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Story Telling and Magic: Meaning Making in Immigration Policing

Abstract

This article explores the place of storytelling and magic in immigration policing in the UK. 'Immigration stories' are important for grasping the role of narratives of migration policing. While aimed at rendering a complex social world legible, this form of knowledge reveals its limitations. Rather than producing a cognitive template to make sense of a boundless world, immigration enforcement practices show illegibility as hallmark of the state. The work of immigration officers is dominated by hazardous and arbitrary practices and rules -which I call 'immigration magic'- which often leave them devoid of power and control. As an exercise in southernizing border criminology, I interrogate the received division of labour in theorising the state in the south and north, one the one hand, and state and society on the other. In doing so, I seek to lay this northern policing bureaucracy open to underexplored dimensions and angles, as frontline staff are tasked with re-spatialising state power.

Keywords: Immigration enforcement, Policing, Globalisation, Southern theory, Magic, Storytelling

Introduction

This article explores the place of storytelling and magic in immigration policing in the UK. 'Immigration stories' are important for grasping the role of immigration officers as cultural agents for producing meaning and acting upon a globalised world perceived as chaotic and undomesticated. While aimed at rendering a complex social world legible, this form of knowledge reveals its limitations. Rather than producing a cognitive template to make sense of a boundless world, immigration enforcement practices show illegibility as hallmark of the state. Their work is dominated by hazardous and arbitrary practices and rules -which I call 'immigration magic'- which often leave them devoid of power and control.

In exploring storytelling and magic, I draw on the policing literature on police and culture while connecting it to the anthropological literature of the state which elaborates on the relationship between state power and magic. By bringing these two aspects of immigration work centre stage, I seek to, first, shed light on the distinctive challenges of policing under contemporary conditions (and the peculiar responses to them by frontline officers); and second, to interrogate the conceptual framework through which much of Northern policing bureaucracies have been theorised. The focus on storytelling and magic foregrounds the instability and socio-cultural foundations of Northern policing knowledge and questions some of the conceptual premises through which the Northern police -and by extension immigration enforcement- has been predominantly analysed (see Mehta, this volume). As a rational bureaucracy governed by rules, the Northern police is imagined as both distinct from their Southern counterparts and radically separated from society. Yet, magical beliefs and thinking are part of the cultural scaffold of immigration work.

As an exercise in southernizing or decolonising knowledge (Connell 2007, Carrington et al. 2016)(Author et al 2021) by bringing magic to the cultural study of the British immigration enforcement bureaucracy, I interrogate the received division of labour in theorising the state in the south and north, one the one hand, and state and society on the other. One way of southernizing this field of knowledge, thus, entails uncovering imperial modes of knowing

and understanding, slackening corseted frameworks as pertaining to specific geopolitical locations, upsetting a one-way direction in the circulation of knowledge and ultimately opening the criminological imagination to alternative forms of critique. It seeds the epistemological sow for a 'subaltern critique of Occidentalism' (Coronil 1997).

In the next section, I turn to the analysis of the concepts of storytelling in the policing sociology and magic in the anthropology literature. I then briefly explain the methodology used in the research from which the data I draw on was obtained. The analysis of this data follows. In this analysis, I detail the peculiar place of immigration enforcement in the contemporary British policing landscape. Faced with limitations for deciphering identities and making sense of a complex social world, the police have increasingly resorted to immigration officers to produce knowledge about subjects and places, and to solve policing problems. I explore the stories through which immigration officers produce such knowledge, and the unorthodox tools and skills to make 'problem people' disappear. Paradoxically, instead of producing legibility and certainty, their work creates confusion and illegibility. The article concludes with a reflection on these two sides of state power: illusion and confusion, foregrounding illegibility as a form of state governance.

Southernising immigration policing: Storytelling and magic

For some time, policing literature documented the role of the police as a cultural institution, emphasising their unique authority to convey meaning about the social world (Loader 1997, Ericson and Haggerty 1997, Harkin 2015). While the capacity of the police to exercise state legitimate coercion has long been their defining feature, policing scholars has argued that the role of the police in society cannot be reduced to its coercive powers. Instead, we need to understand them as 'an especially rich site for the production and dissemination of meaning... that offers an interpretive lens through which people make sense of, and give order to, their world' (Loader and Mulcahy 2003, 45).

