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Academic Copaganda

Outflanked on its student left, intellectual liberalism threw in the sponge without a fight, and many of its outstanding stalwarts, eloquent about academic freedom in general only up to the point where some actual, particular freedom was threatened, emigrated speedily to the extreme right, and made themselves over into the range-riders of discipline.

-Stuart Hall¹

Intellectual activity . . . must be disinterested—the truth is a two-edged sword—and if one is not willing to be pierced by that sword, even to the extreme of dying on it, then all of one’s intellectual activity is a masturbatory delusion and a wicked and dangerous fraud.

-James Baldwin²

Two Harvard professors, Christopher Lewis and Adaner Usmani, published an article in 2022 titled “The Injustice of Under-Policing in America” in the *American Journal of Law and Equality*.³ The professors, who refer to themselves as “socialists” and “progressives,” call for “almost half a million” more armed cops, who they say will arrest 7.8 million more people per year, in what would be the greatest expansion of militarized police and surveillance in modern world history.

In this chapter, I analyze the proposal for 500,000 more armed police officers, as well as the strange responses from the professors to my questions. These two Harvard professors are not outliers; in fact, I focus on them because their bad arguments illustrate a pervasive lack of rigor among criminologists who appear frequently in the news.

What Do the Harvard Professors Say, and What Do They Hide?

The proposal by the Harvard professors argues that (1) the U.S. has way more prisoners than other comparable countries, and (2) that it has way fewer cops. This is bad, they say, because: (3) prisons bring little benefit for their costs, and (4) cops bring big benefits for their costs. As a result, they argue, we should add a lot more cops to achieve what they call the “First World Balance.”

Before I get into the main flaws with the proposal, I want to describe my brief interaction with the professors over email. I was immediately skeptical about the second claim above, and I worried that news outlets might mindlessly repeat the claim that the U.S. has below-median numbers of police officers. So I emailed the professors to better understand the origin of that claim. It’s notoriously fraught to count cops across countries with different local/national approaches to classifying civilian and criminal enforcement bureaucrats (including, in some countries, the identification of unarmed officers as police), so I asked for their data.

I noted to the professors that their U.S. data source appeared to exclude federal policing agencies (e.g., border patrol, ICE, FBI, DEA, ATF, Capitol Police, Park Police, military police, deputized national guard, etc.), potentially many non-local state agencies, and *all* private police forces.⁴ These exclusions were striking given revelations, for example, about the covert and illegal role border agents played across the country in helping local police crush the 2020 protests that the Harvard professors opened their article discussing.⁵

One of the professors responded that they chose to use the number 697,195 from an FBI survey, even though they knew many local police departments were excluded from it. So, he admitted, the number of police may be much higher, perhaps 900,000 if you include those and federal police officers. (Wikipedia, for example, at the time reported 900,000 based on a major police nonprofit source.) The professor then

told me that the U.S. Census count was actually 1,227,788 police (a number they later corrected to 1,088,027). That's 56 percent higher than the number they chose to publish. Using this number, he conceded, would mean the U.S. police presence truthfully is "1.1 times the median rate in rich countries."

Recall that the published proposal had begun with the sexy assertion that the U.S. has *fewer* cops per capita than the median developed country. This was the key premise in Figure 1 of the article, the very first chart presented to readers. Nowhere in the article did the professors explain that they had intentionally excluded hundreds of thousands of cops that might undermine their glossy premise that the U.S. is significantly below its "First World" peers in per capita police.⁶ Instead of disclosing competing estimates and explaining their choices to readers, the Harvard professors used a knowingly wrong estimate that enabled them to suggest, falsely, that the U.S. falls below the median developed country in per capita police. This is the kind of assertion by "experts" that gets picked up by journalists, spread through the news in a circular web of citations, and turned into conventional wisdom because the reasons to be skeptical about it are hidden from the audience.

Relatedly, the professors also chose to omit from their discussion the higher police *budgets* in the U.S., owing in part to more advanced surveillance and weaponry, longer work weeks, and overtime hours, which make the policing *footprint* in the U.S. different than what their comparison suggested. Incredibly, the Harvard professors also did not tell readers that they excluded privately operated police forces. This omission would be puzzling to residents of Detroit, for example, who see private police forces taking over downtown, or to people familiar with many private universities and wealthy neighborhoods with armed, deputized police across the country.⁷ Many people do not even know whether a given police force is private or public. Indeed, as I was heading to my office to revise this chapter in the summer of 2024, I saw an interaction between an armed police officer and a rider on public transit, and I only realized after several minutes of internet searching that the

cop was part of the privatized police force contracted to police the D.C. metro—which refers to itself as “a private law enforcement agency.”⁸ As of 2021, there were 1.1 million private police officers in the U.S. This figure alone, if it had been included, would have almost tripled the total number of police officers the professors reported.⁹

