

## Recall This Book 34

June, 2020

Dan Kryder and David Cunningham

John Plotz:

From Brandeis University in quarantine, welcome to *Recall This*, where we assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events. Today, as usual, your hosts are me, John Plotz, and my brilliant colleague and friend Elizabeth Ferry. And our topic today is the long history of the racialization of policing in the United States. And so one of our guests today is also here at quarantined Brandeis, Dan Kryder, professor of politics, and an expert on the racial politics of policing in America. His publications include a 2000 book, *Divided Arsenal: Race in the American State During World War II*, and he has active research projects ongoing on this topic that I think we'll probably hear about today. So Dan welcome. It's really great to have you, and our other guest, David Cunningham, chair of Sociology at Washington University of St. Louis, taught at Brandeis for many years. Um, so he's a virtual Brandeisian, I guess. Um, I'm a huge fan for example, of his 2012--

Elizabeth Ferry:

--a virtual Brandeisian who's virtual--

John:

Virtually a virtual Brandeisian, yeah. And a virtuous one to boot. I'm a huge fan of his 2012 *Klansville USA: The Rise and Fall of the Civil Rights Era Klu Klux Klan*, and his ongoing research includes the organization, and enforcement of segregation under Jim Crow, enduring legacies of racist violence, policing of organized white supremacy. And also, and I think this is germane for our attempt to establish a bridge over 50 years, he's also interested in the recent wave of conflicts around Confederate monuments and other sites of contested memory. So, David, welcome back to Brandeis. So you guys, we asked you here to explore this massive topic at a moment, obviously, of upheaval and a moment that will have already changed between the time that we're taping this conversation in early June and when it comes on the air.

So, let me just ask you like an easy question to start off: let's talk about the origins of police and police forces and policing in the United States. Is there a distinctly American story, one that's based in race and slavery, or is it a story that's the rise of police and policing in the industrialized first world? So yeah, I see Dan pointing at Dave.

David Cunningham:

This is a distinctly American story, but with overlap to other colonial states and various nations in that sense. I think the two main models that lead to the origins of policing the US, in the North, we tend to see, uh, policing as emerging as pseudo-organized militias in effect. So moving out of a more civic model where policing was community-based and in a literal sense, and didn't have necessarily direct state capacity, it was an effort to kind of rein in that impetus and tie it directly to the state. And in the South, that same impetus was organized around enslavement. And so the idea of the slave patrols leading into the origins of policing regionally, was certainly true. And so, especially in the South, but also in the North, we do see this direct relationship between race and racial control and the very origins of policing in the US.

John:

Dan, is there anything you'd like to add to that, or...?

Dan Kryder:

I think that's quite right. And I guess I would also just scale back even further to note that our constitutional system said nothing about policing and it basically allowed our infinite number of political localities to invent appropriate modes of social control that fit local political economy. So we really have, uh, an extraordinary patchwork of decentralized local stories, that are kind of reflective of local social formation. So this is a country that is pretty much on the extreme end of decentralized policing. And what it's allowed for is a great deal of variation and distinctiveness in terms of local police forces, who are all, I think, attempting to exert social control over what turned out to be a kind of rapacious capitalism, that created really deep structures of

inequality. Um, and how localities worked out that problem over the decades are very distinctive I think.

John:

So back when I was a graduate student, back when I had hair, I worked a lot on 19th century labor protests, and the guys that I worked on, the Chartists and I say *the guys* advisedly, they had a kind of class-based account of policing. They saw police as very distinctly the tool of the upper class to control working-class large-scale unruliness. I guess the question is something like, you know, David, you made a point about distinguishing the North and the South, right. Is the distinction between the North and the South as simple as that in the North, you get that kind of class-based policing and in the South, you get race-based policing? Or is the decentralization you're describing meaning it's a more complicated picture than that?

David:

I mean, I might say there there's some of that character, but in a lot of ways, it's more complicated by a couple of things going on in the US and one of them is going to be the pervasive, entrenched, and still obviously present reality of racial, residential segregation in Northern, especially urban areas, and having an all-white police force in most cases. And that can become a complicated story as we move into the 20th century. And I know Dan knows a lot about that kind of shift, but when you have an all-white police force and you have strongly segregated neighborhoods, you certainly...one of the things that attenuates against just thinking about class is that originally--and again, there was a move by mid century in the 20th century away from this--but originally police tended to be from the neighborhoods that they policed, and the exception to that would be African American neighborhoods. So that would be the one space where you'd see basically policing by outsiders. And so even if there would have been a baseline kind of class distinction, what you often saw were working-class cops in effect policing, working class white neighborhoods as insiders, but extending that policing also to segregated black neighborhoods in ways where they were in effect occupying those neighborhoods in ways that we see direct parallels to today.