Policing literature on story telling have further explored this cultural role as a particular aspect of police culture, examining how through stories they tell themselves and the public the police create and reproduce a particular view of social order and their place within society. Much policing work is, they argue, about making sense of the social world, to build meaning around experiences and events through stories, and to manage narratives. Police stories not only offer a rich insight into the values and beliefs police officers hold and the moral economy of the police (Fassin 2013, 2015), but are important for understanding how these shape the knowledge produced in, and the meaning making nature of, policing (van Hulst 2013). Police stories, Shearing and Ericson (1991, 489) argue, are 'a key to understanding the practical knowledge police officers use to produce action'. Arguing for the centrality of stories in policing unsettles the view of it as a 'rule-oriented' activity structured around discretionary decision-making, and emphasises the informal and the intuitive in policing work (van Hulst 2017). They produce a particular form of experiential sensibility, or intuitive wisdom, that provides 'police officers with ways of seeing and being that allows them to do what jazz musicians do, improvise' (Shearing and Ericson 1991, 495). They form the craft of policing. In turn, they are hegemonic devices in that they invite the construction of a particular worldview where the story fits.

As authoritative storytellers, police officers wield symbolic power which is often articulated in terms of their unique access to occult worlds that civilians are barred from and their ability to 'read' crime scenes (Fletcher 1991). Such privileged access to 'see' things and their almost

supernatural ability to decipher the ‘truth about crime’ contribute to the myth of the police (Comaroff and Comaroff 2017, 101). While as an institution the British immigration police (the Immigration Compliance and Enforcement teams) do not command the same symbolic power at its territorial police counterpart, immigration officers often boast their power to see ‘the whole picture’ and work their magic (Aliverti 2020b, 2021b). They are privy to the underground and the backstage of society, and endowed with a ‘sixth sense’ to tell who is who, in the context where the faux (fictive identities, fictive homes, fictive workplaces) is widespread as a subaltern strategy of sort to evade the state gaze (Ghosh 2019, Reeves 2013, Aliverti 2022). Immigration stories, as Irene Vega (2018) argued, are a key legitimization strategy for they provide moral justification for immigration enforcement work. Amid heated public controversy about their mandate, immigration officers tell themselves and others stories of immigration abuses and criminality which function as self-legitimation narratives. They help them to ease the moral pains of border work (cfr. Aliverti 2020a), but also serve as ‘institution-wide cultural scripts’.

Based on empirical data collected for a study on immigration-police cooperation in immigration enforcement in the UK, this article draws on the policing literature on storytelling, but advocates for an understanding of such ‘immigration stories’ as sedimented knowledge produced through histories of colonial encounters with the ‘Other’. These are not stories constructed in a vacuum and are not random, but are deeply embedded in asymmetric relations of power, built through memories and imageries that collate the debris of history, are ignited to tame uncertainty and wildness, and form the background of actions. They create a particular view of the ‘primitive’ by the ‘civilised’ as both mysterious and demonic, and ‘constitute a prism through which people orientate themselves in a globalized world’ (Beek 2016, 308, also Said [1978] 2003). Further, it shows their fragility and instability challenging the ability of the state to advance a single version of the story.

Ultimately, the article seeks to bring to the fore, and reflect on, different forms of knowledge and of knowing deployed by these state agents which mix the scientific, formal and technical with the intuitive, informal and magical (Comaroff and Comaroff 2017, Aliverti 2021b). As anthropologist Susan Greenwood (2020) argues, scientific knowledge and methods provide valuable yet limited insights on ‘unknown regions of experience’ and ‘ultimate reality’. Such dimensions are accessible through a shift in consciousness -a magical consciousness- which privileges associations, sensory connections, and affective dispositions. Magic is a human process of the mind that works through stories, tales and myths. It is a form of knowledge that allows us to access different planes of reality which are not apprehensible through traditional sciences. Many practical and experimental aspects of magic were adopted in science (cfr Mauss 2001 [1950]).

Magic and science are born out of human desire to settle uncertainties and control the natural world. Both are oriented at harnessing and manipulating occult forces with the aim of bringing about empirical outcomes. Magic is a particularly salient powerful resource amid periods of change and fluidity to give meaning, explain (mis)fortune and orient actions; hence the contemporary re-enchantment with magic under global conditions (Buyandelgeriyn 2007, Meyer and Pels 2003). The appeal of neopagan practices amid largely secularised societies undergoing significant social changes might be a sign of the deep limitations of traditional institutions to fulfil the human yearning for understanding and faith in supernatural forces (Rountree 2011, Collins 2015). Magic hence is a critical resource to ‘address complex moral, relational, and emotional problems alongside technical ones, [which] are at play in all human societies’ (Benussi 2019).