When I confronted them with these omissions, they switched course. They claimed that they were not interested in privately deputized armed police and that per capita police comparisons don’t actually matter much, even though it had been the starting point for their published proposal. They said they instead care about *ratios* of police to prisoners and police to homicides. Even a moment’s thought reveals that this focus on ratios is strange. Such ratios might merely show that the U.S. has way more prisoners than other countries and that the U.S. is also a violent society with lots of guns. The denominators in these ratios, prisoners and homicides, do not say anything necessarily about the numerator in terms of whether there should be *more police*—i.e., the main point of their article.

These manipulations in counting the number of police officers are not central to the argument about whether the U.S. needs more police, but they are revealing and representative of the way sloppiness can slip into public discourse about police. The two professors knew they had available data that would refute the headline-grabbing point on international per-capita police comparisons, and they chose to omit it. It’s perhaps less persuasive to start a proposal for 500,000 more cops with “the U.S. probably already has more police than most comparable countries and it is less safe than those countries, but we think it needs way more police!”

The “Core” Problem

In fairness, although the Harvard professors name their proposal for “almost half a million more police officers” the “First World Balance” and say in the article that the international comparisons “anchor this

piece,” they correctly admitted to me that none of these international comparisons are important to their “core” points. Their “core” points relate only to the U.S. and are captured in argument #4 above about the supposedly big benefits of police. I agree that this is the core of the article, but this is also where the article goes off the copaganda rails.

The most glaring flaw is that the professors ignore the social costs of adding more police. They present the main social cost of their proposal as 7.8 million more arrests. They call this the “main downside,” and it is the only one they credit. They then conclude that the benefits of more police far outweigh the costs of 7.8 million more people arrested.

But more arrests are *not* the only social cost of “almost half a million” more armed cops. To start, the professors don’t mention that they are excluding *millions* of police assaults as a social cost of policing. They similarly exclude all pretextual and abusive police stops. Philando Castile, a school cafeteria worker who frequently paid for the lunches of kids who couldn’t afford to eat, was stopped for minor traffic issues fifty-two times before he was stopped for a broken taillight and shot to death by police with his girlfriend filming.¹⁰ They also exclude forcible searches, home raids, beatings, taserings, handcuffings, strip searches, sexual assaults, and property seizures. They exclude all the jail deaths, like that of Sandra Bland, caused by police arrests, and all the lost jobs, lost homes, dead pets, billions in bail bond and other jail fees transferred from the poorest people in our society to large corporations, the increased spread of infectious disease, lost medical care, and family separations attendant in 7.8 million more *legal* arrests. They further omit the robust research showing that more low-level arrests and prosecutions lead to *more* crime in the future.¹¹ They also omit the downstream consequences from arming hundreds of thousands more people with guns in general, including the sale of police-issued guns. A CBS news investigation found that because police sell so many of their guns, between 2006 and 2024, “at least 52,529 guns once owned by police” were “later used in crimes.”¹² Instead of accounting for all (or any) of this, Lewis and Usmani merely “guess” (their word) that adding more armed cops

might “cause” there to be “less police violence,” which they measure only by police homicides. So, if cops engage in legal or illegal violence of the kind I mentioned above but don’t kill anyone, the professors don’t count it at all. And when they try to explain their “guess” on the anticipated decrease in police homicides, they do not support their contention with *any evidence*. They offer only “speculative reasons” that more police would make society safer, which they say might make policing less dangerous, which, in turn, might end in police killing fewer people. They therefore conclude that “it is not at all clear” that fewer police would reduce police homicides. This kind of armchair guesswork about police homicides, extrapolated to all forms of legal and illegal police violence, is unfounded at every level of inference.

The issue of domestic violence underlines a related category of social cost that the professors ignore. For decades, studies have found that families of police officers experience domestic violence at astronomical rates: between 24 and 40 percent of all families with a police officer report criminal domestic violence. That is a rate of domestic violence up to 400 percent that of the general population.¹³ Given how frequently domestic conflict turns violent, and that more police officers will have more guns, one might “speculate,” to borrow a term from the professors, that more cops could mean more murdered domestic partners. Already nearly half of all murders of women in the U.S. are committed by a current or former partner.¹⁴ The complete refusal to acknowledge, much less explore the implications of, these kinds of secondary effects for a society with more armed police officers is not unique to the Harvard professors—it is a feature of most summaries of the criminological literature purporting to balance the social costs and benefits of police.