Dan:

I do think that the Sixties are a touchstone: they contain kind of the most recent major wave of urban unrest/rebellion and the most recent major wave of kind of police violence and police rioting. And so for me, it's just interesting to look back at the late Sixties and to look back at the way that the federal government in particular tried to understand them. I've had another look at the Kerner Commission report, um, that was launched in 1967. And I think what strikes me actually are the number of really significant differences between that phase of social conflict and the current one. But again, you know, we don't see these kinds of major waves very often in American political history. What we're seeing now is distinctive in the sense that we're seeing simultaneous demonstrations across scores of American cities, maybe even hundreds of American cities, large and small. That's not what we saw in the 1960s.

They're relatively peaceful and nonviolent. They are political demonstrations. They tend not to be creating a great deal of property damage, which was so characteristic of the social conflict in the late 1960s. As many people have pointed out there also include a much more mixed populations in terms of race and ethnicity, that these are multiracial crowds and they have political motives and political and political concrete demands. And to me, they are much more sophisticated as political organizations. And so I'm struck by how sophisticated they are politically and the promise that carries for actual real reform.

Elizabeth:

It also seems that--and this is just my own impression and not, not a scholarly observation--but it seems not only that the protests are more widespread and more multi-racial, but they're also protests in places that are almost entirely white about Black Lives Matter. And that seems very different, right? That you can imagine, you can see at least some moments within the Sixties where there are kind of cross racial alliances even if those break down because probably because white people, when it really comes push comes to shove, they, they back off, or they don't follow through. But I don't know that you saw, or it seems like you didn't see, you know, rural, you know, California towns and, you know, little Lexington, Massachusetts, and other places like that having a lot of protests so that seems very, very different.

David:

Yeah, the pervasiveness of these across these kinds of communities, I find really amazing. And I appreciate Dan mentioning it that way as well, because it's, it's heartening to see on the one hand, but really jarring. You know, there, there are places and I don't need to name the specific ones, but St. Louis is certainly an area where the city is heavily African American. The counties have grown up to basically dwarf the city in population. So the metro St Louis area, the city is probably about 10% of the overall population. So it's really dwarfed by the surrounding suburbs and kind of more rural exurbs beyond that. But some of those exurban areas are, you know, really seeing, you know, these are deep red areas and really seen as Trump country in a lot of ways-- white flight would be a simple way to kind of think about why they've grown so quickly. You really see them as, as conservative almost, uh, hegemonically white areas. And just two days ago, there was a protest out in the county there, and there were 2 or 3000 people there. A lot of the organizers had come from the city, but the crowd was largely white, but not sort of white centrist liberal. It was kind of white what you'd see as, as conservative. And so the pervasiveness of this is really incredible.

John:

How do you guys interpret that? I mean, is that, does that have to do with access to media that allows people to see stories that aren't direct impact on their lives, but nonetheless sort of speak to their conception of what the country should be doing? Is it, I don't know what....?

Elizabeth:

Everyone's really bored of staying inside?

Dan:

Maybe. I mean, I think, gosh, it's, so it's such a complicated phenomenon, um, that, and we're really sort of at the front end of it I think. So I'm really hesitant to, to draw too many conclusions about it, but I, but I guess I do think that that the movement for black lives over the last, um, six, seven years has made a substantial progress in focusing attention on this issue and have done so in a kind of consistent and, and consistent and coherent way. The other thing is that, you know, we've simply not improved very much of the chronic problem of police violence. And so these incidents are recurring in almost a regular

fashion. And this last one with George Floyd was so egregious and so cruel and so banal and so, um, so visually, uh, degrading that, I think it had a mobilizing effect independent of all the other factors.

And then the last thing I would point to is I do think there is a really major role that Trump has played in kind of creating the conditions that have brought this forth on sort of both sides of the coin. That is in essentially rolling back Obama era Department of Justice oversight on the one hand in using inflammatory rhetoric and hateful rhetoric in ways that have made racial hatred, more permissible. But also in kind of stoking, I think a counter movement among Black Americans and sympathetic white Americans to, to demand some decent fairness in the way that police deal with minorities in American cities. David, I'm not sure what you think about this.

