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Protection from Violence: Making Space Public in the Streets of Johannesburg

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Violence consistently undermines efforts to make space public. However, this does not mean that violence and public space can be meaningfully studied in isolation from one another. Rather, it may mean that we need to be even more closely attuned to the reasons why the process of making space public frequently springs from – and results in – violent acts. I argue that we can better understand how violence makes (and un-makes) public space if we pay more attention to the concept of ‘protection’. Protection relationships can create contexts in which public dialogue can occur, but relations of protection are themselves the object of contestation and dialogue, and the dynamics of protection can promote unequal, arbitrary outcomes. I illustrate and further explore this dilemma by examining an ‘extreme’ case, where achieving protection constitutes the core public problem at hand: the neighbourhoods of Hillbrow and Berea in inner-city Johannesburg, South Africa. I use this exploratory case study to call for more attention to the manner in which violence feeds into the ongoing process of making space public.

Keywords: violence; crime; South Africa; Johannesburg; public space

Making Space Public

In recent years, public space has (re-)emerged as a crucial site for the transformation of political communities *and* a crucial site of social exclusion. Protest movements associated with Occupy and the Arab Spring have heightened our awareness of the situated and grounded nature of democratic, deliberative politics.¹ At the same time, these developments have drawn attention to the fragility of public space and the public sphere, and the latent potential for violence to undo the gains made by protest and renewed public debate. While protest movements give life to public space, violence – particularly violence sanctioned by the state – can rapidly close down and undermine the radical potential of situated public spheres. This article seeks to contribute to our understanding of public space by thinking through the relationship between public space, violence and protection.

To some degree, violence is the very opposite of what ought to occur in public space. In the hypothetical *agora*, people are supposed to gather, associate and resolve shared problems through dialogue, negotiation and consensus rather than intimidation, coercion and

1 D. Vigneswaran, K. Iveson and S. Low, ‘Problems, Publicity and Public Space: A Resurgent Debate’, *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 49, 3 (2017), pp. 496–502.

bloodshed. If violent persons and actions determine who gains access to – or can speak in – a given place, to what extent does it make sense to call it ‘public’? Surely such places may be more appropriately designated as sites of domination, where the mightiest determine the boundaries of the polity and how its problems are framed and resolved?

This article argues for a more nuanced approach to the relationship between violence and public space. More specifically, it suggests that the fact that violence consistently undermines efforts to make space public does not necessarily mean that violence and public space can be meaningfully studied in isolation from or opposition to one another. Rather, it may mean that we need to be even more closely attuned to the reasons why the process of making space public frequently springs from – and results in – violent acts. Hence a full understanding of how space is made public requires further exploration of the generative and destructive role of violent acts and behaviour.

In this respect, I take my cue from Stéphane Tonnelat and Cédric Terzi.² They encourage us to move beyond categorical definitions of what public space is, taking specific aim at efforts to define public space as simply all those places that are accessible to everyone. While these sorts of definitions may be useful for planners’ efforts to differentiate between the uses of places in an urban context, they are less helpful in determining where public spheres ‘take place’. Drawing on John Dewey, they ask us to adopt a more process-oriented account of how space is made public. According to this approach, we cannot meaningfully separate urban spaces into categories of ‘public’ and ‘non-public’.³ Rather, ‘publicness’ is a potentiality latent in a range of urban spaces, which may or may not be fulfilled. Building on this idea, I argue that the question as to whether a given place is ‘public’ cannot be answered by way of mere reference to whether or not violent acts tend to occur there, but only by determining how violence shapes concrete efforts to realise a place’s potentiality for becoming public.

The concept of ‘protection’ can help us to understand better how violence makes (and unmakes) public space. The first section of this article develops the foundations of this claim by engaging with the literature on the relationship between violence and public space. I argue that the ambivalence in this relationship originates in the protection dilemma. Protection relationships can create contexts in which public dialogue can occur, but they are themselves the object of contestation and dialogue, and the dynamics of protection can promote unequal and arbitrary outcomes. I illustrate and further explore this dilemma by examining an ‘extreme’ case, where achieving protection constitutes the core public problem at hand: the neighbourhoods of Hillbrow and Berea in inner-city Johannesburg, South Africa. I then offer a portrait of the empirical basis of the article, describing how the residents of this neighbourhood came to construe their streets as a protection problem. The narrative describes how a group of civilian street patrollers in Hillbrow/Berea morphed from a local policing lobby into a neighbourhood watch patrol and then a violent vigilante force in order to understand why, despite the fact that violence is a crucial feature of space becoming public, violence also consistently threatens to transform public places back into zones of confrontation and fear. In my concluding remarks, I reflect on the implications of these findings for our efforts to understand the production of public space in locations that are less violently extreme.

Violence Creates and Destroys Public Space

The ‘public’ is a crucial dimension of the way we think about the formation of political community. The ‘public sphere’ may be understood as a realm of dialogue within which we

2 C. Terzi and S. Tonnelat, ‘The Publicization of Public Space’, *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 49, 3 (2017), pp. 519–36.

3 J. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, Swallow Press, 1957).

rationally make collective decisions. ‘Public spaces’ may be understood as the physical places in which members of the public commune and engage one another in dialogue.

We have commonly conceptualised the ‘public’ as disconnected from or devoid of violence. The ‘public’, in the modern liberal imaginary, has been constituted as a sphere where decisions and actions take place in accordance with dialogue and reason, as opposed to violence and domination.⁴ Similarly, public space has been defined as characteristically non-violent or devoid of force. As Don Mitchell describes, US Supreme Court doctrine assumes that ‘orderly discourse can be preserved in public forums only to the degree that both spaces and the discourse are devoid of force’.⁵ However, as Mitchell’s work demonstrates, this definition introduces a tension into the concept of ‘public space’ because the very process of excluding forceful actors from public spaces has itself involved the use of force. On the one hand, violence has been consistently used to prevent those perceived to be ‘unruly’ and ‘irrational’ from speaking and participating in public spaces. On the other hand, these same groups have consistently used force in order to lay claim to public space and the right to be heard: ‘it is only by being “violent” or forceful that excluded groups have gained access to the public spaces of democracy’.⁶

