Violence work: policing and power

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Abstract: Present *ad hoc* outcries about police excesses such as shootings of young black men on the streets and mass incarceration miss the point about the nature and role of the police, argues the author. Coining her own counter-category, 'violence work', she shows how the police carry out violence work for the state; policing being the quintessential translation of state power. In a considered argument taking in the history of colonial policing, the development of racial capitalism and US foreign intervention, the article discusses a number of fallacies about policing: that it is civilian and distinguishable from the military; that it is a public service rather than a private endeavour; and that it is locally based and municipally controlled. Policing is in fact the human-scale expression of the state. She discusses a number of state theorists from Adam Smith, to Poulantzas, Foucault, Agamben and Hall and contemplates the role of the state to the market. The piece lifts the assumptions about public safety, state/private sector, place and scale to reveal the ideological landscape that legitimates state-market violence.

Keywords: mass criminalisation and neoliberalism, Movement for Black Lives, police-military collaboration, private v public policing, race as a technology of rule, racial capitalism, state-market violence, 'violence work'

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When four agents of Blackwater USA were killed in Fallujah in 2004 and their bodies displayed on a bridge over the Euphrates River, Americans expressed outrage. Newspapers called the deaths 'slayings' and termed the hangings 'savagery … sheer bestial violence'.[1] In addition to the predictably Orientalist outcry against the 'barbarity' of the 'terrorists', outrage was also directed at the private contractor Blackwater, echoing the outrage directed at Halliburton for its war profiteering in the rebuilding of occupied Iraq.[2]

The critique of private military companies yearns for a simpler era when war was purely military, uncorrupted by private, for-profit operations. It shares much with the amnesia around the militarisation of policing, highlighted in 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, where police in combat gear added insult to the injury of their murder of young Michael Brown. As if US police were less racist or murderous before 2001, the coverage of this scandal placed Homeland Security at the bases of the military excesses of domestic police. Experts decrying events in Ferguson called the problem at best 'decades' old, pinning 'the *security-über-alles* fixation' on 9/11.[3] The projection of a purely civilian policing balances the imagining of a purely military warfighting machine, together reinforcing the framework that legitimises state violence. The categories of public, private, civilian and military are crucial to this legitimisation, validating state violence along its terrible continuum from public armies to private companies, soldiers to police, shifting to evade controversy, regulation, and opposition. The endorsement protestors lend to the object of their protest is particularly unfortunate in relation to the police, because protestors have both power and, right now, opportunity. Power because consent is absolutely vital to policing; opportunity because controversy around the police is currently so intense, the revival of conflict in St Louis in the fall of 2017 salting wounds still open to the bone. The dedicated and insightful Movement for Black Lives collaborates with a burgeoning body of activist scholarship on policing.[4] Together they redouble the urgency of old questions: why are police in modern democratic nations so devastatingly lethal? Why have the best attempts failed to mitigate their abuses?

Policing is so difficult to grasp and reform because its legitimacy is defended by powerful political arguments. These arguments shield policing from challenge, obscuring its raw, ugly essence, the violence it inflicts in the interests of capital. Racism also morphs in the face of these effective arguments, appearing to be an incidental error or the fault of individual people or a throwback that time will soon resolve, instead of what it really is, the fundamental technology of differentiation inextricable from the work of contemporary states. To pull policing and its labour into focus – to reveal police work as the brick-level labour of racial capitalism – I suggest a counter-category: 'violence work'.

Might *violence work* as a concept help dispel the arguments that legitimise policing? To take up this question, this article first works through some of those arguments, focusing in particular on the claims that police are civilian and public. The question of what it means to be public then moves the discussion over to the realm

of state theory, to contemplate the relationship of state to market. This thinking-through highlights the tremendous value of the concept of racial capitalism for clarifying the workings of race. It also targets the heart of the problem, the relationship of police to state power. With those buttresses in place, the logic of the concept of violence work then springs into focus. Then does the work of policing, stripped of its feathers of myth, divested of its ideological buffers, become available for those of us willing to face it with sober senses, to dream of the world we want.