More broadly, though, the professors ignore the social costs of the massive expansion in other bureaucracies that would result from the 7.8 million more arrests they call for, including: prosecutors, judges, probation officers, drug testing, stay-away orders, fines and fees, debt collectors, GPS monitoring, bail bond companies, the jail telecom industry, and consulting firms that, among others, would be involved with

pretrial and posttrial supervision of millions more people. All of this leads to an unprecedented involvement of government penal institutions and corporate profiteers in the lives of tens of millions of additional arrested individuals and their families. Once these profitable bureaucratic institutions grow, it is nearly impossible for a society later to shrink them, because of the political power and inertia that they accumulate.

More fundamentally, many scholars have studied deeper social costs when a society increases the number of centrally controlled, armed government bureaucrats. These non-financial costs include, among others: the deterioration of privacy across society; expanded capacity for organized schemes of municipal political retaliation, reprisal, and censorship; greater ability of police to distort the news and public knowledge acquisition with hundreds of thousands more officers and tens of billions more in budgets, union dues, and consultant contracts; the international linkages and consequences for democracy in other countries of expanding the global policing industry by tens of billions of dollars; increases in overall masculine violence and aggression; increased power of the government to surveil, investigate, and interfere in people's lives; and reduced infrastructure and capacity of people and communities to resolve interpersonal conflict.¹⁵

The professors casually dismiss such concerns without seriously considering them. They claim that, after adding 500,000 more police, "the United States could hardly be considered a police state." To justify this conclusion, they assert (based on their earlier inaccurate numbers and exclusion of private police) that the addition of 500,000 police would make the U.S. look like "today's Spain." That is the entirety of the argument by two Harvard scholars for the claim that a historic expansion of armed surveillance agents would have little impact on private life in the United States.

But it gets worse. Perhaps the most profound social cost the professors ignore is the role police play in preserving inequality. A primary function of police for 150 years has been to surveil, infiltrate, and crush progressive social movements seeking to reduce inequality. It's why

police spied on, infiltrated, brutally repressed, and continue to crush labor, feminist, civil rights, anti-war, LGBTQ, environmental, reproductive rights, indigenous, and economic justice movements.¹⁶ To take one of thousands of examples, as I was completing a final edit of this chapter, the chief of patrol of the NYPD made a public announcement from his official social media account in the wake of the police violence against students calling for peace and justice in Palestine. He wrote:

Who is funding this? What is happening? There is an unknown entity who is radicalizing our vulnerable students. Taking advantage of their young minds. As parents and Americans we must demand some answers! I can't speak for the rest of America, but in NYC we won't rest until we find out! We will broadcast what we see and find. We will use the might of our Intelligence Bureau and our Federal partners to quite simply connect the dots. Follow the money!!!!!!¹⁷

I encourage you to peruse the archive of this repression collected by scholars that I have made available in the corresponding endnote.¹⁸ To take one vivid example that inspired me to study the issue further, the NYPD assaulted and arrested fruit and vegetable workers, who were deemed essential workers during the pandemic, for the “crime” of organizing for a \$1 raise after the 2020 lockdowns.¹⁹

Apart from their role in destroying those organizing for progressive social change, the police are and have always been central to protecting private concentrations of wealth through selective enforcement of the law; gentrification; unlawful redlining; evictions; immigration enforcement and the management of migrants fleeing the effects of global U.S. policy; civil forfeiture; and many other forms of exclusion and predation.²⁰ And they are preparing to play a central role in the enforcement of anti-democratic voter restriction laws sweeping the country, as well as laws banning books from libraries and anti-trans laws.²¹ How can two scholars write confidently about the social costs of police but not

mention, for example, the prospect that, in about half the United States, police will now be tracking the communications of and arresting women and providers of reproductive medical care?

In addition to the authoritarian role that U.S. police play by selectively enforcing rules made by those with power in an unequal society, they also have a long history of both overtly supporting and actively being infiltrated by the far right. As professor Naomi Murakawa has documented, for example, during and after the 2020 protests that the two Harvard professors express sympathy for, police across the country helped far-right and white nationalist groups terrorize protesters, even calling fascists who showed up to civil rights protests as “armed friendlies.”²²

In addition to what they do as police on the job, police are also *political* actors. In recent years, for example, police unions have used their financial and political capital to endorse far-right politicians like Donald Trump, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Ron DeSantis, Nicole Malliotakis, Elise Stefanik, and almost every contemporary prominent election-denier running for major office.²³ And they have called on these politicians to increase border militarization; end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, program; support private prisons; and even roll back the Affordable Care Act.