If Mitchell’s work directs us to the way in which maintaining control over access has necessarily involved violence, feminist research draws our attention to the manner in which access is more routinely determined by the social organisation of violence.⁷ This work explores the manner in which acts of violence structure – in particular – women’s access to space. Our spatial awareness of the distribution of violence, particularly the threat of violent victimisation, strongly conditions which parts of the city we can move through and inhabit. Women are perhaps the group that is most acutely aware of the potential for criminal predation in public. Women are not only commonly violently victimised across a range of potentially public settings but are the objects of a highly moralistic discourse that implies that they must view many spaces as potential sources of danger, particularly for the city’s prototypical ‘victim’: the unaccompanied woman at night.⁸

These works draw our attention to the complex relationship between violence and public space. Violence can shut down the potential for reasoned dialogue; it can be used to claim and reclaim spaces deemed to be public; it can itself be the object of public concern. Political theory has commonly encouraged us to think of these forms of violence as separate from one another – often through an artificial chronological separation between ‘originating’ and ‘implementing’ violence.⁹ This is one of the reasons why acts of civil disobedience are so symbolically and rhetorically powerful, because they draw our attention – by laying claim to space, obstructing the path of authority figures and withdrawing compliance – to the originating violence that underlies the authority of public institutions. This article explores how the various forms of violence that constitute public spaces in fact occur simultaneously as actors taking part in concrete social struggles seek to convey and ascribe meaning to their

4 J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1991).

5 D. Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (New York, Guilford Press, 2003), p. 52.

6 *Ibid.*

7 G. Valentine, ‘The Geography of Women’s Fear’, *Area*, 21, 4 (1989), pp. 385–90; G. Valentine, ‘Images of Danger: Women’s Sources of Information About the Spatial Distribution of Male Violence’, *Area*, 24, 1 (1992), pp. 22–9; R.H. Pain, ‘Social Geographies of Women’s Fear of Crime’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 22, 2 (1997), pp. 231–44; R. Pain, ‘Place, Social Relations and the Fear of Crime: A Review’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 24, 3 (2000), pp. 365–87; S. Khan, S. Phadke and S. Ranade (eds), *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* (Mumbai, Penguin, 2011).

8 Cf. A.K. Franck, ‘A(nother) Geography of Fear: Burmese Labour Migrants in George Town, Malaysia’, *Urban Studies*, 53, 15 (2016), pp. 3206–22.

9 Cf. A. Sarat and T.R. Kearns, *Law’s Violence* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2009).

'public' dialogues and conflicts. In doing so, it also demonstrates how difficult it is to create genuinely public spaces when the question of what constitutes 'legitimate' violence is itself in dispute.

In thinking through these problems, I again find the approach of feminist theorists illuminating. Their work draws our attention to relations of 'protection'.¹⁰ Protection may be defined as all those acts that mitigate the risk of violence. Protection includes prevention (acts that prevent actors from committing violent acts), defence (acts that physically halt or undermine a violent act) and remedy (acts to provide redress or compensate for a violent act that has been committed). The capacity to prevent, defend and remedy violence is unevenly distributed across society. So some will inevitably call on others' help. 'Protection' refers to the set of contingent relationships between providers and seekers of protection.¹¹ Feminist scholars have focused on the way in which a paternalist language of protection has been used to justify the adoption of sovereign power, legitimate gender discrimination and suppress dissent against decisions to make war. In grounding their analysis in a logic of 'protection', this literature also suggests that violence does not coincidentally or occasionally produce exclusionary spaces. Rather, it consistently promotes such outcomes.

Feminist authors follow in the footsteps of a much deeper historical sociologist tradition in using the concept of protection to question the legitimacy of patriarchal protection guarantees. This literature offers three reasons why protection ought to be viewed as a 'racket', in which providers of protection are collectively positioned to dictate the terms upon which services are offered. First, protection markets tend naturally towards oligopoly, in which a limited range of actors have the capacity to offer meaningful protection from violent acts, so that those who seek protection have a limited range of choices of provider.¹² Second, and relatedly, people seeking protection generally lack the capacity to resort to violence and therefore struggle to acquire and deploy leverage in their relationships with providers of protection, who commonly possess violent means.¹³ Third, providers of protection often have a perverse incentive to increase or maintain people's risk of harm, thereby increasing the value of the protection services that they have to offer.¹⁴

These observations should not lead us to conclude that protection relations are inherently illegitimate, but to recognise that so-called 'publics' are rarely in a position to decide who provides protection in a given context. In most cases, questions of who constitutes a legitimate provider of protection are simply taken for granted, as office wielders, uniformed officials and representatives of the 'state' assume the mantle. This unthinking acceptance of the authority of those wielding state symbols is possibly one of the enduring manifestations of the institution of sovereignty. In many contexts, however, there is no clearly defined institutional locus of protection, such as a legitimate police force or military.¹⁵ In these contexts, people must actively negotiate protection relationships in 'real time', and, in so

10 J.H. Stiehm, 'The Protected, the Protector, the Defender', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 5, 3–4 (1982), pp. 367–76; I.M. Young, 'The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29, 1 (2003), pp. 1–25; S.R. Peterson, 'Coercion and Rape: The State as a Male Protection Racket', in M. Vetterling-Bruggin, F.A. Elliston and J. English (eds), *Feminism and Philosophy* (Totowa, Littlefield, Adams, 1977), pp. 360–71.

11 D. Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1996).

12 F.C. Lane, 'Economic Consequences of Organized Violence', *Journal of Economic History*, 18, 4 (1958), pp. 401–17.

13 C. Tilly, 'War Making and State Making as Organized Crime', in P.B. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer and T. Skocpol (eds), *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 169–91.

14 J. Pearce, 'Perverse State Formation and Securitized Democracy in Latin America', *Democratization*, 17, 2 (2010), pp. 286–306.

15 E. Bittner, *The Functions of the Police in Modern Society* (Chevy Chase, National Institute of Mental Health, 1970); B. Jauregui, 'Beatings, Beacons, and Big Men: Police Disempowerment and Delegitimation in India', *Law and Social Inquiry*, 38, 3 (2013), pp. 643–69.

doing, construct public space and public spheres as they go. It is this ongoing struggle to constitute public spaces in and through negotiations around the terms of protection that I want to focus on in this piece.