Police mythologies

The arguments that legitimise the police are diverse. There are those that rely on a dichotomy between good and bad police (police are independent of the market except when corrupt, police are benign when behaving themselves), and others that back the populace into postures of grateful deference (police are public servants; their work is terribly dangerous). These self-evident alibis for superficial reform are individualising denials (the former) or saviour fantasies (the latter). Plus, they're inaccurate: police work is not actually very dangerous. Federal occupational health statistics show US police work to be relatively safe, nowhere near the top three fatality-prone occupations: agriculture, transportation and mining. Police aren't even the occupation most at risk of violent death. That honour falls to 'first-line supervisors of retail sales workers'.[5]

Other arguments, more potent because more complex, revolve around concepts of safety or security (police keep us 'safe' or are anchors of public 'security'), or take the concepts of legality and its inverse, criminality, as transparent (police uphold the law, police fight crime). Interestingly, if you ask what really makes people feel safe, very few will list 'police' among the answers.[6] Political theorists have begun to follow this logic through to deconstruct the trope of 'security'.[7]

The contention that police fight crime is probably their most important legitimising claim. Yet what is crime? The concept has sustained intense scrutiny from critical criminologists. They have pointed out that crime − and law, which defines crime − are deeply contingent, reflecting the biases of their time, and they challenge the equation of 'harm' and 'crime' by pointing out the intense harm inflicted by actions never designated crime such as war, pollution, or systemic medical neglect.[8] These challenges render 'crime' conceptually incoherent. It certainly survives as a category of experience for participants or police, but critical thinkers cannot maintain it as a category of analysis.

Even as a category of experience, however, crime is not the mainstay of police work. Police actually spend quite a small amount of their time on what they call crime. As researchers and practitioners alike acknowledge, crime-related tasks are a tiny portion of police officers' daily labour.[9] There is a mass of research showing that:

> criminal law enforcement is something that most police officers do with the
> frequency located somewhere between virtually never and very rarely. … less

than a third of time spent on duty is on crime-related work; that the percentage
of police effort devoted to traditional criminal law matters probably does not
exceed 10 per cent.[10]

Indeed, the infrequency with which police confront 'crime' shows how easily
police forces could be diminished. The other things police do could—and
should—be done by others: social workers, Emergency Medical Technicians, fire-
fighters, traffic directors, counsellors, neighbourhood associations, friends, and
so on. That, not so incidentally, is the core of a practical, stepwise process of
police abolition: begin to give to nonviolent agencies, piece by piece, the tasks
currently allotted to men and women in blue.

Many of the arguments legitimising police have been eloquently challenged by
careful and critical thinkers, while others are less frequently discussed, perhaps
because it is harder to see them as arguments. Three of these lurk within the
widespread notion that police work is primarily civilian, performed by govern-
ment employees at the local level. Looking closely at this uncontroversial state-
ment reveals what Roland Barthes called mythologies, claims presented as natural
but are actually deeply ideological.[11] First myth: police are civilian, not military.
Second: they are public, not private, that is, state (government) rather than mar-
ket agents. Third: they are local; they work for municipal or state bodies, never
leaving national territory. Simple as these notions may appear, they are actually
pointed political arguments, crying out for response.

Two of these arguments are adamantly defended: the claims that police are
civilian, and that they are public. Such claims are prescriptive and normative;
many people believe that police *should be* public and civilian. Charges of police
militarisation or privatisation can be serious political challenges. Notably, such
challenges recognise that in many cases they actually *are* private and/or military,
but see these as dangerous aberrations. Less controversial is the sense of police
geography (scale and territory), often taken for granted, as in the virtually unques-
tioned notion that police are local.

These three borders delimit police work so as to legitimise police power. Police
authority is justified when this trio of boundaries is granted. That assumption, so
valuable to police legitimacy, functions best when allowed to remain invisible
and unquestioned. We must therefore spotlight and interrogate it.