Police unions are even more active in pushing right-wing agendas at the local level. They intervene in elections and privately pressure local officials such as judges, budget auditors, district attorneys, city councilmembers, and county executives. Over the years, numerous local officials have told me they cannot support reducing police budgets because they are terrified of retaliation by police, including of cops raiding their homes or stopping and harassing their loved ones.²⁴ Such intimidation is a pervasive fact of daily life for local progressive politicians—and even of numerous judges who have confided to me about their fear of retaliation against their families by police. The Harvard professors don’t address *any* of these political ramifications when they talk about the effects on society of more—and more powerful—police.

The professors also ignore a related point: because police are both the front door and a crucial driver of the punishment bureaucracy, they use their political power to lobby for the large prison populations that the professors concede are harmful. This happens in many obvious ways both overt and covert, including through many of the same overlapping punishment-bureaucrat organized labor formations. The self-proclaimed “rigorous” academic article about what the professors call the political “feasibility” of reducing prison populations by two million to pay for 500,000 more cops therefore does not ask the question about what bad things, *including more imprisonment*, might come from a more powerful police lobby.²⁵ The professors are essentially asking, “Imagine a fantasy world where everyone agrees to massively reduce prisoners by two million; what should we do with the resulting budget surplus?” Their answer is police. But if we could save money by freeing two million people from prison—which we cannot do in part because police drive mass incarceration through lobbying, pressure, and propaganda—why would we spend it on cops instead of on approaches addressing the root causes of violence that even the professors agree are better at producing safety and that don’t carry these costs? Their lip service to reducing prison populations is just that—it’s an attempt to feign “progressive” credentials and insulate themselves from attacks about the authoritarian nature of their proposal.

Ironically, the professors admit that greater social equality would be the best way of reducing violence. But the power of armed surveillance bureaucracies within local, state, and federal governments is one major reason we can’t fund many of the things that the professors admit lead to real safety—like the various social equality programs that police help block. And police threaten society whenever their funding is at risk—through organized work stoppages, misinformation, violence, or simple political campaign expenditures—so once you add all these police, there is no realistic chance of going back.²⁶ The expansion and militarization of the police is one of the biggest political barriers to the “egalitarian” society the professors say they want.

I have seen this firsthand. In every place I have worked on civil

rights and economic justice issues, police have organized to oppose us. They have lied in court and in the news; they have made threats to me, my family, and my friends; they have intimidated vulnerable allies of mine seeking progressive change for their communities, and they have spent huge sums lobbying against even modest changes that are backed by evidence. To take one example, a police chief I had publicly criticized once grabbed the back of my neck in a public hallway, looked at his hand, smiled, and commented that he now had my DNA before telling me the make and model of my rental car and wishing me a good day. To take another of many personal examples, a Harvard Law School student intern and I (traveling with a *New York Times* reporter doing a profile of our civil rights work) were illegally detained inside a small room at a courthouse by armed sheriffs after I asked a clerk at a public desk for public case records that could expose police and judicial corruption. That crime committed by the sheriffs against us met the elements of kidnapping. Millions of police assaults, kidnappings, and illegal searches and detentions like the one visited on me and my intern happen—mostly to vulnerable people or people advocating for social change—and they are rarely recorded. Professors Lewis and Usmani excluded illegal actions like this from their analysis, even though these actions collectively shape, at its very core, the kind of society we have and how safe many people feel fighting for a better one.

Finally, the social costs of police expansion are global. The rise of the policing-industrial complex in the U.S. has been a key driver of global authoritarianism through a web of lucrative and strategic training partnerships; task forces; shared infrastructure; and multinational intelligence, surveillance, weapons, and policing technology companies that promote authoritarian control to manage and preserve inequality across the world.²⁷

It's one thing to weigh all these social costs against supposed benefits, but it's something different to pretend that the costs do not exist. I have gone into detail about what the Harvard professors omit because it helps reveal the purpose and effect of such scholarship. As with

copaganda in the news, the selective erasure of profound harm committed by the punishment bureaucracy is a ubiquitous feature of pro-police scholarship. Incredibly, despite their refusal to consider most of the social costs, the professors are confident, proclaiming that the costs “pale in comparison to the benefits.” They call an alternative view on the social costs of police “implausible on almost any accounting.”