Before moving on, it is perhaps worth explaining why I see the concept of protection as providing a particularly useful lens on processes of making public as compared with related concepts such as 'security' or 'safety'. What seems to be its greatest value is its inherently realist assessment of the underlying character of social relations. Whereas the concepts of 'security' and 'safety' posit the idea of a realisable state in which individuals and groups are emancipated from the threat of violence, the concept of protection insists that the relations of violence are structured in an inherently unequal and, in important respects, paradoxical way.

Hillbrow as an 'Extreme Case'

In order to explore the purchase of this concept further, I examine a context where the search for protection lies at the heart of the struggle for the streets. In some contexts, violence in public is an aberration rather than the norm. The vast majority of the polity endorses the right of a single actor to arbitrate and sanction violence. In these settings, it is relatively common to assume that protection refers to a relationship between designated providers and clients rather than a problem that a given public must organise to resolve.

None the less, we can think of many places where questions of protection are central to the question of whether space becomes public. It is with this in mind that this article directs attention to the inner-city neighbourhoods of Hillbrow and Berea in Johannesburg.

In contemporary South Africa in general, violence is a very 'public' problem. Here, we may make four inter-related observations. First, due to South Africa's unique political history, the police are not immediately recognised as legitimate providers of public protection, but have rather more commonly been seen as sources of violent predation.¹⁶ Second, South Africa reports comparatively high levels of violent crime.¹⁷ Third, after a period in which elites attempted to ignore this issue, violent crime is now a key topic at all levels of political discourse – from State of the Union addresses to informal banter in the back of a taxi.¹⁸ Fourth, and most important for the purposes of this article, crime prevention has become the object of a wide variety of civic activity. This ranges from the relatively impersonal process of contributing funds to a neighbourhood's private security arrangements to the more active role of participating in community policing meetings, to full-fledged vigilante work.¹⁹ This selection of an 'extreme' case is particularly useful for exploratory

16 J. Steinberg, *Thin Blue: The Unwritten Rules of Policing South Africa* (Cape Town, Jonathan Ball, 2008).

17 J. Burger, C. Gould and G. Newham, 'The State of Crime in South Africa: An Analysis of the SAPS Crime Statistics for 2009/10', *South African Crime Quarterly*, 34 (2010), pp. 3–12; C. Gould, J. Burger and G. Newham, 'The SAPS Crime Statistics: What They Tell Us – and What They Don't', *South African Crime Quarterly*, 42 (2012), pp. 3–12.

18 J. Comaroff and J.L. Comaroff, 'Figuring Crime: Quantifacts and the Production of the Un/Real', *Public Culture*, 18, 1 (2006), pp. 209–46.

19 C. Benit-Gbaffou, S. Didier and M. Morange, 'Communities, the Private Sector and the State – Contested Forms of Security Governance in Cape Town and Johannesburg', *Urban Affairs Review*, 43, 5 (2008), pp. 691–717; J. Hornberger, *Policing and Human Rights: The Meaning of Violence and Justice in the Everyday Policing of Johannesburg* (London, Routledge, 2011); S. Jensen, 'The Security and Development Nexus in Cape Town: War on Gangs, Counterinsurgency and Citizenship', *Security Dialogue*, 41, 1 (2010), pp. 77–97; L. Buur, 'Reordering Society: Vigilantism and Expressions of Sovereignty in Port Elizabeth's Townships', *Development and Change*, 37, 4 (2006), pp. 735–57; L. Buur, 'The Sovereign Outsourced: Local Justice and Violence in Port Elizabeth', in T.B. Hansen and F. Stepputat (eds.), *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants and States in the Postcolonial World* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 192–217; L. Buur and S. Jensen, 'Introduction: Vigilantism and the Policing of Everyday Life in South Africa', *African Studies*, 63, 2 (2004), pp. 139–52; M. Marks, C. Shearing and J. Wood, 'Who Should the Police Be? Finding a New Narrative for Community Policing in South Africa', *Police Practice and*

research, in which the goal is not to generalise about a broader family of cases but specifically to generate richer theoretical insights into a particular variable or relationship.²⁰

South African civilians' efforts to secure themselves and one another have not resulted in the emergence of a single policing model or policing norm. Rather, policing arrangements are united by what they lack: a single dominant actor that is widely recognised as having the sole responsibility for providing protection. To some extent, this has been the deliberate purpose of policing reform in the post-apartheid era. Recognising the illegitimacy of the South African Police Services (SAPS) in the eyes of the public,²¹ one of the ambitions of policing reforms has been to 'democratise' policing, primarily through the development of community policing forums.²² These forums were originally seen not simply as ways in which the South African public is supposed to subject the police to scrutiny but as sites where the basic goals of local policing are initiated and debated. Increasingly, community policing forums have been encouraged to take far more active roles in public policing itself, reporting crimes, conducting surveillance and performing patrols in public spaces.²³ In this context, we have seen the emergence of a variety of 'hybrid policing' structures, which include various combinations of federal police, local police, publicly and privately funded security companies, neighbourhood watch committees, vigilantes and criminal protection rackets.²⁴ This pluralisation of policing has not necessarily dulled the spectre of state-provided security in a South African context. Rather, even those actors who fundamentally undermine the claim of the SAPS to separate and unique violent authority often appeal to the symbolic imagery and formal institutions of the police.²⁵

This article will not attempt to offer a portrait of the varying policing approaches across the city of Johannesburg. Instead, it aims to provide an account of how and why a very specific policing hybrid emerged in my field site of Hillbrow/Berea in response to the problem of protection in public space. Hillbrow/Berea has been a site of major social and demographic transformation in the 21st century. During the apartheid era, the Hillbrow/Berea neighbourhoods were famous for their largely white, middle-class inhabitants and for their edgy entertainment scene.²⁶ From the early 1990s, Hillbrow became initially one of the first areas of mixed racial residence and then, increasingly, the preferred destination for black South Africans and for immigrants from elsewhere in Africa, including homeowners and renters of both middle and working classes. During this period – accentuated by large-scale flight of white residents and businesses to the suburbs – Hillbrow also became renowned as a locus of urban decay, poverty and criminality.²⁷

The name 'Hillbrow' is often used to invoke a highly stylised image of criminality and policing in contemporary Johannesburg and South Africa. However, policing norms in the

Research: An International Journal, 10, 2 (2009), pp. 145–55; T.R. Samara, *Cape Town after Apartheid: Crime and Governance in the Divided City* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

20 J. Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006).

21 Steinberg, *Thin Blue*.

22 C.D. Shearing, 'Transforming Security: A South African Experiment', in H. Strang and J. Braithwaite (eds), *Restorative Justice and Civil Society* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 14–34.