For police regularly cross whatever lines we think separate civilian from mili-
tary spheres, doggedly protect private interests or work for market employers,
travel abroad and operate at all scales of government up to the federal level, as
we will explore.[12] Revealing the borders of policing as fictions, however, is not
sufficient to counter the work they do to legitimise police. The borders of policing
are fortified with all kinds of material and affective investments. They anchor the
very belief in the democratic character of government, a belief most earnestly
desired. This works differently in kingdoms, companies, or in countries with
explicitly paramilitary police such as gendarmeries or constabularies, but in the
US, the popular myths that police are not for sale and of police vs military

mission, place, and lethality secure (some) citizens' consent to be policed. In this they are like national borders, which, as the field of border studies has affirmed, still exert tremendous force even as all sorts of crossings and mixtures show them to be more fluid than traditional political definitions allow. To look squarely at the hegemonic arguments advanced about the borders of policing can reveal how the popular notion of police achieves legitimacy – and lends the same to the idea of the state, I will go on to argue – by contrasting itself to concepts defined as outside it.

Defending police as civilian

A great range of people, from champions of the police defending their mission to protestors furious over 'militarisation' to neighbours yearning for the benevolent protector of childhood dreams, argue for the civilian nature of policing. This laborious rhetorical lifting actually reveals the opposite, pointing to the great effort required to insist, against all evidence to the contrary, upon the civilian status of the police.

The first barrier to such status is that it doesn't exist: there is no logical way to draw a clean line separating military from civilian spheres. The distinction is a vanishing horizon, retreating the closer one approaches. Popularly, it relies on differentia of mission (military attack, police protect), place (the military works abroad, police at home) or intensity (military action is more lethal). None of these is a bright divider; all fail to capture what police and armed forces actually do. Scholarly definitions shrug that military means associated with war while civilian is everything else.[13] Yet war and its preparations affect every facet of national life, even during peacetime.[14] The section of the Geneva Convention on the protection of civilians doesn't define *civilian* in the abstract, and gives a simple definition of *civilians*, plural, as non-combatants.[15] Despite the lack of definition of these terms, criminal justice scholars of police take their object to be civilian, happy to 'assume that studying the police and military is a mutually exclusive undertaking'.[16] This is equally true for scholars of the military, who also largely accept the integrity of these categories as given.[17] Like obscenity, the distinction relies on the recognition of the obvious, that classic 'function of power'.[18] Thus does Anthony Giddens call the military-civilian distinction 'flimsy', 'rarely clear-cut' and 'usually full of tension'.[19]

Yet US soldiers and cops have never been distinct. Since the Republic, when the Navy and Marines formed constabulary forces to combat piracy, banditry, and smuggling, 'overlapping police and military tasks' have been routine.[20] From the mid-nineteenth-century, US urban police embraced a military organisational model, even choosing military commanders for their leaders.[21] As commissioner of the New York City police, Theodore Roosevelt 'made little distinction between military and law-enforcement functions', contending that 'many of the principles … which obtain in the army applied equally to the administration of a police department.[22] Blurred lines extend into twentieth-century organisations such as

the Border Patrol, whose roots in the Texas Rangers confirm its paramilitary character, or the National Guard.[23]

Police and soldiers have worked together outside of US territory as well. Police swelled US war-fighting capacity in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Indian Wars, the Spanish-American clashes of 1898, the world wars, and on.[24] The Indian Wars, in some views 'more a prolonged series of police operations than actual wars',[25] involved the military under the civilian direction of Congress and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, their personnel in many cases then shifted to the overseas fronts of 1898. Over the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, US police expanded their global reach by travelling overseas in pursuit of fugitives and then to provide foreign police assistance, their power growing in direct relation to US global might.[26] In all these cases, police took their strategies and objects *to* theatres of war − the opposite of the trajectory imagined as 'militarisation'. Even in the case of the Vietnam War, one of the conflicts most blamed for 'militarisation', there was no simple army-to-police trail: weaponry was developed for *both* foreign and domestic use, particularly as the war seemed likely to end, and by companies that had developed in domestic markets.[27] Today, police-military collaborations and exchange sustain the war on terror, Abu Ghraib's 'military police' but one sore thumb of an example, and police as a matter of course train at military bases in sniper skills, SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) team work, and weapons use.[28]

