves, therefore, as English or British in relation to the image of the bobby. This mythologizing though is presented in a structuralist fashion – in that the bobby that is presented to public as a fixed meaning. As some have also evidenced, the bobby is more symbolic than effective [46; 10] with the avuncular image not always accepted by all. Yet England is simply not England without its Bobbies. If crime is the sign if disorder, violence and social disorganisation, the bobby, on the other hand, is the sign of peace, order and social stability.

The media play an important role here too through actively engaging in promoting a useful fiction about policing through television drama and friendly documentaries, which informs public perception. From a semiotic perspective, these present ‘common-sense’ discourses with regard to policing. Indeed, a recent Daily Mail headline asking ‘Where are all our Bobbies?’ [55] proclaims that one in four Briton have never seen a policeman on the beat. The underlying premise is that most citizens seek the reassuring presence of McLaughlin’s ‘avuncular bobby’ [39: 1-3]. Yet, we can contrast the vision of the quintessential English bobby walking the beat and offering a helping hand to those who require it to the image of ‘menacing teams of officers, unrecognisable in visor, ‘NATO-style’ crash helmets and fire proof overalls, advancing behind transparent shield being banged by drawn truncheons’ [27]. This latter image is also flashed across our screens on an increasingly regular basis. The

recent case of the death of Ian Tomlinson at the G8 summit in London [18] and the 2010 riots [31] provide recent examples. However, such imagery, as Jefferson [27] observed, is seen as ‘un-British’. It is the former image of the ‘Bobby on the Beat’ that remains the culturally significant one and the one that is increasingly mythologized by the media and policy makers alike. The problem that stems from this mythologizing is that an ever amount of social space is given over to crime control. Community responses often echo and amplify the moral panic, particularly in the media of the fear of outsiders increasing in many neighbourhoods. Idealised notions of citizenship and community are often pitched against problematic communities [20]. Put another way, some myths are accentuated- such as the myth of the stranger- and others played down. It is, however, the ‘bobby on the beat’ that remains the iconic figure to assure order and nourish the well-being of the community in an avuncular way. Such intentions of the media were not lost on Barthes. Indeed, he argued what ‘press’ undertake everyday ‘demonstrates that the store of mythical signifiers is inexhaustible’ [4: 151].

It is then, the mythical image of the British police officer as a reassuring, friendly chap in his uniform, in his traditional pointed helmet, unarmed with only his whistle and truncheon to aid him that has becomes an icon of English/Britishness. The bobby is no longer simply a literal image of a police officer he is the very alibi of British stoicism and fair play. The bobby depicted on the postcard or sold as a soft toy in a tourist gift shop has become the symbol of the United Kingdom itself. To become a souvenir, one must identify the bobby as English/British without question. What are the visitors purchasing the icons of the Bobby buying into? The bobby becomes a symbol of Englishness like the rose becomes the symbol of love a romance and lion became the symbol of strength. In Barthesian terms, the original literal meaning becomes distorted [4 : 152]. This distortion is re-inserted back into the discourse of policing with its mythical status amplified for full intent.

4. Conclusion

Drawing the strands of the argument together, the following can be concluded: There is no doubt that that the bobby is a cultural and political symbol of English order and has become the indisputable image of local policing in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, the rhetoric that surrounds the bobby rejects any negative characteristics being attributed to him. Indeed, for more almost four decades, the appeal to the 'bobby on the beat' has driven debates around policing, both in the political and public domain. The need to see more 'bobbies on the beat' is the common cry found right across the United Kingdom [see, 55 for example]. While other policing 'strategies' have come and gone the core notion of the 'bobby on the beat' has endured and continues to ostensibly appeal to the spirit of the 'citizen in uniform'. In this sense, the bobby has become a synecdoche for the role policing has in reassuring a public increasingly insecure about crime. The articulation of so styled 'peelain principles' and the 'bobby' are, however, interpretive practices that are projected onto a complex and multifarious policing landscape. Even when beat and patrol is couched in terms of re-assurance, it remains, according to Herbert [22], about maintaining social order. Moreover, far from being impartial convenors of the law, policing is highly discretional and beholden to both local and national political influences [48]. It is the case then, that when police officers inhabit social space the visual character of this space changes when they are present within it.

Within the discourse of policing little opposition is given to the 'myth'. Myth de-politicises arguments to evince common sense [4 : 168]. Any resistance brought against it is seen as an attack against common sense or set against 'what the public want' and within the myth of the bobby the drama and excess of policing is played down [35]. Essentially, the public simply struggle to decode the difference between reality and myth. Using semiotic based analysis, this article has attempted to develop an exploration of the mythologizing of

bobby in terms of policing social spaces. In this context, the article has sought to produce an analysis that sensitises the reader to how myth is utilised to frame a common-sense approach to justify more invasive policing into social space. There is a positive effect – in terms of engendering security for those in fear of crime – and a negative effect – in terms of a pervasive visual presence for those in fear of further curtailments of civil liberties. Local anxieties about crime are often manipulated to justify more intrusive policing. Moreover, rather than having the consent of all, policing takes place in often diverse and dislocated neighbourhoods where consent is mythologized to justify their presence. This presence is justified through the mythological construction of the bobby; mythologized within the mind's eye of the public to maintain the sacred position of the police in the UK and which needs to be brought under more critical scrutiny.

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