Twitter Thread by Claire Berlinski.



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Some preliminary thoughts and questions about policing. All thoughts welcome, but especially thoughts from professional police officers, criminologists, sociologists, and people who've studied policing around the world:

I take as given that we need the police and will need them so long as the human species remains recognizably human. For any population x, some percentage will be dangerous predators, and without the police, we'll all be the prey.

We need the police. In principle, everyone should feel grateful to the men and women who do the difficult and dangerous work of finding and apprehending predators and bringing them before a court of law.

Yet in practice, it seems there's an immense public uneasiness with the police that it by no means confined to the US. The attacks on the police yesterday in France shocked and disgusted me. There's no possible justification for it.

Yet it's important to understand what the perpetrators were telling themselves about why they sought to kill the men who in principle protect them. The scenes represented a breakdown of some kind in both public trust and public discipline.

I don't understand it yet. I want to understand it. Meanwhile, we're seeing reports both of egregious police brutality and widespread, sustained protests around the world: in Nigeria, with the #EndSars movement; in India; many other places.

I want to understand whether it makes sense to look at these disparate phenomena as related: Are these "policing" problems, or "state violence" problems, or "culture" problems?

I particularly want to speak to police professionals who've had success in preventing the kind of scene we saw in France yesterday *before it starts.* Is it possible? Can it be done? How do you do it? What legal regime needs to be in place?

An Italian friend pointed out to me that casseurs *don't* regularly destroy Italian cities. I thought that was like the dog that didn't bark: Why don't they? Is it because Italy has no Black Blocs? Is it because the police have infiltrated and somehow neutralized them?

Is it because Italy doesn't have a mass-protest culture, and therefore there's no real opportunity for them to take advantage of protests to do what they do everywhere else?

The Black Blocs are a transnational problem. Learning how other countries have dealt with them would surely be useful. It's critical not only because (obviously) they can't be allowed repeatedly to destroy life and property,

but because they've become a threat to freedom of assembly: If 2-5 percent of peaceful protests devolve into a mêlée because the Black Blocs keep showing up and burning everything, the protesters become tarred by association and protesting becomes dangerous.

The violence in Paris yesterday didn't just injure the police, obviously. Demonstrators, journalists, and passersby were injured. One journalist--a Syrian refugee--looked to be severely injured, which was heartbreaking. (Does anyone have an update on @AmeerAlhalbi's condition?)

In this sense, the casseurs are also a severe threat to freedom of expression. The amount of property damage they did was grotesque. And to monopolize the time and attention of hospitals, firefighters, and police *during a pandemic* is pure sociopathy.

In the US, everyone laughs about journalists who report "mostly peaceful protests" while the building behind them is burning. But there's clearly a real point that needs to be better articulated: Most of the protesters yesterday *were* peaceful.

They had the right to protest. In my view (which doesn't matter to the argument--freedom of assembly and the right to protest are fundamental, whether or not you're right on the issue), those peaceful protesters were right on the issue:

The new comprehensive security law is ill-conceived, and needs to be rewritten. (If you haven't been following the debate, in short, the aim of the bill is to prevent terrorists from putting a target on the cops' back by filming them and diffusing the images. A good aim--

but the law as written is too vague; it criminalizes the filming the face of a cop in a "malicious" way. Obviously, and especially in the age of cellphone cameras, this could make criminals of anyone who filmed and brought to light any abuse of police power.

It's a bad law, and people *should* protest it. The half-million people who marched against the law yesterday were indeed mostly peaceful. Their right to demonstrate to protect their own civil liberties (and in favor of common sense) was usurped--

not by the police, but by the violent demonstrators. The moral responsibility for the injuries suffered by peaceful demonstrators and journalists yesterday lies firmly with them.

That said: The violence also represents other, broader failings.

I will not denigrate France's overstretched, overworked, exhausted police force. That they're overstretched, overworked, and exhausted is a political problem that must be solved. I've written about this here: https://t.co/ssUtfQj0Id

And here we get to the parts that really confuse me, and where I'd like to speak to law-enforcement officials around the world for insight. To what extent is it a police failure, by definition, if so many violent protesters infiltrate a demonstration?

Is it reasonable to expect that competent police work can take them out of circulation before the event? What would that work look like? Can it be done without sinister infringements of other basic rights? Where has it been done successfully, and how?

To what extent is this problem a local and cultural one: Is an excessively romantic and indulgent view of street violence the legacy not just of the French Revolution but of the hundreds of years of violent uprisings both before and after?

If so, can "better policing" fix a problem that stems from widespread cultural tolerance of rioting? Has any country or city, to anyone's knowledge, managed to change public attitudes toward rioting, rendering it taboo? If so, how? (More questions to come.)

I want to understand is why we've seen so many protests against "police violence" around the world recently: Is it because there's been a rise in police violence? If so, why? Is it a mimetic phenomenon, with other countries imitating what they're seeing in the US?

Is it something specific to the cellphone era--whereas previously, people leaned toward believing the cops, not the victims of police violence, now they can see for themselves that abuses really happen?

Or do these protests mean something else? Are they reactions to the lockdown? Is this what happens, inevitably, when people's natural human instincts for companionship are denied for months on end? Might it just as easily have been another cause or pretext?

Are similarities between the stories we're seeing around the world misleading? Anyone who read the Anglophone coverage of the beheading of Samuel Paty and its aftermath would be gravely misinformed:

UK & American journalists took superficial elements of similarity in the story (police shoot minority of some kind) and came to the most lunatic, wild conclusions about what it meant--

even to the point that headlines obscured the fact that the man the police shot had just beheaded a schoolteacher, in broad daylight, for teaching his class about freedom of expression and showing them a cartoon of Mohammed.

His shooting did not represent a "police violence" or a "systemic racism" problem. That these are the concepts now invigorating the American imagination does not mean they're the appropriate operating concepts for understanding France's problems.

Yet violent demonstrations, either the reality or the widespread perception that the police are too violent, and the threat posed by the Black Bloc contingent and violent far-right provocateurs who turn peaceful demonstrations into war zones *do* seem similar.

Are they? If so, who is doing the best job of solving this problem, and how are they doing it? @metpoliceuk, @NYPD, @delhipolice, @PoliceNationale, @poliziadistato, what should I read about this? To whom do you recommend I speak? Thank you for doing a thankless and essential job.

@zeynep, to whom should I speak, in your view?

@SkinnerPm, what about you--to whom would you recommend I speak, and what questions should I ask them, as I try to make sense of this?