23 Marks, Shearing and Wood, 'Who Should the Police Be?'

24 A. Clarno and M.J. Murray, 'Policing in Johannesburg after Apartheid', *Social Dynamics*, 39, 2 (2013), pp. 210–27.

25 T. Diphoorn, "'It's All About the Body": The Bodily Capital of Armed Response Officers in South Africa', *Medical Anthropology*, 34, 4 (2015), pp. 336–52; S-J. Cooper-Knock, 'Policing in Intimate Crowds: Moving Beyond "the Mob" in South Africa', *African Affairs*, 113, 453 (2014), pp. 563–82.

26 A. Morris, *Bleakness and Light: Inner-City Transition in Hillbrow, Johannesburg* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 1999).

27 K.S.O. Beavon, *Johannesburg: The Making and Shaping of the City* (Pretoria, University of South Africa Press, 2004); J. Beall, O. Crankshaw and S. Parnell, *Uniting a Divided City: Governance and Social Exclusion in Johannesburg* (London, Earthscan Publications, 2002).

neighbourhoods of Hillbrow and Berea differ substantially – not just from the rest of the city, but also from the neighbourhoods that form a part of the larger Hillbrow police district. The specific characteristics of the Hillbrow/Berea neighbourhoods may be better understood by contrasting them with these other neighbourhoods. The precinct is made up of seven neighbourhoods. The densely populated, majority black African, high-rise neighbourhoods of Braamfontein, Berea, Joubert Park and (somewhat confusingly) Hillbrow lie on the northern side of the Johannesburg central business district (CBD) and at the top of one of two ridges that dominate Johannesburg's topography. The police district extends further to the north and down into the valley at the bottom of the ridge. Here we find the more sparsely populated and very wealthy, racially mixed, single-family, detached accommodation and expensive low-rise apartment blocks of Houghton, Killarney and Parktown. The streets of the wealthy valley neighbourhoods of Houghton, Killarney and Parktown are zones where wealthy residents pay for private companies to isolate and eliminate potential assailants. As has been noted with regard to similar sites in Johannesburg's northern suburbs, the various companies that make up this security force tend to equate the protection of public space with the task of detecting the presence of unknown black pedestrians and interrogating them about their origins, whereabouts and possessions.²⁸ Private security also plays a major role in the provision of public protection in the high-rise neighbourhood of Braamfontein. However, the difference here is that city officials have framed pedestrian traffic, and specifically middle-class pedestrian traffic, as a means of making space 'public'. The City of Johannesburg administration has worked in partnership with a variety of private businesses to gentrify the neighbourhood through measures including investment in the provision of private security to patrol streets and pavements.²⁹

To the east of Braamfontein, the neighbourhoods of Hillbrow and Berea also contain large residential towers, a long retail 'high street' and a diverse array of bars. As in Braamfontein, these buildings all employ private security. Unlike Braamfontein, however, the many private security companies in the neighbourhood largely abstain from involvement in any violent encounters that occur anywhere outside their premises, restricting their policing activities to their particular sites. During the day, at night, and at weekends, there is a large amount of pedestrian traffic on the streets, and this extends up into the many shebeens (unlicensed bars) that dot the high-rise residential towers. However, and again unlike Braamfontein, city and policing officials have identified pedestrians as part of the problem for local efforts to secure the neighbourhood. Most of the drinking establishments serve an exclusively black and largely working-class clientele and are poorly regulated. Not only is their clientele an unlikely advance guard for gentrification initiatives, they are seen as the source of much of the violence that occurs across the precinct, particularly at night. The Hillbrow police devote most of their resources to patrolling these two neighbourhoods and responding to call-outs there, but they rarely leave their vehicles to intervene in altercations among civilians.

In this context, the residents of Hillbrow and Berea came to see their streets as having a particular type of problem. Unlike the residents and consumer populations of the neighbouring parts of the precinct, the majority of Hillbrow and Berea residents are not car owners and therefore must use public space to commute and work. They also do not possess the funds to outsource security to private providers, as residents do in Houghton, Killarney and Parktown. Meanwhile, pedestrian traffic does not offer the same promise of regenerative

28 Clarno and Murray, 'Policing in Johannesburg after Apartheid'.

29 L. Burocco, 'People's Place in the World Class City: The Case of Braamfontein's Inner City Regeneration Project' (PhD thesis, University of Johannesburg, 2013).

public–private investment as it does in Braamfontein. In this context, many of my respondents identified public violence as a primary reason why they became more actively involved in patrolling their own streets.

I spent approximately 12 months conducting ethnographic fieldwork on policing practices in this precinct. In addition to ‘ride-alongs’ with the SAPS, this involved extended periods observing ‘community policing’ initiatives and attending protests, meetings and informal patrols. I then followed up the participant observation with a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with key informants. This approach gave me the opportunity to observe relations between police officials, community policing actors and ordinary civilians in real time and, with the help of the interviews, to interpret my observations in light of the participants’ own understandings and perceptions. Such in-depth ethnographic work posed a range of ethical dilemmas for the study, particularly including potential risks to the safety of the researcher and respondents and obligations to report categories of criminal wrongdoing. More in-depth details of the way in which these issues were handled may be found in more extensive accounts of the research methods and findings.³⁰

The Origins of the Street Patrol

Many street patrollers explained why they joined the patrol with a tale of criminal victimisation and the feelings of injustice that this evokes. This could range from typical Johannesburg stories of a violent mugging to seemingly more nuanced reflections on the injustice of violent crime. A standard variant of this was a bitter tale from one of my respondents about a favourite jacket that he had brought with him to Hillbrow and his annoyance at having to hand it over on the night he arrived when four armed men surrounded him and demanded all his belongings. In this sort of account, violence is identified as the very problem at hand and the object of concern. In other cases, however, similar ideas could be conveyed through efforts to imagine what the streets in Hillbrow might be like in the absence of such a threat. For example, another respondent reminisced about Hillbrow’s past, when a date with a girlfriend might consist of simply walking the streets at night to go window-shopping. He then cast these visions forward to envisage a future in which one might conceive of sending one’s child down to the corner store with 10 rands to buy some milk.