If US police often feel their mission to be pro-active attack (a 'war on crime'), it is partly because of this cohabitation. Police and military are often in the same places, pursuing the same goals, applying the same lethal means. Following the suppression of rebels in the Philippines after 1898, for example, US police 'came home to turn the same lens on America, seeing its ethnic communities not as fellow citizens but as internal colonies requiring coercive controls'.[29] Domestically, the brunt of this mission miscegenation falls on African-Americans, disproportionately sighted in police crosshairs. Conflating them fully with targets abroad, police in Black areas 'view each person on the streets as a potential criminal or enemy'.[30]

The fiction of separate military and civilian spheres feeds off a fantasy of a civilian police, and feeds that fantasy in return. In fact, police and military are and have always been, in fundamental ways, inseparable. Twin vehicles of state violence, police and military rub up against each other in productive friction. 'Speculating that the police could be anything but paramilitary denies the existence of the inherent bond – historically, politically, and sociologically – between the police and military.'[31] This is not an accusation of corruption that calls for reform but an observation about form itself: policing is the quintessential translation of state power.

When police-inflicted violence rises, it is not 'militarisation' but the conjoined evolution of police and military forces that extends the killing fields. Protesting against police militarisation doesn't just miss this major target but strengthens it,

granting the categories with which the state cordons off its violence from chal-
lenge. The lethality of domestic and foreign violence workers evolves together,
their labours of mortal containment indebted to each other for material support
and ideological justification.

Defending the public police

Like the category 'civilian', the category 'public' awards state violence an alibi.
It works through tautology, via the assumption that when we are talking about
'police', we mean only and ever the uniformed public police. The simplest way
to make sure the police's public status is never compromised is to allow the
blue-clad officer of the peace to serve as definitional end point. This common
sense, as Gramsci taught us, produces a great fog. In Bittner's words: 'When
people are called upon to explain on what terms and to what ends the police
service is furnished they are unable to go beyond the most superficial and mis-
leading commonplace.'[32]

Perhaps this explains why such enthusiasm met Foucault's invitation to treat
'police' as a verb and to analyse the ways in which policing becomes collective,
with many people taking on the enforcing of social norms. While astute in its
understanding of the process of building hegemony, that kind of thinking turns
us away from the actual police. It proffers a slippery slope in which everyone
along the famous 'disciplinary continuum', out to the local kindergarten teacher,
would be included.

This dilemma of definition casts the would-be student of police back and forth
between unhelpful extremes, leaving us disputing only superficial aspects of
police practice. What if we wonder, instead, what it is that distinguishes public
from private police work? Are people actually doing different things with differ-
ent emblems on their shirt pockets?

These questions get to the 'complex, ambiguous ways', public and private
police – uniformed public employees and security forces hired by non-state enti-
ties, we should specify – relate to each other. Mixed or hybrid public-private
forms abound, and the boundaries of public and private are always shifting, 'not
natural divisions, but socially and historically constructed'.[33] Part of this, as any
observer with a single Marxist hair on their body knows, involves the public
police's long labour in the service of capital. Public police as a matter of course
breach the public-private divide, keeping the 'dangerous classes' in place, pro-
tecting financial interests, preserving social order. But it is not only that public
police cross over to private protection. The *formally* private police must also be
approached with a clear vision of their complex intertwinings with public police.
That is, not only have public police long laboured in the service of capital, but
private police do the work of the state.

Private policing supported colonial ventures by European corporations. The
British South African, Royal Nigerian, Imperial British East Africa, and East India
companies all had their own proprietary police.[34] Private police predated the 1830s

public police, and the two have co-existed ever since, drawing water for both market and state. Prior to the creation of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1909, the for-profit William J. Burns International Detective Agency and Pinkerton National Detective Agency composed the only US national police force, paid by the state via government contracts. Those agencies were less displaced than absorbed into the FBI, which built on their records systems and drew personnel from their ranks. Pinkerton, Burns, and Wackenhut, founded in 1954 − the 'big three' − are large, active, underappreciated pieces of US police history. They formed the first centralised criminal records system, and shaped US law and practice for cops in all manner of uniform.[35] Their existence was dependent on federal contracts and nourished through policies that placed public coffers in their reach, such as mandating security for federally funded research, and government bodies took all sorts of measures that created a broad climate of support.[36]

When government law enforcement began its obscene swelling in the 1970s, private policing got in on the windfall. The big three's revenues 'more than tripled between 1963 and 1969', nearly doubling again as the 1970s unfolded.[37] Private policing had been on a dramatic upwards swing since the end of the second world war anyway. So startling was this rate of growth that observers have called it a 'quiet revolution' − though a 'rebirth' rather than a novelty.[38] Public and private policing have not just grown in parallel, but together, intertwined, so that '[t]here are currently no functions performed by public policing agencies that are also not somewhere and sometimes performed by private security actors'.[39] No bright dividing line.