Magic has long been considered the ‘bastard sister of science’ and demonised by institutionalised religions in the fierce battles historically waged to police the boundaries of legitimate knowledge. The orientalisation of magic as inherently inferior to science and religion was in part the product of European colonialism, as it required ‘the foil of native magic as a pretext for domination’ (Benussi 2019, also Crais 2002, 63). The politics of magic, and the attendant cultural boundary making between the three domains, endure in Northern academia. Yet, as anthropologists of magic claim, far from being the terrain of uncivilised, backwards societies, magical thinking is universal and permeates everyday practical knowledge (Tambiah 1990). It is important for understanding state authority and power (Taussig 1997, Frazer 2018). As Clifton Crais observed, the relationship between magic and state power has been a constant feature across societies. ‘Magic has been a crucially important way of understanding the world, particularly the problems of power and evil’ (Crais 2002, 66). State power relies on fantasies and myth for its effectiveness. As Fernando Coronil argued, official national history as ideological construct works through the ‘selective presentation of the elements that create illusion of its existence through invisible tricks’ which plays between truth and fiction (Coronil 1997, 3). Coronil’s fascinating discussion of state magic situates the 19th century formation of the modern Venezuela state within the global economic order as an oil-exporting periphery, a petro-state, demonstrating the close intertwining of the local and global, and the social and natural, the material and cultural in state power. Although he focuses on the manufacture of Venezuela as a ‘modern oil nation’, his observation can well be applied to neocolonial Britain’s nostalgia as a unified, white, and ordered nation and its imperial amnesia (Loader and Mulcahy 2003, 312, Gilroy 2004).

Recent theorisations of the *idea* of the state and its *effects* in terms of illusory qualities (Mitchell 1990, Abrams 1988, Hansen and Stepputat 2001) point to the importance of magic for the making of the modern state (Coronil 1997, Taussig 1997, Das 2004). In exploring the relationship between magic and modernity, Peter Pels (2003, 5) argues rather than being a counterpoint to modernity, magic is one of its products (Taussig 1987). Modernity creates its own forms of magic, which is most evident in the ‘enchantments that are produced by practices culturally specific to modern states, economies and societies’. As Margaret Wiener (2003, 156) argues, theories and discourses of magic are important less for understanding the phenomenon itself but for its function in ‘conjur[ing] modernity’ and the modern state. Rather than thinking about magic in positivist and orientalist terms as a practice and quality found among uncivilised, backward people, we can understand it as a product of colonisation, and shaped by the politics of colonialism.

I revisit the literatures on storytelling and magic to shed light on the idiosyncratic nature of UK immigration enforcement. By examining the everyday work practices of its officers, I explore two aspects of state power -illusion and confusion. Amid late modern colonial encounters, discourses of magic are produced routinely by state officers as they attempt to make sense of fluid and seemingly inscrutable identities. As I show, the focus on magic helps us understand it as an important aspect of the alchemy of domination, that is the ways in which immigration officers evoke magical beliefs and stories to wield power while simultaneously dismissing those told by the people they police as devious and perfidious. Through immigration magic, these officers create the illusion of readability. Yet, as I also show, they uncover its limits as state power in this sphere remains hazardous and unpredictable. In the next section, I provide more details on this relatively novel, peculiar and

controversial agency, nicknamed the ‘foreigners’ police’, and the study I conducted with its officers.

Researching the British ‘Foreigners’ Police’

In this article, I draw from empirical data obtained during a project which investigates police and immigration cooperation in everyday policing, in two major UK police forces and the respective Immigration Compliance and Enforcement (ICE) teams. The ICE teams are local immigration teams formed by immigration officers who are trained in various policing powers (including forced entry, search, arrest, and seizure of documents) and are authorised to wield physical force under specific conditions (Aliverti 2021a). These teams are part of the Home Office’s Immigration Enforcement, which is tasked with enforcing immigration laws and regulations inland, as opposed to at the territorial border.

The project charted different forms of cooperation to understand the drivers, nature and implications of interagency work. It is based on data collected during a period of ethnographic research within these institutions, between 2017 and 2019. The data derives from approximately 1,000 hours of non-participant observations of enforcement operations, custody processes, training sessions, case management work and police-immigration officials’ interactions at a distance from control rooms (equivalent to 3 days per week during a 18-months period). The project was divided into two stages: the first stage was devoted to observing custody processes (including police and immigration interviews, custody bookings) in custody suites with embedded immigration officers and shadowing these officers throughout their daily shifts for 16 weeks. In the second stage, observations focused on operational joint work between immigration and police officers. I accompanied immigration and police staff during pre-arranged intelligence-led visits. On average, I attended operational visits once in a fortnight during a period of 12 months. Observations were collated through extensive, reflexive fieldnotes after each shift. They capture some of these interactions and informal conversations I had with staff as faithfully as possible (when possible, I reproduce them verbatim), and my reflections on them.