Most of my respondents had sought to realise these visions of Hillbrow’s streets by calling upon their local police for better protection. On many occasions during my time with the street patrollers, I observed them attending community policing meetings or directly lobbying police officials for a more proactive response to street crime. In these contexts, several of the patrollers were capable of forcefully and eloquently advocating their case. However, the patrollers commonly expressed dissatisfaction with the outcomes of such processes. This seemed to be partly a result of their experience of repeated police failure to meet their demands. Even as crime rates in the neighbourhood declined, the police failed to communicate these changes clearly to the resident population, failed to follow up many civilian requests adequately, and struggled to counter the widely shared belief that the majority of station officials were compromised by their corrupt connections to the various criminal syndicates operating in the neighbourhood. In this context, many Hillbrow and Berea residents concluded that lobbying the police could achieve only a limited range of effects. Instead, securing public space in Hillbrow/Berea required efforts to move beyond

30 D. Vigneswaran and J. Hornberger, ‘Beyond “Good Cop”/“Bad Cop”’: Understanding Informality and Police Corruption in South Africa’ (Johannesburg, Open Society Foundation for South Africa, 2009); D. Vigneswaran, ‘Incident Reporting: A Technique for Studying Police Corruption’, *Policing and Society*, 21, 2 (2011), pp. 190–213.

the realm of debate about what ought to be done and towards direct action to solve the problems at hand.³¹

It was in this context that the street patrollers emerged as a potential channel for civilian activity. The street patrollers are a group of approximately 70 black South African working-class men and women who patrol the neighbourhoods of Hillbrow and Berea in groups of 10–20 on Friday and Saturday nights. The patrollers are a voluntary initiative that began as a collaboration between an individual citizen and a middle-ranking police official at the station. Yoliswa, a woman in her mid 30s, explained the origins of the initiative as an outcome of her dissatisfaction with the failure of her station to address a specific crime problem. Over a period of several weeks in 2007, she had watched from her apartment as a young boy mugged several passers-by in Quartz street, Hillbrow. Too small to intimidate his victims physically, the boy simply approached and stabbed them. The stabbings temporarily disabled his victims, allowing the boy to take their belongings and flee. Yoliswa had helped some of these victims and reported the problem to the police. After the police repeatedly failed to respond to her reports, she decided to establish a group that would, in her words, ‘beat up the criminals’. The officers at the station persuaded her to work with them instead and form a civilian patrol. The station handed responsibility for the patrollers to Inspector Moroke, a middle-aged officer with more than three decades’ experience at Hillbrow station, who was responsible for police–civilian relations in the neighbourhood. Yoliswa began to recruit volunteers, and Moroke provided monitoring, management and basic training (drills, procedure, protocols and self-defence).

Given the widespread dismay at street violence in the neighbourhood, Yoliswa’s patrol quickly attracted members from a pool of volunteers who had already been mobilised to serve in various community policing forums and initiatives. While most patrollers saw this as a natural development in their activities, the patrols also created tensions as the group shifted back and forth between the role of serving as an accountability structure for the ‘real police’ and behaving like ‘real police’ themselves.

On patrol days, 20–40 patrollers would convene at the station between 6 and 8 p.m. for a patrol lasting 4–6 hours. They assembled in an abandoned room inside the station, dressed in reflective jackets and executed a military-style drill. At some point during this process, Moroke would arrive and address the group on administrative issues, recent crime reports and the plan of action for the night’s patrol. The plan usually consisted of a list of designated suburbs where separate teams would patrol, and a time and place to convene at the end of the patrol. After a short prayer, Moroke separated the patrollers into two or three teams, each of no fewer than 10 persons, and appointed an individual to lead each team. At the end of the parade, the teams went their separate ways.

Moroke provided monitoring and support by roaming between the teams and the station in a vehicle, but generally exerted limited direct oversight on tactics and procedure. Hence, rather than a police initiative with public support, the patrols are perhaps better seen the other way round. The teams patrolled the precinct by travelling along routes determined by their team leaders. Unless they were specifically told or had reason to suspect that a criminal act was taking place in a private building, they remained on the streets and in the parks. The patrollers walked at a fairly casual pace and were dressed in bright reflective jackets. From afar, they resemble a flotilla of orange lanterns. So, while some people walking the suburbs at night, particularly the inebriated, might be surprised by their arrival, anyone on the lookout could easily evade detection and capture. Recognising this, the senior members of the street patrollers appeared to concur that their patrols were not suited to generating many

31 J. Eckert, *The Charisma of Direct Action: Power, Politics and the Shiv Sena* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003).

arrests. This, of course, provokes the question: what was the patrol for? The street patrollers were less clear on this issue, explaining their actions in terms of a vague sense that visible policing ‘makes the suburb safer’. But safer for whom?

Letabo’s Outburst: From Protest to Profession

We can develop a sense of the sort of safety that the patrollers were creating by considering the following example of an exuberant outburst by an older female patroller, Letabo. I walked with the patrol on this occasion.

The group was walking on a Saturday night along the Quartz Street market, an area renowned for muggings, particularly in the daytime, when it is crowded by shoppers, traders and their wares. Approaching an intersection, Letabo overtook me. I didn’t pay her much attention because she had always tended to ignore me, and kept to herself on patrol, smiling but rarely engaging in the banter and by-play that occupies her colleagues. So I was a little surprised when Letabo exclaimed, apparently with no provocation, raising her arm above her and bringing it down for emphasis ‘the crime in Hillbrow is going to be way down tonight; the visibility is too much!’ Several of her colleagues laughed in encouragement.