Despite the fact that we see it everywhere and all around us, private security fails to rise to the level of visibility that would make it a part of public consciousness. Great discursive labour − political argument − is successfully foreclosing the view of the overlap and equivalence of public and private policing.

Why must policing be so meticulously, energetically represented as public? In part to maintain the fiction of separate public and private spheres, or state and market broadly. As private policing scholar Les Johnston comments, public-private divisions in policing are 'taken as natural and self-evident distinctions. But in fact, the extent of their overlap makes simple opposition between them (and related oppositions between the state and the market, the formal and the informal) impossible to sustain.'[40] Observing the actual relationship between public and private policing prompts the correlated insight that state and market are so deeply intertwined as to be in practice and in essence inextricable. While there may be fragments that appear to belong to one side, the wholes exist only in their join.

Market-state-market

The border between public and private spheres, the linchpin of the autonomy of state and market, is vehemently defended, for it is the cornerstone of liberal capitalism, and all the more so of neoliberal capitalism. Classical liberal economists

such as Adam Smith imagined public and private as cleanly distinct. Smith posited *homo economicus* as age-old and markets as naturally evolving long before states sprung up within them. Karl Polanyi's 1944 *The Great Transformation* disputed this speculation. Markets need states, Polanyi showed; never has there been an independently-operating, self-regulating market. Market economies grew not naturally but due to 'highly artificial stimulants administered to the body social' and would destroy themselves and society, left to their own devices.[41] In the 1970s, political economist Nicos Poulantzas extended this logic, roundly rejecting the notion that the political could be autonomous from the economic. Even more emphatically than Polanyi, he called the relation 'inherent and theoretically unbreakable'.[42]

Capitalism was the structuring matrix of the state, and the state returned the favour. Like chicken and egg, neither comes first: the state was 'capitalist from the start, and not … an institution inserted into "capitalist society"'.[43] Starting from the other end, capitalism had the state from the start: 'there has never been a minute in the history of capitalism lacking the organized, centralized, and reproducible capacities of the state'.[44] The inseparable nature of state and market in capitalist democracies means that the ostensibly democratic US state has always been as deeply involved in markets as are socialist or fascist states. Perhaps we should speak of the 'state-market' as a joined, if internally heterogeneous, phenomenon.

No wonder it is Marxist scholars who recognise that the notion that state and market are distinct is 'an illusion, a trick, to fool the powerless into thinking that the state is neutral and above and beyond such sordid transactions'.[45] Among the many scholars who have followed this thread,[46] Timothy Mitchell has added wonderfully helpful ways to think *around* the 'imaginary coherence' of the state. Recognising that what we call '"the state" arises from techniques that enable mundane material practices to take on the appearance of an abstract, nonmaterial form', Mitchell proposes that scholars seek to historicise the production of 'state effects'.[47]

The state-effect has a function, Mitchell expands: it limits claims for equality and justice by carving up discursive and material space,

> by acknowledging certain areas as matters of public concern subject to popular decision while establishing other fields to be administered under alternative methods of control. For example, governmental practice can demarcate a private sphere governed by rules of property, a natural world governed by laws of nature, or markets governed by principles of economics. Democratic struggles become a battle over the distribution of issues… [48]

This is precisely the purpose of the division between public and private, whether argued in relation to police or the state.