David:

I would certainly agree with what you're saying about the Trump effect in this case. And, you know, I've always seen it as we think about Trump as a polarizing figure, literally when we think about the electorate. And that's usually what we think of as people who might've been closer to the center have moved, you know, uh, sharply rightward. But the other thing that's happened as part of that dynamic is it's taken away kind of the pressure valve of the middle, you know, one could imagine in almost any other time, if we had even the exceptionally degrading event, as you mentioned with, with the George Floyd killing to have a national leader step in and basically chart a middle path, like to condemn the act and to say something that might be palatable to a broad section of the middle that would create a whole different dynamic here.

And in the absence of that, basically everyone has to take a position. You know, this is not the sort of event where you can kind of sit back and be neutral, and basically Trump's taken away the entire middle ground. You're either going to, uh, be unwilling to say that this is problematic, or you're going to be saying "Black Lives Matter," which is something that a lot of these people probably would not be saying giving a more centrist alternative, because one of the things that happens absent the national oversight are it really comes down to local municipalities and local leaders trying to reign in police. And what we see locally that is not as present, when you think of national level leavers, are the strength of police unions, which are just really dominate, um, local politics in a lot of places. The *New York Times* just yesterday had a big front-page story about, about the power of police unions. St. Louis it's really

amazing where the police union [has] become a mouthpiece for an exaggerated Trump-like rhetoric in every sort of fashion, to the extent to which there is a parallel police union called the Ethical Society of Police that largely represents African American officers in the city. You know, it's not explicitly racialized, but basically they're very clear that they support civil rights and police acting in a way that preserve civil rights.

John:

Are they a union too, David? You're saying you could join either union depending on--

David:

Join one or the other, um, I guess presumably you could join both, but they're really oppositional to each other. And I just recommend, you know, follow these two groups on Twitter because they go after each other, the Ethical Society will come flat out and say that the police union is racist in St. Louis, and they'll have all this evidence to back that up. And so not only are these dual unions they're explicitly and publicly in opposition to each other. Um, but the issue is that the main longstanding union here has a lot of power and influence in, in a lobbying sense and in a pressure sense over, uh, local political leaders. And so when you don't have a department of justice who can kind of come in and create a counterbalance, it's really difficult to reign in the police in the presence of the unions.

Dan:

And you can almost see people's minds changing in real time. And I see this in some white male athletes like Drew Brees or Joey Votto, the baseball player.

John:

Right? The NFL is an interesting place to look for sure. Well, can I connect that to the point that David, you were making about the whiteness of many of the crowds? One thing that really struck me, I think I saw this in 538, but I've also seen it reported in the *New York Times* is the shift in racial attitudes among white Democrats, like, which, and I'm not sure whether we understand that as formerly racist, white—racist whites who used to vote for the Democratic party are now going to the Republican party? But even in the last decade, the

numbers of white Democrats who would agree with a statement like “the justice system in America is systematically biased against African-Americans” has gone from like 50% to 85%. And I guess that's goes to my question about realignment, like where I feel like there's both an optimistic and the cynical view of that kind of realignment like Thomas Piketty, his latest book gives us kind of the cynical view, which is to say that the Democratic party is like now the Brahman educated party. And so that's the realignment that reflects economic interest underneath, but maybe a more optimistic view would be like, David, what you were describing of, and your point about small town demonstrations, Elizabeth would be like, well, actually lots of white Americans are now understanding systemic racism as part of their problem. Like something they want to solve.

Elizabeth:

Well, or they're they think they're understanding it this week anyway. I'm hesitant to see where this can go.

John:

But Elizabeth, those poll numbers are more sustained than that. I mean, you're right. I totally agree with about going out. You're right. Standing on a street corner is one thing, but I do, but it does feel like the poll numbers are meaningful in terms of what Democrats think they're supporting.

Elizabeth:

I hear that.

David:

Yeah. I feel like this next period that we're going to enter is going to be hugely important. I mean, in part it's going to be electorally important as we move towards November, certainly. And so those poll numbers could suggest some movement in the middle. But you know, in terms of the rhetoric that we're hearing now in unexpected places, what that will actually look like when it develops, I mean, it's one thing that I think the, this is entirely not systematic, but it seems to me that the proportion of the population willing to invoke the



term *systemic racism* has drastically increased over the last few weeks. And you know, once we get to a point where invoking that is not solely about expressing opposition or largely about expressing opposition to kind of public degrading violence against people of color, but actually is about the, addressing the systemic part of that, which runs much deeper. And, you know, the kind of community I mentioned earlier, pretty quickly you can run a line from police violence to understanding why the population of their community increased five-fold over a decade, as it aligned with school desegregation policies and various things. And it's pretty clear that it won't take that long for people to have to, if they're going to continue with the shift in attitudes, really reckon with things that they've seen as really sensible decisions that, that they, and people like them have made.