This brief outburst speaks to patrollers’ dual experience of the value of the patrol: part public demonstration; part public policing act. In one sense, Letabo’s outburst might be seen as an address to her colleagues and herself. The content of what she said was less important than the composer and the delivery. What I saw in this moment was the transformation of a relatively shy, elderly woman, who would ordinarily seek to attract little attention if walking along streets like these at night, into the figure of a dramatic street preacher. It may have been the act of being outside at night and feeling the sense of security provided by this communal demonstration of strength that allowed for the apparent conversion. In this respect, the patrol could be understood as playing the same role as a ‘reclaim the night’ march, in which otherwise vulnerable members of society embolden themselves through force of numbers and the expression of a collective will not to give in to fear. What is gained here is a feeling of security through the act of confronting the source of danger *en masse*. While the patrollers did not necessarily describe the patrol on this way, this appeared to be one of the benefits that they gained from participation. Many of the patrollers had reflected on their changed perceptions of the neighbourhood in this light. For example, Elmon reflected on how becoming involved in the street patrols had changed his experience of being in his neighbourhood alone. He spoke about his experience of walking across the whole neighbourhood while talking on his cell phone, and then only subsequently realising that he had been engaged in a dangerous – and therefore subversive – act.³²

While the simple act of walking the streets as a group at night may have been an empowering experience, self-empowerment did not constitute the sole rationale for the street patrollers’ efforts. This is evident in Letabo’s choice of words. It is significant that she spoke of the likelihood that their patrol was going to have a verifiable impact on crime *trends* in the neighbourhood, deterring potential criminals through the concrete act of policing the streets. In this sense, the syntax of her exclamation is more relevant. In saying ‘the crime in Hillbrow is going to be way down tonight; the visibility is too much!’, Letabo might be understood as announcing to all within earshot that the patrol – a ‘visible’ form of policing – was an effective deterrent. In my previous work on the patrollers, I explored how crime statistics have become central to their understanding of their role as a public protector within Hillbrow’s already crowded market for protection services. The patrollers saw statistics as

³² In Johannesburg, public displays of wealth are commonly perceived to heighten the risk of criminal predation.

the ultimate policing performance benchmark and consistently explained the value of their activities by referring to their deflationary effect on reported crime trends.³³ So, in saying that crime would be ‘way down’ in Hillbrow tonight, Letabo might be seen as making a rallying cry out of one of the most consistent refrains in the street patrollers’ claim to be a reliable provider of protection.

Marching to the Corner: From Demonstrators to Detectives

While the dual functions of the patrol could be easily reconciled within Letabo’s demonstration, they resulted in tensions in other contexts. Once the patrollers had crossed the line between a civil society group and a police force, it was not easy to return. This was evident in their waning interest in demonstrative action that did not involve ‘real policing’. The patrollers would deride the community policing forums as ‘talk shops’ or ‘politics’ because they had come to believe that it was their responsibility to address the problem of public crime, not to call on others for help. Indeed, even the more evocative, effective and violent forms of protest appeared to have limited resonance for this group.

South Africa’s history of civil resistance has bequeathed its civilians an empowering tradition of protest strategies and demonstrative communication. Yet this did not appear to satisfy the patrollers’ emergent question of how best to pacify their streets. It was evident in the very different ways they engaged in two separate demonstrations in the same site: the drug dealing ‘hot-spot’ of Berea.

The corners of Tudhope and Fife Streets in the neighbourhood of Berea are renowned in the area as the principal location where drugs are openly traded. The site is particularly concerning to the residents because of the various forms of public violence – particularly muggings and petty theft – that participants in the trade commonly perpetrate in the surrounding area. During my time with the patrollers, they visited this area on numerous occasions. I was once called to join a daytime march that had been organised by the African National Congress (ANC) Youth League to protest against inner city crime and the drug trade. Resplendent in the bright yellow T-shirts provided by the organisers, approximately 300 people toyi-toyed throughout the neighbourhood. The toyi-toyi was introduced to the South African protest repertoire by members of the ANC’s armed wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, during the 1980s. They in turn had first seen it practised by soldiers belonging to the Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA). The toyi-toyi is a ‘stomp and chant’ dance with mock military gestures and struggle slogans, singing and chanting. On this occasion, the protesters punctuated their chants with the call and response ‘hawu’, a rhythmic acclamation commonly used in Youth League anti-apartheid protests to signal a combative spirit to the oppressive regime. When they arrived at the Tudhope–Fife intersection, the usually busy corner had been vacated. The marchers threw down their banners, blew their vuvuzelas and continued their chants. The march concluded with a visit to the police station to hand the station commissioner a petition demanding immediate action to eradicate the drug trade in his precinct.

While the patrollers joined the rally, they did so on the periphery, as photographers and spectators, but not as dancers or rally leaders. During the presentation of demands, they whispered to one another about the political drama unfolding. After the march, they spoke joyfully about the experience but sceptically of the likelihood that it would lead to much.

Their general indifference towards the public demonstration was in stark contrast to their more regular visits to the same intersection on patrol. At these times, the patrollers would

33 D. Vigneswaran, ‘The Contours of Disorder: Crime Maps and Territorial Policing in South Africa’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 32, 1 (2014), pp. 91–107.

commonly assemble in advance at a nearby point and remove their reflective vests – signalling a move away from their usual ‘visible policing’ approach. They would then divide into groups and quietly advance towards the intersection, where they would subject everyone to a full body search. The patrollers would commonly lay claim to the site on these occasions in demonstrative ways, in some cases instigating direct confrontations with dealers who frequented the site or singing out xenophobic abuse at the west African nationals who worked there. On one night, echoing a popular Nigerian evangelical song at the time – ‘God is Good-O’ – one patroller waited for her colleagues to finish the sweep by singing in a forced Nigerian accent, ‘these people – ohhhh, they’re full of shit – ohhhh’.

While such behaviour was common, the patrollers differed from the xenophobic vigilante mobs who have been widely publicised for meting out justice to migrant groups in the townships. They appeared more squarely focused on the development of a more conventional, statist brand of justice. This was exemplified by their focus on procuring evidence for the purposes of prosecution. When I was there, they would make a point of showing me the drugs that they had seized during a search and arrest the perpetrators to take back to the station for processing. The vast majority of these arrests did not lead to successful prosecutions, partly because of the patrollers’ inexperience in establishing an adequate evidence trail and partly because of the capacity of the drug syndicates to use both bribes and lawyers to obtain the release of their workers. In terms of a palpable effect on crime, these acts may have been less effective than the temporary closures effected by the daytime march. The patrollers none the less found them to be a source of inspiration. These raids not only directly addressed the problem at hand, but represented evidence of the significant differences between the patrollers and the formal police, who – whether by dint of corruption, as perceived by the patrollers, or strategy, as explained by the station detectives – rarely arrested people suspected of participating in the hand-to-hand trade of drugs on the corners.

The Block Party: Between Revelry and Enforcement

The patrollers did not simply prefer ‘real policing’ to mere demonstrative action. In various ways, they had come to conceive of themselves as a type of police rather than mere civilians. This problem became particularly evident in cases where their fellow residents were patently breaking or flouting the law. In such contexts, ostensible lawbreakers and law enforcers must find ways of deciding what uses of urban space are legitimate and what forms of violence are necessary to sustain valid use. This dilemma was on display in the following scenario, when the patrollers raided an unlicensed ‘block party’. The street patrollers encountered the party on a basketball court during a Saturday night on patrol.