Copaganda’s Cynicism

This brings me to another of the proposal’s copaganda themes: its incoherent cynicism. The professors claim to acknowledge that a primary underlying root cause of violence is “concentrated disadvantage”—that is, the very inequality and maldistribution of social investments that cops protect.²⁸

The professors admit that inequality is the biggest factor leading to violence, but they declare that increasing social investment to reduce inequality through programs like early childhood education is “infeasible.” So, two Harvard scholars conclude that they have no choice but to base an entire academic project on the assumption that it is impossible to make the world more equal:

We think that in the long run, a significant expansion of social policy would reduce crime by addressing its root causes and in turn reduce the need and demand for both policing and imprisonment. In other work, we argue that *any* coherent conception of distributive justice or economic efficiency entails that the United States *should* expand social policy. But a significant expansion of social policy requires significant redistribution from rich to poor. Redistribution of this magnitude would require the poor to wield some kind of leverage over the rich. Given the collapse of the American labor movement and the electoral fracturing of the American working class, we doubt we will see anything like this soon.²⁹

In our email correspondence, the professors reiterated their “pessimism about what kind of social policy alternatives to policing are feasible.” I couldn’t believe what I was reading: two Harvard professors agree that violence is caused by structural inequality, but since they don’t think we can reduce inequality because the poor have little power, they advocate the only solution they think feasible: authoritarianism. Of course, 500,000 more cops to control oppressed people isn’t a surprising—or intellectually interesting—proposal if you start from the premise that social change and a more equal society are impossible!

As with a lot of the best copaganda that I analyze later, what makes this cynicism more pernicious is that Lewis and Usmani claimed to be “coming from the left” and that they “hated” their own conclusion. They wrote to me:

But we are, like you, coming from the left. . . . The conclusion Adaner and I have reached in this particular project is one we tried our hardest to avoid for a long time. But we have come to think it’s the only way to be consistent with our fundamental egalitarian and progressive commitments. We didn’t come into this project hoping to vindicate the under-policing thesis. We both hated the idea from the start and it is still uncomfortable to us.³⁰

Elite criminology is awash in this kind of de-politicizing drivel dressed up as scholarship. Any solution—especially those that would require organizing, building power, political education, changing hearts and minds, reshaping institutions, and mobilizing marginalized people to shift the balance of power in our society—is treated as so inconceivable that it does not even merit discussion. Even immediately implementable alternatives that are currently working well in many places are not mentioned. *Copaganda requires this sense of hopelessness to thrive.* Two scholars at one of the most elite institutions in the country celebrate their own article as “rigorous normative argument,” which it is

not. But it does serve powerful institutions, which benefit from more people sharing the authors' cynicism about the possibility of progressive social change and ignorance of other potential alternatives—and which benefit from the call for increased investment in bureaucracies of social control. And so, like many political elites before them for over a century, they conclude, after a lot of fancy words in a prestigious journal whose title includes the word “equality,” that the response to inequality can only be . . . more government agents with guns.

A Circular Loop

The real core of the proposal is an empirical assertion that more police will reduce “serious crime”—which the professors define to exclude white-collar crime, environmental crime, police crime, and public corruption, to name a few. Thus, at bottom, the professors are merely arguing that police are better than anything else at reducing “serious crime,” so we should have a lot more of them. If this claim is incorrect, all their other conclusions would be invalidated. To make this claim, the professors offer no original research.

The core thesis, on which the entire argument rests, repeats a controversial claim by a few pro-police professors, whose 2017 article on this point the Harvard professors cite in a footnote. They do not cite the contradictory research that has for decades found that an increase in police officers does *not* reduce police-recorded crime, or other research showing that non-police alternatives are more cost-effective.³¹ A casual reader would have no idea that these other bodies of research exist.

Ignoring other research on whether police are effective at all and whether other alternatives are more effective, they “guess,” based on work by other pro-police professors, that adding 500,000 cops would lead to four thousand fewer homicides. It’s important to pause here to note that, even according to Lewis and Usmani, this is *the main benefit of their proposal*. Amazingly, even if this linear relationship between more

police and fewer homicides were true, it would mean that, under their plan, the U.S. would still have about 80 percent of its current homicides.

Unsurprisingly, when discussing homicides, they ignore findings that policing increases *non-homicide* deaths in the short term and increases homicide in the long term by maintaining inequality. For example, police violence has been shown to increase infant mortality in Black children and to “substantially decrease the birth weight and gestational age of black infants residing nearby.”³² A few other examples demonstrate how 500,000 more cops could lead to more death. Recall that air pollution kills 100,000 people in the U.S. every year—about five times the number of homicides—and that cops crush environmental organizing and threaten even modest local protests about pollution, such as demonstrations against local point-source dumping and emissions that cause cancer.³³ To take one widely reported example, a pipeline company paid Minnesota cops millions of dollars to target climate protesters.³⁴ Adding more police will lead to more repression of people organizing to stop environmental destruction. The same can be said about police repression of organizing against foreclosures, evictions, lack of access to health care, poisoned drinking water, and labor exploitation, all of which lead to more social harm and death.

