Enforcing Order: An Ethnography of Urban Policing is a disturbing yet riveting narrative that takes the reader deep into the daily routines, racial animosities, periodic violence, and moral reasoning of special policing squads operating on the outskirts of Paris in impoverished French banlieues. After three years of trying to gain access, anthropologist Didier Fassin, now a professor at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, spent roughly 15 months between 2005 and 2007 with anti-crime crews in an effort to provide a rounded account of the way disadvantaged residents—particularly adolescents and youngsters—of the so-called “sensitive urban areas” were treated by the police. The results are appalling but convincing.

Trotsky famously said, “there is but one international and that is the police.” Fassin brings this point home brilliantly, pointing out that from Watts to Brixton, from Chicago to Amsterdam, from London to Paris, virtually all major urban disturbances over the past fifty years have been marked by violent interactions between the police and ethnically or racially stigmatized residents who reside in disadvantaged neighborhoods. This, as the author carefully notes, is not to say the police are identical from place to place, but that the relations the police have with certain publics, the way the police are evaluated and disciplined (or not), and the accounts they themselves offer for their actions are, in fact, generalizable. This is a matter both asserted and demonstrated as Fassin makes excellent use of the ample (compared to France) ethnographic literature on the police in North America and Europe.

More critically, perhaps, the police practices and justifications that are highlighted in this monograph appear to be on the rise in most western democracies. A small sample: the subtle shift from a concern with law enforcement (“preventive policing”) to enforcing order (“repressive policing”), true particularly in blighted urban areas and often rendered with excessive zeal; the growth of a paramilitary police whose equipment and methods resemble those used by the army, especially notable when heavily armored riot squads are brought in to maintain public order; the managerially-driven intensification for tracking police performance by use of quantitative measures that are at best loosely coupled to crime rates; the mounting social and cultural distance between the public and the police who typically work in places they do not know, understand, or much care about; the increasing use of anti-crime squads made up of self-selected, aggressive officers who often work in plain clothes but whose constant visible presence in particular neighborhoods is experienced by residents as oppressive; the spreading police distrust of the judicial system that justifies an extension on the ground of police discretion; and so on (and on). These accelerating trends—mostly out of sight to the general public—suggest that the police go about their
business in an increasingly autonomous fashion, above the law and, in many respects, out of control.

The evidence and arguments put forth in Enforcing Order are dense and multilayered. Fassin looks to explain police behavior in France in relation to the broad social demands for security made of the national police, to the highly bureaucratic and insulated state-run organization (i.e., “the Prince’s police not the people’s police”), to the right-turning, anti-immigrant, racist political climate in France, and to what he calls—and devotes considerable attention—the deeply entrenched “moral economy” that informs police work. Seven chapters of the book cover how police work is situated and ordinarily carried out (particularly in the banlieues), how police-public interactions, largely with minority and immigrant youth, often lead to violence, how institutional racism has arisen and is sustained politically at a national and organizational level, and how police officers at the local and ground levels routinely administer street justice according to their own—largely unquestioned—moral codes. These chapters are framed, up front, by a reflexive account of the author’s fieldwork and the inevitable complicity such work requires and, at the end, by his understanding of why such work is so critical and intimately related to an open, democratic state.

The writing throughout is direct, lively, and, sometimes, quite personal. Differing perspectives (and theories) are carefully attended to and sorted out. The wide-ranging episodes recounted are vivid and varied. A kind of no-nonsense and determined realism attends to the representations of witnessed police encounters and talk. This is indeed all too real, and a sense of drama—like most literary accounts of the police world—shapes much of the text. But the police world is, as Fassin makes perfectly clear, hardly all drama. A good deal of the work entails simply coping with the boredom that accompanies the job, even in anti-crime units. And comedy, too, helps us grasp the police world. Some of this is found in the dark humor and jokes of the police canteen, but much of the informative comedy Fassin suggests is unintentional—a call for help from a colleague who has somehow locked himself in a toilet while on a house search, a police van responding to a call and careening dangerously through crowded city streets only to arrive at the wrong address, the inadvertent setting off of a burglar alarm during a security check, a police radio left on high volume and alerting suspects of the police presence. Nor is farce unknown: when an officer accidentally sprays tear gas on several of his mates, the unit panics and starts beating one another with their nightsticks, sending four of them to the hospital.

Standing behind such antics, however, is the recognition that routine police work is rather dull, marked only occasionally with dramatic flair. Calls for police assistance are relatively rare and therefore precious to the police and are likely to bring forth a sudden burst of often-misplaced energy. As a matter of form, the French police prefer the bellicose New Centurion model of the cop in the United States as a mythic ideal to the style of the restrained British bobby. Residents of the banlieues know this well and are reluctant to call on the police, for most are convinced that there are few situations that the police do not make worse by their mere presence. Whether comic or dramatic, however, Fassin effectively makes the point that police work in France has at most a limited effect on crime—a point well established in a variety of police studies conducted elsewhere.

The most common interactions the anti-crime squads have with the public are of the proactive stop-and-frisk variety, ostensibly for identification checks. These are the kinds of interactions that not only shame and degrade those stopped but on occasion (deftly parsed by Fassin) give rise to violence of a unilateral sort. Who is stopped or deemed suspicious by the police—young men of immigrant or minority status—arises from their physical characteristics or more accurately, as Fassin notes, from the prejudice attached to their physical characteristics. What is at work here is both malign intent on a given officer’s part and, more critically, the sense that a stop of these young men is most likely to bring results. The latter reason, Fassin makes clear, is an approved collective practice but unquestionably a not-so-subtle form of institutional racism.
that is less identifiable, less overt than the former.

To close, Enforcing Order makes clear that practices an outsider might regard as deviant, if not illegal, are inscribed as proper in the moral economy of police work. Some officers, of course, manage to hold a less hostile (“them versus us”) view of the world, and some are sparing in their use of force; however, the passive loyalty they display to their peers and to the organization keeps them from voicing their reservations, and a “get along, go along” work ethic rules the day. The message Fassin brings the reader is unambiguous: the broader prerogatives given the police in France in the past decade and the aggressive forms of patrol work now undertaken by the anti-crime squads aggravate the very problems they are supposed to solve. What might be done to do away with such practices, given the blinkered complicity of high police officials, the courts, and the politicians, is a question Didier Fassin brings to light but, alas, cannot answer. Nor can we. But this is not a work dedicated to repairing, reforming, or dismantling the police force (although a sense of outrage lies beneath the surface), but an eyes-wide-open view of the organization itself and why it operates as it does. Written as a public anthropology piece to inform readers of the politics of law and order in France, the work is stunning.