As soon as the patrollers arrived at the court, James, one their leaders, walked towards the disc-jockey (DJ) and told him to turn off the music. Some women on a balcony nearby began singing and dancing in unison, directing co-ordinated arm waves to the patrollers. A couple of inebriated men stumbled out of the same building, swearing at the street patrollers. But a smartly dressed man explained to them that ‘[the street patrollers] are just doing their job, brothers. You must show them some respect’. After this, the patrollers slowly made their way across the court, assembling on the street outside.

The DJ turned the music back on and the party resumed. James gestured towards the revelers, ‘you see these people are not criminals. They are members of the community’. Then he pointed to several high-rise apartments around the court; ‘but these people must go to work in the morning’. Despite this admonition, James and a couple of other street patrollers began to shimmy to the music, which was now back up to its original volume.

The patrollers then called Hillbrow police station for ‘back-up’. Soon, three police cars arrived from Hillbrow and five officers took control of the scene. One officer approached

the DJ and told him to disassemble the system. Another walked up to some of the older men and began a heated argument over why the party must stop. A third confronted a younger man who was trying to leave the scene. The officer grabbed his face with his left hand and slapped him with his right. He shoved him against the wall and kned him in the groin. He slapped him again and kned him again and took out his pepper spray and sprayed it liberally in his face. At this point, the street patrollers left the scene, leaving the officers in a series of heated arguments with the revellers about the way the party had been brought to a close.

This incident is in some respects a predictable tale of Saturday night policing. The community members were having a good time and keen to continue doing so. The Hillbrow police always have better things to do than negotiate with revelers, and commonly conclude such encounters with unobvious displays of force. What makes this moment interesting for this analysis is the presence of the street patrollers and their fraught position between the illegal party and the formal constabulary. While the partygoers were clearly breaking a number of city bye-laws, they were also helping to create the sort of space that the street patrollers may have envisaged. After we had moved on, some of the patrollers told me how their fellow residents had been raped or mugged on the same basketball court, which was usually silent, deserted and completely dark at night. This is what makes the women on the balcony such powerful agents. Simply enjoying the moment, being exuberant if slightly mocking, the women presented to the street patrollers an image of the neighbourhood that they were trying to create, where black women – by far the most likely victim of a violent attack in Johannesburg – could dance in public and allow their children to mill about on the streets at night. While the party, with all its alcohol and lack of organisation, was potentially a recipe for more violence, in this respect it was also a welcome change. The partygoers served the role of potential guardians in a space of ritual danger and, in this respect, offered a form of making space public that was parallel to that which the street patrollers may have hoped to provide. So, while James felt sympathy for the workers in the neighbouring buildings and their need for a good night's sleep, he could also empathise with the revellers and allow himself to be momentarily swept up in the atmosphere.

The street patrollers were capable of delivering the same sort of violence as the members of the SAPS. I have seen the patrollers chase and catch armed men and deliver terrifying acts of punishment and retribution. In the case of the block party, however, they were 'vulnerable' – if we can call it that – to the revellers' appeal for protection. Thus, when the smartly dressed man instructed his colleagues to recognise the patrollers' right to do their job, the patrollers beat a strategic retreat. Paradoxically, by acknowledging the authority of the patrollers, he had also ensured that they would not be the ones to bring this particular party to a halt.

If the street patrollers were a 'reclaim the night' march, this might have been the end of the story. However, this group had set themselves up as law enforcers, and not mere demonstrators. And it is for this reason that, having reconciled themselves to their own inability to resolve the block party 'problem', the patrollers nevertheless called for back-up. The formal police never presented themselves as a source of protection. Rather, they went straight for, and in some cases initiated, conflicts that would allow them to bring matters to an end – with brute force. In this respect, the beating of the young man was crucial. This act closed down any possibility for negotiation and mediation between the two groups and decisively transformed the space back into its traditional condition: a zone of confrontation and fear. The fact that the agents doing the victimising were the official representatives of 'the state' should not distract us from the fact that they were also the ones to nullify the potentially public nature of this space. By annulling the dancers' and patrollers' temporary – if fraught – relationship of protection, they closed down the brief opening for this party to be

accepted as a transformative and progressive act – as bringing a temporary public life to a barren zone of criminal predation. Instead, the party could be seen now only as an illegal form of use, lumped together with the long list of other infractions – big and small – that the police would be called on to douse with more violence in Hillbrow on that night. While the patrollers had called the police to this situation and can be seen as responsible for the outcome, it was also an outcome about which they felt profoundly ambivalent. It was a considerable source of angst for them in the aftermath as they recognised the ‘failure’ of the intervention in spite of the palpable ‘success’ of the enforcement.

The Mob and the Patrol Car: Protectors or Simply ‘The Man’?

The point here is not that the street patrollers’ efforts to create public space will inevitably unravel into violent exchanges. Rather it is that, in adopting the role of a police force, they opted for an outcome that preserved order over the possibility of allowing a more ‘public’ form of spatial use to continue. In the incident on the basketball court, the patrollers had a genuinely open choice. Indeed, the sharply dressed man had put them in this position by discouraging his colleagues from challenging their authority. In most other contexts, the patrollers are not similarly positioned to choose how to respond. This is due to the fact that many of Hillbrow’s other residents recognise that the streets lack stable protection, and they are willing to challenge anyone purporting to adopt the role of a protection agency. This was apparent in my work with both the formal police and the street patrollers. Individuals from both groups were consistently posed with the fundamental problem that the street patrollers had set out to address: that on the streets of Hillbrow, there was not a clear set of norms for differentiating between protectors, the protected and threat. This meant that, from the perspective of other civilians in the neighbourhood, the police and the patrollers were seen in many cases as the object of concern. Take, for example the following incident, when a police car was forced to beat a tactical retreat.

On the first night out with the patrollers, I travelled in the squad car with Moroke and Yoliswa, the woman who had initiated the patrols. Some of the patrollers had just arrested a Senegalese national for a ‘suspected theft’. His bag contained eight cans of deodorant, but he did not have a receipt. The ‘suspect’ was travelling in the back of the utility vehicle and had insisted that the receipts were in his car, but he didn’t have the keys. So Moroke was driving us back to the area where he had been arrested.