Elizabeth:

And that have benefited them at the expense of other people.

David:

Exactly. And so I think that's a very different thing to get an acknowledgement and a reckoning with that than expressing opposition to these acts of police violence. And, you know, it'll be interesting to see whether it can move to that next step, but that seems to me to be the real key, if we're thinking systemically about change.

John:

Yeah. Well Dave, can I ask you to talk a little bit, I mean, if, if it seems germane, you know, you've been working in Missouri, so that's an interesting place to be working on Confederate monuments and sites of contested memory. So do you, do you have a report there? Is that a kind of a polarized discussion or do you see movement that you wouldn't expect to see?

David:

Yeah. I mean, it's an interesting question in the sense, you know, Missouri is a border state and has a very complicated orientation to the Civil War. Um, so it was a slave state, but it, uh, formerly was on the side of the Union, but really it was in practice was the, the place where there were, uh, hundreds of gorilla skirmishes, because there were so many people on both sides of the issue. Um,

St. Louis is a real outlier in that case. It was kind of the Union stronghold, the largest Union armory certainly West of the Mississippi, ( I'm not sure how much beyond that) was in st. Louis. And it was sort of seen as the, most strongly unionists space in Missouri. So being where I'm sitting is, is not quite representative, but I will say that there was a 31-foot-tall Confederate monument about a mile from my house in Forest Park, which is the large park about the size of central park in St. Louis. That was taken down in 2017. Um, it was an interesting moment in the sense that there really wasn't....it took about eight months of calls back and forth, and there were a set of protests and counter protests around it. But the, uh, and it's a more complicated story, but the upshot of it is that the monument was removed--and it very quickly evaporated from public discourse. And actually some colleagues of mine and I have a paper coming out later this year about how the, sort of the form of a recontextualization of Confederate objects shapes the degree to which it kind of impacts discourse in those communities afterwards. And St. Louis has kind of a canonical case of just a pure removal of an object creating kind of a vacuum in terms of discussing what it meant for it to be there for over a hundred years in that community. So St. Louis has been very good at sort of moving as they would see moving past this issue and not really reckoning with the fact of why it was put up and why it was defended in past decades and all.

Dan:

Yeah, it's such a complex question. I mean, another very striking set of images from these events to me is to see so many examples of police officers taking a knee themselves, um, which is just really unimaginable to me even 12 months ago. I do think there is now (and on the other hand, other police officers apparently resigning in protest in the face of certain kinds of indictments) there seems to be a little bit more space for, um, for police officers to act with agency right now. That's in other words, kind of breaking apart that blue line and allowing for individual preferences to reveal themselves. I don't know the answer to your question. I've done research on the longer term that it shows to me that, um, demonstrates to me any way that, that the appointment of black police historically was often a very instrumental decision made by city officials, white city officials to basically improve the efficiency of local policing in black neighborhoods.

And so, um, so it's a, it's a kind of a double-edge story of the advancement of individual black, um, men, usually to positions of real prestige and respect. But

also it's clearly an instrumental decision to improve, um, methods of social control in big cities, um, because white cops simply weren't effective in creating relationships that produce valuable information, creating the kind of minimal amount of trust that, uh, police require to police crime and so on. So, I would fall back on, on the observation that the different police forces really vary in this regard, depending on local sort of local conditions and local practices, and one other really major difference it's to me from, uh, the 1960s to today is now the presence of really a whole legion of Black local officials who have real power in cities and who have real power in city councils. And that's also something that really wasn't common in the late sixties yet. So, um, it's, it's another factor that I think should lead us to be more optimistic about the role that black officials are going to play going forward.

David:

When we think about police in this way, too, we think about the kind of system that surrounds them as well. If we think about how the broader criminal justice or legal system works in these places, you see how the culture of the police is really deeply intertwined in these ways. And another story that relates to the area that I'm sitting right now that seemed really telling is, well, we had the, a police union dynamic I described earlier here, we have these dual unions. St. Louis was also part of the movement from 2018 to elect predominantly women of color, predominantly Black women into a really influential, uh, city attorney positions.

John:

Rachel Rollins in Boston.