This approach is the scholarly equivalent of citing a big oil-funded study of climate change that contradicts other independent studies, and presenting the former as scientific consensus while not even mentioning the existence of the latter. As we saw when discussing the news media’s use of experts, one of the routine practices across the copaganda universe is permitting claims to be made without acknowledging the extent to which they are disputed. And often, having ignored most of the available evidence and making it seem like no one else disagrees with them, copagandists can then claim that they only came to their authoritarian conclusions reluctantly, as a last resort. These are not clerical errors or little boo-boos by meticulous scholars. They are omissions and distortions that undermine the integrity of scholarly discourse. An article

arguing for *reducing* police by 500,000 officers resting on similarly weak and misleading claims would have put the career of non-tenured scholars in jeopardy.

The Harvard Professors Respond

After I published a version of this analysis and coauthored a similar critique with the sociology professor Alex Vitale, the two professors posted a link to a PDF document on a Dropbox account entitled “Reply to Alec Karakatsanis.”³⁵ I do not know to whom this “reply” was selectively sent, but I was alerted to its existence by another Harvard professor a few months later. The reply accuses me of trying to censor the Harvard professors, and it illustrates how scholars in fancy institutions become adept at using a lot of flowery rhetoric but operate without the transparency, curiosity, humility, meticulousness, and accountability that people who care about the advancement of knowledge should aspire to. I discuss the reply here because it is representative of how difficult it can be to get prominent academics to have a genuine conversation about the flaws that plague the field of pro-police criminology.

First, and most importantly, Lewis and Usmani’s reply does not address *any* of my main criticisms. Without explanation, they say in one sentence that most of my critiques are “unserious”:

In a recent Substack newsletter and Twitter thread, the lawyer Alec Karakatsanis has raised a number of objections. Most of these are unserious, and so we would have preferred to ignore them. But because his accusations of scholarly malpractice have garnered some attention, it has seemed necessary to set the record straight.³⁶

I do not think it was “unserious” for me to point out—to take just a few examples discussed above—that professors recommending the greatest expansion of police in modern history did not consider the

social costs of or alternatives to policing, the effects of the increased political power of 500,000 more cops, the impact on the criminalization of reproductive rights, or the research on increased infant mortality and reduced birth weight of Black babies. It is not a response to numerous careful criticisms to say they are all “unserious” but decline to explain why.

Second, almost the entirety of their reply is devoted to a distraction: the issue of how they count existing police officers, which all of us had agreed was not central to their argument. Despite my statement that their misleading assertion about the number of cops in the U.S. was *not* the “core” problem with their article, their reply calls it my “main accusation.” They conclude that our disagreement regarding the numbers of police across countries “has nothing to do with” their conclusion. I concur. But we are only talking about it because *they decided to begin their paper with it* as a public relations strategy and to name their police-expansion plan the “First World Balance.”

Third, their reply makes no effort to respond to anything Professor Vitale and I said about the social costs of policing, the political power of police, the role of police in disrupting progressive movements, the research they ignored showing the ineffectiveness of police in reducing “serious crime,” or any of our other points about the flaws and internal contradictions in their article. They only repeat the point that “serious crime” causes a lot of harm, so *if* they are right that more police are the best possible way to reduce “serious crime” without negative consequences, then yes, the U.S. should add 500,000 police. But that’s one of the big “ifs” we used evidence to dispute!

Finally, they conclude: “Karakatsanis has done nothing to sway us from our position.” That is hardly a rebuttal. One standard of scholarly discourse is to explain *why* one comes to one’s views, including the logical and evidentiary steps that would allow someone to follow one’s reasoning. The Harvard professors failed to do that in either the original article or their reply. And this is a feature of academic copaganda—it is difficult to get pro-police professors to respond to specific criticisms

with any rigor. In this way, an entire bubble of scholarship can develop without anyone asking the most basic questions or holding each other intellectually accountable.

In classic copaganda fashion, the professors instead assure us again that they are “progressives” who care a lot about marginalized people. But a vow of compassion is no substitute for good scholarly work. Their reply opens with the assertion that they are “socialists” who care about inequality, especially racism. This is like the mayor of San Francisco saying that she cares deeply about solving homelessness while proposing armed police sweeps to put homeless people in jail because real estate developers announced they would object to any policy that involves more affordable housing. As I explain later in the book, doing authoritarian stuff while claiming to be “progressive” is a copaganda *strategy* designed to dissuade well-meaning people from asking hard questions.