Additionally, I conducted more than 100 in-depth semi-structured interviews with police and immigration employees at different ranks and with various responsibilities. Interviews lasted for approximately 45 minutes on average and explored officers’ backgrounds and perceptions of their role, as well as experience of multiagency work. Interview recordings and fieldwork notes were subsequently transcribed and coded together, through NVivo, to identify common themes and connections. When reproducing interviews and fieldnotes, participants are identified by their institutional affiliation, rank and pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. Likewise, the sites where I conducted observations are not identified to protect the anonymity of participants.

The project was initially aimed at exploring patterns of decision making and the exercise of discretion by immigration and police officers in dealing with crime suspects. Yet, as the project unfolded, it was evident that such focus on legal rules and operational discretion (one that has been dominant in the analysis of Northern police bureaucracies) was reductive of the much messier and complex framework where the everyday work of these officers take place, and did not convey the informal, hazardous, and arbitrary nature of decision making, where the identity of both suspects and officers take central stage. Often, in seeking concepts and frameworks which allow me to make sense of this data, I widened the theoretical palette to anthropological and sociological research on the police and the state outside the ‘west’. Such

search for a theoretical framework to understand the British immigration police provides an illustration of the conceptual and methodological promises of ‘doing theory from the South’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012).

Given the socially embedded nature of storytelling, I pay attention to how participants’ identities feature or not in and shape ‘immigration stories’, and how the identity of the audiences of these stories shapes them too. As a researcher, and therefore one of their ‘audiences’, I often partook in these stories in different ways since as a white, middle class, professional woman from Latin America I embody different social, political and moral universes. I was often asked about my views about the plausibility and credibility of the accounts the people they encountered and questioned offered. As it turns out, I was tested too. For some officers, I was perceived as a ‘good migrant’ who ‘played by the rule’: people like me, they suggested, were not the target of their work. Yet, my outsider identity casted me aside as untrustworthy, suspect and gullible. Although I strived to keep a neutral and detached position, ‘immigration stories’ are powerful narratives based on cultural tropes which through repetition consolidate and solidify as unquestionable truths. As such, they demanded constant interrogating and unpacking. In the remaining of the article, I delve deeper into the social structure of immigration stories and the politics of magic in immigration enforcement, foregrounding the socio-cultural foundations of policing knowledge and its instability.

‘You’re looking for odd things’: Managing uncertainty, taming mystery, and working the magic of immigration

Operational work, immigration officers repeatedly assert, bestows them with a distinctive skill, a ‘sixth sense’ and a sort of magic to see beyond the obvious, to discern the fake from the authentic, and to decipher the truth. In a context of ‘simultaneous hyperdocumentation, forgery, and lack of certainty’ about people’s identities (Ghosh 2019, 872) and state bolshie efforts to fixate them, these officers’ intuitive wisdom is in high demand. ‘These are not your average John Job’, Detective Becky lectured an audience of police officers on identifying ‘foreign national offenders’, hinting at their elusive and unfathomable identities as a mark of distinction from the vernacular police clientele. They change their names, camouflage, drift and move, evading attempts to pin them down. In this section, I argue that while magic suffuses immigration work, it operates unevenly (and politically) to affirm and legitimate the cultural scripts told by immigration and police officers, and to dismiss and orientalise as ‘fairy tales’ those conveyed by the people they encountered.

Their expertise on different nationalities is amassed less through formal training than through a mix of operational experience, ‘racial common sense’, and organisational folklore. It aids them navigating ambiguity and uncertainty at operational level, and offers a source of professional pride and institutional legitimation. Possessing this unique expertise for ‘deciphering’ identities makes them an indispensable actor in contemporary policing. ‘You know in the back of your mind that something is wrong’, Immigration Office (IO) Tabita once told me. Laying down their arithmetic of suspicion and their craft in unravelling the mystery of individual identities, Chief Immigration Officer (CIO) Bruce explains: ‘Police encounter a lot of people when they’re out and about and they automatically assume they have the right to be in the UK, and of course I know differently, I know that, you know, five Greek guys working at a car wash is not normal’. IO Sam agrees: ‘Greek people don’t work on car washes; they are legal and they are educated people.’ The man he was fingerprinting in custody had shown a Greek ID card and said he had a legal right to work because he was

Greek. Sam was suspicious because the man was unable to speak Greek and his Facebook profile suggested he was Albanian. He was later taken to a detention centre.