Mitchell suggests that the mid-twentieth century saw an expansion of supposed laws of 'the market' as an 'alternative technology of rule', effectively

excluding more of the world from democratic contestation.[49] One name for this expansion is neoliberalism, the philosophy emergent since the 1970s that posits the separability of political from economic realms, and coaches its followers to assume *and desire* a radical autonomy of state from market. The paladins of neoliberalism prefer the freedom of capital to that of the nearly eight million people in the US now under some form of correctional control.[50]

The rise of mass criminalisation under neoliberalism is no coincidence. A critical aspect of the market as 'alternative technology of rule' is race, that central engine of post-war prison expansion. Race itself is a technic of governance, a way to separate, define, and control populations – as Foucault put it, 'a way of fragmenting the field of the biological that power controls'.[51] Like highways or telecommunications, as Gilmore and Gilmore agree, 'racist ideological and material practices are infrastructure that needs to be updated, upgraded, and modernized periodically'.[52]

Thinking of race as a technology of rule, reworked over time, helps clarify its relationship to capitalism. Race has been fundamental to capitalism from the first. From its emergence, capitalism made race 'its epistemology, its ordering principle, its organizing structure, its moral authority, its economy of justice, commerce, and power'.[53] Capitalism, Chris Chen points out, has always required 'the systematic racialisation of [unfree] labour through the creation of an array of effectively non-sovereign raced and gendered subjects'.[54] That is, capitalism has always been 'racial capitalism', as Robin Kelley explains:

> Capitalism and racism … did not break from the old order but rather evolved from it to produce a modern world system of 'racial capitalism' dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide. Capitalism was 'racial' not because of some conspiracy to divide workers or justify slavery and dispossession, but because racialism had already permeated Western feudal society. The first European proletarians were racial subjects (Irish, Jews, Roma or Gypsies, Slavs, etc.).[55]

Given racial capitalism's roots in feudalism, it is no wonder that even older notions of the state, tightly tied to the person of the prince, are racialised in concept.[56] Meanwhile the modern version emerged in and of the dynamics of colonialism and its denials of humanity to some.[57]

Police have been essential to the functioning of racial capitalism. Many observers agree that race matters to the activities of police, but they see this relevance as incidental or correctible through police sensitivity training or better regulation. The link is deeper and different. Any analysis of US policing must consider its active racialisation of Black and brown subjects, constant since the US police's structural formation as an anti-black force.[58] The police power as laid out by the Supreme Court is 'little more than the benevolent articulation of state racism in the name of the public good'.[59] This is an essential undergirding to discussions that may not always explicitly address race. For whoever says 'state' in

discussing the last three or four hundred years, says 'market', 'capitalism', 'violence', and 'race', and whoever says any of those, says 'police'.

States of policing

Looking closely at police reveals something much more abstract and harder to see: the nature of the state. Police and state are differentiated by degree: police are the human-scale expression of the state. Scholars of politics and police have phrased this relation in compelling ways. Adam Smith understood police as 'the science of government in a broad sense'.[60] Agamben pulls out the tautology: 'Police is the relationship of a state with itself.'[61] Other thinkers expand: 'every police agent embodies a minute replica of the state'.[62] 'As a core component of the state's monopoly on the legitimate means of coercion, police practices epitomize sovereignty in action.'[63]

The juridical principle of the police power shows the relationship of police to state most clearly. Dating back to the Greeks, this legal tenet is focused not on crime – it could not be, as the notion that the state should be responsible for crime developed no earlier than the late nineteenth-century – but on abstractions: order, or the 'public good', a 'most expansive, and most amorphous' power.[64] As Walter Benjamin explained, 'a consideration of the police institution encounters nothing essential at all. Its power is formless, like its nowhere-tangible, all-pervasive, ghostly presence in the life of civilized states.'[65] Giorgio Agamben reflects: 'in the juridical theory, the police is a kind of black hole'.[66] The early theorists observed 'The police includes everything'; 'The police's true object is man', Foucault reviewed, conveying their sense that police jurisdiction is essentially infinite.[67]

Many people understand that police do things that seem beyond their core role. These days it's not uncommon to hear even people friendly to the police (or police themselves) complain that police have taken on too much, assumed tasks that were never imagined as their purview.[68] It is certainly true that the US in the last forty years has defunded every conceivable social programme from health care to education to housing and shunted the money into the dismal non-solution of the criminal justice system.[69] Yet to say that *anything* falls outside police purview is to get policing wrong in principle. Policing can be as much of a swollen behemoth as we allow.