Lewis and Usmani continue by asserting that any redistribution of wealth will require “the mobilization of the poor and the working class,” but since this is “a distant prospect,” the best we can do for now is more police. Their reply thus repeats the argument that social change, such as reducing inequality and investing in early childhood education, is not possible. Ignoring recent evidence, scholarship, and real-world examples being implemented across the U.S., they even double down, saying “there are no feasible social policy alternatives” to reduce crime.³⁷ And, yet again, they ignore the scholarship, which I cited, that documents how increasing the power of police would *hinder* the very progressive movements and social policy campaigns they claim to support. Eugene Debs, the most prominent socialist leader in American history, imprisoned by police and prosecutors for his opposition to World War I, must be rolling over in his grave. (Then again, his grave would probably need to be dug up to make room for one of the several dozen new \$100 million training facilities for 500,000 new cops.)

The professors were savvy to combine their call for an unprecedented expansion of police with a half-hearted assertion that they wanted to reduce imprisonment, something they know, but didn’t tell

readers, is inconsistent with increased police political power. Unsurprisingly, the *Washington Post* later used the professor's bad scholarship the way I predicted: it embraced their call for more police but said that the reducing imprisonment part isn't politically feasible at this point.³⁸ It argued, therefore, that we should dramatically expand police and then promised that, later, wink-wink, perhaps the reduction of mass imprisonment could be explored. I can find no attempt by the professors to criticize this use of their work.

The political right also embraced the professors. The San Francisco Deputy Sheriffs' Association began urging people to read the article "in its entirety," through a social media account paid for by its political action committee. The police union explained that the "study" showed "exactly what is going on in San Francisco. Little to no consequences and lack of police." The police union then said that the article by the Harvard professors is proof that "the civilianization of police will go down in history as the biggest mistake any city can make." In what can only be understood as a fascist warning, the police union then said: "Only a new leader that will make drastic changes can correct the course."³⁹

Similarly, employees of the far-right Manhattan Institute published an article, in the "Ideas" section of *The Atlantic*, called "We're Underfunding the Police," which cites the Harvard professors as a key piece of evidence.⁴⁰ The right-wing weaponization of their arguments should not be surprising. It is to the advantage of the far right to use an article by self-proclaimed "progressives" to further entrench the punishment bureaucracy, justify authoritarian policies, and block social change.

Accusations of Censorship

After avoiding my arguments, the professors suggest that I tried to "censor" them:

The real shame of Karakatsanis's reply is that he has pandered to our intellectual culture's worst features. Students today too

often graduate from college and graduate schools unable to engage people who disagree with them in good faith, or even to make the relevant counterarguments. Instead, they look to institutions to censor views which make them uncomfortable. This anti-intellectual tendency is a lamentable feature of our times. It undermines the integrity of scholarly discourse and, therefore, the research necessary for informed public policy.

The Harvard professors portray themselves as interested in debate and the “integrity” of scholarship, suggest that I am not engaging in “good faith” or making “relevant counterarguments,” and charge me with having a corrupting influence on impressionable students. In reality, I set forth counterarguments clearly relevant to the question of whether to add 500,000 armed police, which they entirely ignored. As for their aspersions about my fostering an “anti-intellectual tendency” and even advocating censorship, they do not and cannot cite a single word, clause, sentence, or paragraph as evidence. (This mistreatment also did not go over well with my grandmother, who doesn’t like when people are mean to me.)

More seriously, the accusation of censorship cheapens what is an important problem, and is an insult to the scholars around the world who are *actually being* threatened with the loss of their jobs based on the content of their syllabi or the bravery of scholarship that challenges powerful institutions. And, most profoundly, it is a perversion of the concept of “scholarly discourse.” Pointing out sloppy scholarship, debunking poorly constructed arguments that help powerful institutions maintain inequality, and calling out the manipulation of facts is not “censorship.”

The professors’ attempt to cast a critique of how criminology scholars support their arguments as “censorship” is perhaps the most alarming part of this episode. These are two powerful people. I have no doubt that their pro-police views will help their scholarship escape the scrutiny that would otherwise accompany an anti-police scholar in the

tenure review process at Harvard. They will probably teach thousands of students at Harvard and have huge platforms to influence the most powerful people in our society, as evidenced by the *Washington Post* and *The Atlantic* quickly parroting their conclusions. They will become even more prominent public figures as the right-wing and corporate media embrace their plan for 500,000 more cops precisely because it comes from self-styled “socialists” and “progressives.”