A group of six to eight men were standing in two groups on either side of the street, and Moroke parked between them. Moroke left the car to ask one group of men for the keys. However, the negotiations quickly escalated into a dispute. One of the men on the other side of the road yelled out ‘the street patrollers are full of shit’. Johanna left the car and walked over to stand right up to his face. She yelled at him that the street patrollers were trying to protect them and that he should show them more respect.

When she and Moroke returned to the vehicle soon after, both groups and some 10 other men began to gather round the vehicle, some of them leaning in Moroke’s window to talk to him. Moroke ended the conversation by driving away. Soon after, as Moroke and Yoliswa recounted the incident, Yoliswa complained, ‘with some of these people, the first thing they do when they come to South Africa is to insult a police officer’.

This incident is partly intriguing as an illustration of the difficulties involved in policing a space in the absence of consent.³⁴ It is important to note that the street patrollers have no legal right to stop, search or interrogate any civilian, regardless of whether they have reasonable grounds to suspect that person has participated in a crime. Yet, during all my

34 Bittner, *The Functions of the Police in Modern Society*.

observations of the patrollers' stop-and-search procedures, I noted very few instances in which their fellow civilians would object to being searched, even if the searches were physical and invasive. As I have suggested elsewhere, this reflects an ingrained tradition of relative compliance with rough-handed policing tactics in South Africa.³⁵ So the resistance shown by the deodorant salesman's colleagues was certainly out of the ordinary.

While the street patrollers were able to make an arrest in this context, their capacity to maintain their presence in that place, let alone arbitrate access to it, was fragile. The capacity of the suspect's colleagues to assemble round the vehicle left the armed officer in a position in which he needed to decide between flight and escalating the situation – probably through the use of force. Again, the presence of the street patrollers as the liminal group between civilian and police is what makes the incident particularly intriguing. Yoliswa's primary concern appeared, in both her actions and her comments afterwards, to be not with the formal act of policing crime but with the ancillary goal of being recognised as legitimate police. She sprang into action to address the abusive remark against the street patrollers and focused her commentary on that same issue after the event. This is evident not only in her choice of words when berating the man on the street corner, but also in her comments after the fact. While, in some respects, Yoliswa was merely falling back on standard policing clichés in describing the man as having insulted a 'police officer', her use of this popular-cultural trope may have been compensatory or aspirational, representing her squad as the type of policing agent that the patrollers have yet to become, which even Moroke, the SAPS officer, was, in this situation, struggling to be: a public protector. Unfortunately for her, the men who had crowded round the vehicle probably saw the incident through an entirely different lens. In their eyes, the patrollers were the unwelcome, violent intrusion. The act of crowding round the squad car may have been understood as a means of protecting their 'victimised' colleague. The squad car's retreat may have signalled a victory for the public domain that they had sought to claim.

The problem for both the street patrollers and the deodorant salesman's colleagues is that there is not necessarily a clear recipe, short of demonstrating one's capacity to use force, for garnering legitimacy as a provider of public protection in a place like Hillbrow. The patrollers sometimes respond to situations where the legitimacy of their presence is in question in the way that Moroke did: through retreat. On other occasions they might choose Yoliswa's option of demonstrating capacity for violence and aggression. The problem is that, frequently, the demonstration of violent capacity appears to become the primary object of their work, as in the many cases where I observed the patrollers – occasionally with great brutality – publicly beating fellow civilians who challenged their commands. While one might like to think that the patrollers are capable of a more high-minded approach to the process of establishing the legitimacy of their claim to protect, it would be at least somewhat naive to expect that untrained volunteers who place themselves in this kind of danger would be able consistently to reach accommodations with the many other groups that seek to lay claim to parts of Hillbrow and Berea at night. Rather, I would be more inclined to suspect that, until they have successfully established their claim to be the rightful protector of Hillbrow's streets, they would commonly end up addressing such challenges by strategically demonstrating their capacity to be effectively violent.

Concluding Remarks

This article has sought to shape our understanding of making space public by paying more attention to social relations of violence. Taking the relatively extreme case of the Hillbrow/

35 D. Vigneswaran, 'The Complex Sources of Immigration Control', *International Migration Review*, 54, 1 (2020), pp. 262–88.

Berea neighbourhood in Johannesburg, I have sought to explore what happens when violence, rather than playing a background and/or occasional role in determining how space is accessed and used, constitutes an explicit and active goal of those seeking to define what their streets are for. The article echoes previous suggestions that the relationship between violence and keeping space public is paradoxical. Violence is a basic precondition for public space yet a constant threat to its preservation. I have argued that these findings lend credence to feminist works on the concept of ‘protection’, suggesting that the formation of public space requires the establishment of a claim to legitimate violence and that it may be unrealistic to think that such a claim can be achieved through dialogue alone.

In drawing attention to the importance of protection relationships in the maintenance of public space, my intent has not been to valorise violent actors or their means or to imply that we should expect public space to be consistently riven by violence. In this respect, I am well aware of precisely how extreme the Hillbrow/Berea case is. It may be that it is only in such extreme scenarios, where the threat to one’s personal security is palpable and constant and where the absence of reliable protection so evident, that we can begin to ask whether the street patrollers constitute a practically and normatively defensible form of policing. Rather, my intent has been to indicate precisely how remarkable and fragile public space really is. The fact that so many societies have devised forms of demonstrative action that teeter on the edge of violent provocation but consistently avoid open confrontation is a true oddity of the contemporary public sphere. As I have sought to demonstrate here, once groups cross the line between dialogue and violent action, a whole range of dynamics, stemming from the protection dilemma and leading towards relations of dominance, are likely to kick in. Once the question of who is protecting who from whom is up for debate, dialogue may bring us back from a Hobbesian anarchy, but only, invariably, in ways that reflect the consequences of violent acts and behaviour. In this respect, the article offers a cautionary note to the Habermasian tradition of resolutely isolating realms of dialogue and democracy from those characterised by violence and domination. While this may have been a useful approach at a certain point in the development of social theory – to demonstrate the relative independence of the public sphere as a social and political entity – it would be dangerous to harden the move into an enduring ontology resulting in the neglect of the consistent role that violence plays in making and keeping space public.

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