The reason the police power varies so widely is it carries out the functions of governance. *Police* (in the singular, as in the legal principle) does what the state-market needs to do, and that is potentially infinite. The power to govern *is* the police power; the police refract that breadth in practice.

What, then, is the core of police labour? Is there some essence of police work that could not be taken on by other agents? If 'crime' doesn't hold up as a category of analysis, what does constitute its inalienable centre? One productive line of thinking lies in a classic formulation from police scholar Egon Bittner, who observed in 1970 that it is the potential use of force that constitutes the quotidian power of policing, the actual application in most cases unnecessary.[70] Here is one

way to distinguish work that must be done by police from work that could be done by others: work that relies upon violence or the threat thereof. Violence work.

Violence work

We can now connect the pieces. Violence is fundamental to police because it also lies at the heart of the state. Invoking the Weberian definition of the state, and locating the police at its crux, Bittner called the police 'a mechanism for the distribution of situationally justified force in society'.[71] Policing (like soldiering) translates the state's most basic component, the monopoly on legitimate violence. At the heart of police labour (again like the labour of soldiers) lies 'the state sanctioned capacity to use physical force'.[72]

Police realise − they *make real* − the core of the power of the state. That is what calling police 'violence workers' can convey. It doesn't mean the work is always violent. It is not intended to indict the people who are police officers as bad people, vicious in personality or in their daily routines. It is about what their labour rests upon and therefore conveys into the material world.[73] It takes work to distribute state violence. Somebody has to do it.

The violence police sheathe in their scabbards is sometimes hard to see, and many people understand it as exceptional. They think police only use violence in extreme cases or when cops go bad, as in the wrongful use of force. That point of view misses the *potential* violence that is the essence of their power. Yes, the violence of the police is often latent or withheld, but it functions precisely via that suspension. It need not manifest, because people fear it and grant it legitimacy, in direct extension of the legitimacy they grant the state − and vice-versa: consenting to being policed is one of the most important ways people legitimise the state itself.

One necessarily confusing aspect of such a usage is the ambiguity of the idea of 'violence'. Violence exists in a great continuum from the *thunk* of an impact to the most attenuated inflictions of epistemic, symbolic, psychic, and economic injury, as a great many theorists, from Agamben and Arendt to Taussig and Tilly, have pondered.[74] What kind of violence is inflicted by violence work? Certainly some of it involves neither gun nor nightstick but the absence of nutritious food to eat or conditions of labour that destroy the body. Some call this 'structural' violence, a concept useful in calling attention to the consequences of injustice and to seeing violence as constitutive of power.[75] But structural violence can suggest an amorphous problem, unconnected to institutions, too intractable to combat. Even this sort of violence comes to function in specific institutions with histories and futures, and has real people behind it. To exercise its power requires work − violence work.

The gamut of violence is best grasped expansively, as Gilmore does with her incisive definition, 'the cause of premature deaths'.[76] This capacious prescription includes all the forms of violence beyond physical coercive force that constrict

and immiserate, leading people to an early grave. It corresponds with Gilmore's definition of racism, 'the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death', and indeed, racism is the highly logical framework in which to understand the toil of violence workers.[77]

In the most expansive reading of this definition, a wide range of people might be engaged in violence work, down to that legendary local kindergarten teacher. For argument's sake, let us narrow the focus to its smallest subset, people whose labours are enabled by the fact that at some point they can bring out the handcuffs. Police are far from alone in this category, joined by people in any branch of the military, prisons or detention centres, high-level agencies such as marshals or customs officials, private security companies and corporate security forces. Moving across the categories of military and civilian, from public to private, and over all levels of scale, 'violence work' requires us to broaden our vision to include the range of workers whose activity depends upon the threat or potential for violence, because their authority relies on that threat. Indeed, 'violence work' is useful precisely because it requires this broadening.