I tried my best to marshal my experience and my safe position outside academia to explain why their proposal lacked rigor and honesty. I tried to explain why this kind of scholarship poses a danger to our society, particularly at a time of rising authoritarianism, because of the effect it can have on students and journalists, and because stuff like this adds a veneer of legitimacy to the proposals of a growing fascist movement. I didn’t do this because their opinions made me “uncomfortable”; I did it because there are consequences to Harvard professors making public proposals for 500,000 more police as right-wing mobs take over school boards, as university professors are fired for discussing race (*actual* “censorship”); as women, pregnant people, and healers are arrested for receiving or providing reproductive health care; as poor people are arrested for voting; as people forced from their homes are arrested for sleeping on the streets; as police beat striking union workers; as students and faculty calling for an end to militarism, apartheid, and genocide are violently arrested; and as people seeking to draw attention to ecological calamity are surveilled, shot, and imprisoned.

Writing an op-ed that criticizes the professors is not “censorship,” but by invoking that specter, they turn their own failure to address criticism into a moral crusade to protect the integrity of the academy. It is a scenario where, as Orwell would say, “two plus two equals five.” For these reasons, I offer the two Harvard professors, Adaner Usmani and Christopher Lewis, tenured chairs at Copaganda University—new positions made possible by a donation from an anonymous company that makes ecofriendly handcuffs. If things don’t work out for them at Harvard, they now have a home more suited to their work.

Harvard Students Contact Me

My critique of the 500,000 cops proposal became widely shared and referenced by scholars and in classroom discussions across the country. It appears that the “Reply to Alec Karakatsanis” may have been written as a form of damage control for their reputations among other Harvard professors, preparing them to make the argument that any critiques they face from students or other faculty are the inventions of a “woke” mob who cannot handle arguments that make them “uncomfortable.”⁴¹

After my critique was published and around the time of their “reply” (addressed to me but not shared with me), private armed cops employed by Harvard surveilled and crushed a student protest at Harvard Law School calling for more reproductive rights staff, more professors of color with tenure, and racial justice on campus.⁴² Harvard’s private police action was part of a long history of armed campus policing by privately deputized police.⁴³ According to these two professors, though, these aren’t “police” worth counting and what happened isn’t a social cost worth considering. Shortly afterward, some Harvard Law School students contacted me and exposed how one of the two professors, Christopher Lewis, had used the stressful first-year final exams to get law students to do intellectual labor in furtherance of his scholarship. The students sent me the final exam question, which asked students to brainstorm potential counterarguments to his personal scholarship on police. I posted the exam questions on social media with some reflections about the ethics of an instructor forcing students to give free intellectual labor for pro-police scholarship on a final exam that is supposed to be assessing their proficiency in first-year criminal law.⁴⁴ The students also told me that they had raised critiques similar to mine in class before I had published my article, confirming that at least one of the professors was aware of the omissions in his arguments but chose not to engage with them. Finally, the students informed me that the journal that published the “progressive” call for 500,000 more police by

“socialists” was a recently created journal about “equality” that had been presented as one of Harvard’s major responses to racial justice uprisings and student protests on campus against police brutality in 2020. Just two years later, it was publishing shoddy articles with no meaningful original research, including one proposing the greatest expansion of police in modern history.

Academic Copaganda and Its Incentives

Many people within elite institutions know that the ticket to stardom—the key to tenure, lucrative grants, appointments to institutes, chairs, awards, fancy invitations, and access to op-ed pages—is to serve power. There is an academic wing of the copaganda ecosystem that churns out scholarship as simplistic as the work of the two Harvard professors featured in this chapter.⁴⁵ As recent research has found, almost none of the punishment bureaucracy’s interventions have significant effects on interpersonal harm even when the most rigorous experimental techniques are used, and for good reason: the root causes of big problems in our society—like violence committed by human beings against each other—are deeper.⁴⁶ But this reality of what actually influences social harm doesn’t stop an endless stream of studies, quotes, and op-eds focusing the public on tweaks to the machinery of punishment that won’t significantly reduce interpersonal harm but will enhance profit, control, and bureaucratic power. In this way, enormous effort is spent figuring out how to *manage* the chaos and suffering caused by poor material living conditions, rather than directing intellectual energy toward *ameliorating those conditions*. Some of it is well-funded and corrupt, but much of it is a more complex result of the culture and political economy of universities, as well as the systemic incentives in how to choose, get funding for, and publicly present one’s work. The whole enterprise is an elaborate effort at losing the forest through the trees.

An academic article by “progressives” proposing the greatest expansion of the militarized police surveillance bureaucracy in Western

history is a moment of reckoning for well-meaning people in the academy. What standards should we expect from a “social scientist” and a “philosopher” at the most prominent university in the United States? What role should intellectuals play on the precipice of authoritarianism? How can well-meaning people in academic work with each other to preserve the integrity of the knowledge-production process? How can we instill in a new generation of students and scholars the ability to dream bigger, but also the obligation to be humble, accountable, critical, and thorough?