David:

And exactly the analog here would be Kimberly Gardener was elected in St. Louis here, and, and then Wesley Bell who was elected in the County. And so Wesley Bell defeated Bob McCullough. And why people remember Bob McCullough was, he was the attorney involved in all of the grand jury proceedings around Ferguson and the murder of Michael Brown. And so he had an absolutely notorious reputation nationally, as well as in this area. He also has a very complicated, personal story where his father was, had been a long-time cop in St. Louis and was, uh, killed on duty while being on duty. So he had this family story that was really about thinking about police violence

from the other side, as it related to his father. So it was, it, it was a really complicated story, but Wesley Bell through amazing organizing efforts predominantly in the African-American community defeats him in 2018. What we see under that though, is his office of almost entirely white attorneys in his office, uh, leave the current County union and join the predominantly white St. Louis city police union that I mentioned earlier, um, after Wesley Bell comes in.

And so you see this idea of what is the culture of this office, who do they see as representing them and who do they see themselves as representing, and then who do they want to be their protectors when something happened? And so I feel like that while not a police story is really important because we see this whole interconnected web, and these levers of power, the police being one of them. But we also see how involved and complicated it becomes and how entrenched a culture can be even when individual personnel can shift in and out of these things.

John:

Yeah. Thanks. That's a great point to maybe pivot to Recallable Books, cause that really helps us see, you know, how important it is to pan back out from any one sort of shard at the moment. Yeah, I appreciate that. So, um, can I ask you guys: Recallable Books is the segment in our show where we talk about other things that, you know, if this is the sort of conversation you like to hear, what are the books that would want to read that would allow you to sort of continue to think this through? Um, so I don't know, David, do you want to start us off?

David:

I can start because I think it follows pretty closely to the point that I was just making. Um, and the historian at Harvard, Walter Johnson just released a book about a month ago called *The Broken Heart of America*. It's very much about St. Louis. The subtitle is '*St. Louis and the violent history of the United States.*' But what Johnson really does is he uses St. Louis as a particular place where these lines that we see all over the country, especially in urban areas all over the country are very, maybe exceptionally starkly drawn. So St. Louis becomes really a case that's emblematic of these dynamics that we see everywhere. Um, but what I love about this book and what he does really effectively is he tells a story and the police are not surprisingly really primary actors within the

story. Um, but he tells a story that is truly systemic, where he begins in the 18th century and moves through the history of St. Louis in a way where to understand the police or to understand the courts or any institution that we might pull out of here, what you realize is that it's all of this part of this broader constellation, and you can't isolate one aspect of it and say, we're explaining what's going on. And so this book really wonderfully kind of builds that galaxy in a way that you see that interconnectedness.

John:

Awesome. Thank you so much. Dan.

Dan:

Well, for me, I guess my, my two ideas also deal with the problem of the broken heart of America, but in a different way. And I go back to James Baldwin and *The Fire Next Time* and its first essay. Um, we as social scientists and historians are so analytically oriented and we want to understand causes and effects, but Baldwin, I think, has always been to me, someone who, even in the moment, which must've been so deeply hostile in ways we can't imagine was able somehow to talk about, use words, to talk about the humanity of, um, of Americans and African Americans in particular and the broken heart of this nation. Um, in a way that I think is worth, um, revisiting and by extension Ta-Nehisi Coates, his book, um, gosh, the title is now escaping--

Elizabeth:

*Between The World and Me*

Dan:

Exactly... is a kind of updated version, utakes this similar kind of essay form that he wrote for his son in this case. I, those two seem to me to be really irreplaceable perspectives on remembering what this is really all about.

John:

That's great. Um, well, thank you guys so much. You've given us a ton to think about. I was so convinced we were going to solve the problem of, uh, race in American policing and, and, uh, in this hour, but I guess we have to push it

over. Maybe, maybe when we have you guys back, we can come back for the solution, you know? Um, so Elizabeth, any thoughts, any parting thoughts here or, uh,

Elizabeth:

Uh, no, but, uh, just to thank both, uh, David and Dan for joining us and to say that, uh, we hope to have a sequel on global policing with, um, anthropologist, Hayal Akarsu and that will be coming up in the future as well.

Dan:

It's been a pleasure.

David:

Thank you.

John:

Great. So I will just say that Recall This Book is hosted today and always by John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry with music by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy sound editing by Claire Ogden and website design and social media by Kaliska Ross. And we always want to hear from you with your comments, criticisms, or suggestions for future episodes. Um, and if you enjoyed today's show, or if you didn't, please be sure to write a review or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts, you might want to check out other conversations we've had over the last few weeks, including with Ben Fountain, who also talked about James Baldwin, with Samuel Delany, Zadie Smith and the science-fiction novelist Cixin Liu. So thank you so much, David and Dan, and thank you all for listening.