The essence of police work extends, therefore, beyond the patrol or the service call and far beyond the uniformed, public police to the much larger category of people who do violence work. People authorised to inflict violence might even be ratified by a non-state agent such as a private company, or be sanctioned *de facto*, as are civilians whose violence is yoked to state purpose in mobs, gated communities, poor neighbourhoods or prisons.[78]

'Violence workers' is a more disturbing term than euphemisms such as 'law enforcement' or 'security guards'. It effectively conveys the full panoply of people whose work rests on a promise of violence, thereby displacing some of the weight of the assumption that policing is only or even primarily a state project or that police are benign and civilian. 'Violence work' highlights the enormous range of activities such people do and the wide parameters within which they do them.

'Violence work' as a term therefore points to a paradox: police both overflow and fail to fill their container. Police do things that do not need to be violence work, and violence work is done by lots of people other than the uniformed public police.

This paradox is itself a reflection of the state's non-confinement to its supposed borders. For the state, like police, is buttressed discursively, mythically, by the distinctions public/private, military/civilian, and domestic/foreign territory. A democratic state is separate from the market, or so the story goes; it uses military action only beyond its borders, treating its citizens to gentler civilian strictures; and it acts independently from other states, within its territory so that the sovereign corresponds to a bounded imagined community.

As with the myths clouding 'police', the state is constrained by its borders only conceptually, even as it relies on them for legitimacy. The state-market split

pretends that the government helps the afflicted, rather than creating their ills. The military-civilian divide pretends that the violence inflicted at home is milder than that wreaked abroad, rather than inflicted differentially by population ('race'), geography and class. Notions of national territory pretend a state serves the people residing within its borders rather than global elites.

Conclusion

What should we learn from this tangle of equivalences? For people hoping to curb the abuses of US police, the lessons involve the objects of protest. Opposing the militarisation or privatisation of policing is counterproductive. To shrink or dismantle the police is the surest and perhaps the only way to diminish their abuses.

Another, deeper implication of this line of argument is an indictment of the state form. At the very least, it leaves us with little reason to invest hope in the state under capitalism. This will appeal to people who lean towards scepticism in relation to the state, from prison abolitionists to anarchists of varying stripes. It will resonate with anthropology's interest in groups who live ably without states, and indeed, understand *state* as the source of violence rather than its solution.[79] Thoroughgoing critiques of the state are difficult, however, for many readers to swallow.

The urgency and scope of state-market violence make it incumbent to wonder why the implications of this argument are so difficult to accept – even for people who accompany most of the steps. The affective investment in the idea of the state, and the corresponding investment in the notion that a human-scale branch of state power could live up to its ideals and genuinely 'keep us safe', go very deep. While many people misunderstand the nature of police, policing, and the state, it is not the kind of misunderstanding that can be simply corrected. The idea of a benign protector, the state, looking after us all via its proxy, police, is devastatingly seductive.

To begin to dismantle this investment, the structures of privilege and marginalisation that make some people desire state violence will have to be dislodged. State violence that might hurt others more than oneself is actually a reasonable choice for subjects formed in the crucible of the carceral state, even if it consigns their lives to misery as well.[80] This is true not only for the apocryphal white Trump (or Brexit) voter, but for people of colour recruited to the defence of racial capitalism, given a system of rights and law in which 'recuperating social value *requires* rejecting the other Other'.[81] We must work to realign desire for Big Brother given that racialised populations are rendered criminal, terrorist, or alien as an *effect* of the operation of law. Appeals to the state cannot save us from the state.

What could alter the investment in the notions of police and state, then, is that age-old bottom line: resource redistribution.[82] Not, this time, by the state-market. Energetic, capable activists in the state-focused movements of the 1930s to the

1960s were met with a process of redistribution *up*, robbing from the poor to give to the rich. Violence work was crucial, as rising inequality was both facilitated and answered by expanded violence. The explosion of prisons and policing in the US − the carceral boom − is both product and engine of the state-market refusal to share the mid-century's wealth.[83]

'Violence work' reveals aspects of our world that are otherwise buried under the weight of assumptions about public safety, state, private sector, place and scale. Lifting that weight, we reveal the ideological landscape that legitimates state-market violence. We interrupt arguments that contain public criticism of the police at home and of the military in its wars abroad, and that recirculate tragic conceptions of the varying value of human lives. We see that police work is the work of the state, and the work of the state is violence, racialised in the interests of capital. Perhaps we also see, over and beyond all that, a better way to live.

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