This is distinctive professional trait, IO Anika claimed, which sets them apart from the police. She can identify suspects who the police would not be able to spot. Such trait, she explained, feeds from operational experience and ‘immigration offending’ trends. For instance, at that particular point, she came across many Deliveroo¹ workers suspected of working illegally. ‘They are Brazilian nationals, many of whom claim to have Italian or Portuguese passports. If the police encounter one of them doing deliveries, they say that they have their passports at home... So what I do is to contact Border Force to request [information on] the passport with which they entered the country. If it’s Brazilian, then I question why they didn’t use the European one... I’m not being discriminatory’, she asserts, ‘but I know because I see cases everyday’.

Immigration ‘sixth sense’ draws on these trends that are crafted as coherent stories. Immigration stories have their own internal plot and timing. A moral panic of sorts that suddenly emerges and succumbs, they involve particular ‘nationalities’ and their ingenious attempts to flout immigration controls. They build around repetition and recurrent trends. ‘At the moment, Albanians are saying they have scabies’ to avoid being placed in detention, I heard once. Sudanese are saying they had been pressured by the government to spy on the opposition and hence they had to escape, IO Roger relayed to me predicting what the man he was about to interview will tell him: ‘it’s all the same scripts... I’d be surprised if he says something else.’ Immigration stories are replete with myths about national traits. ‘Albanians’ featured prominently in them. They are described as dangerous and canny, as police detective John notes:

Albanians are particularly nasty I have to say, I have not enjoyed dealing with them at all. They are hard core nasty fellas... well we know that they are here operating drugs lines, trafficking people. We know that they are doing it, they are foreign nationals, they are illegal immigrants, and they are here, hundreds of them organising crime...

It is enormously important that you know the travel patterns, you know, and again I have seen it with other things, like the Albanians. You can generally tell when someone is going to travel for crime because they will travel on aeroplanes but then, all of a sudden, they will get the euro tunnel and the euro tunnel is pretty much an indicator of they are up to no good.

In contemporary British policing, the construction of these social groups resonates with what Michael Taussig (1987, 172) calls a ‘neocolonial reworking of primitivism’. Taussig points to the conqueror’s attribution of magical powers to the Indian cum Shaman, a figure that at once epitomises ‘the monstrous duality of the diabolical and the goldy’, and synthesises fear and desire that the mysterious and demonic animate. He places this peculiar contemporary figure in the historical context of the brutal exploitation of the Putumayo’s rubber plantations in the 19th century. The cruelty inflicted by the colonial masters on the Indians haunted them ever since, in turn endowing their subject with dual qualities of savagery and innocence, and magical powers to heal and to curse. Through this figure, Taussig points to the classed structure of magic: ‘This imputation of mystery and the demonic by the more powerful class to the lower -by men to women, by the civilized to the primitive, by Christian to pagan, is breathtaking -such an old notion, so persistent, so paradoxical and ubiquitous. In our day it exists not only as racism but also as a vigorous cult of the primitive, and it is a primitivism

¹ A UK fast food delivery service.

that it provides the vitality of modernism' (Taussig 1987, 215). The figure of the Albanian criminal condenses fascination and fear, partaking in a 'play of mirror images' where the state and its threatening Others are continuously constructed as powerful fictional realities (Aretxaga 2003, 403).

More recently, in the context of the so-called 'small boats crisis', whereby the crossing by fragile, flimsy boats across the English Channel surged, immigration officers policing the UK shores reckoned on people's reasons for attempting to reach the UK through these dangerous journeys. Mixing hearsay, speculations and tales, many officers ventured on the enticing forces underpinning the swelling traffic. CIO Phil expands on these: 'I have heard stories. So, for example, there was a spate last year where people who had claim asylum in Germany were coming over and saying: "in Germany we only get flats but here in England you get a house with a garden"'. Articulated in the crude bureaucratic language as 'pull factors', these are framed by his colleague, IO Lara, as fairy tales:

I think it is to do with maybe... have you heard of Dick Whittington?... Dick Whittington is a story about a child or a person who believes the streets of London are paved with gold and he goes to London. So maybe the migrant thinks that the UK is Dick Whittington where you can get... I was recently asked by a girl, a young woman, "when do I get my house?"

These are not just stories that circulate in 'canteen talk'. They provide scripts to craft national identities, which in turn shape decision-making (Mountz 2003, 638). In fact, they are deeply consequential on law and policies, that have used deterrent tools -including the shipping of asylum claimants to Rwanda- as a main governance strategy.

Magical thinking pervades immigration enforcement practices. They help domesticate a highly volatile, fluid social world, governed by unpredictable and capricious forces. Instead of utilising sophisticated predictive technologies, more often than not these officers resort to associations and connections rehearsed through experience. IO Anika once confided an 'office tale' to forecast fluctuations in workloads. At the time, many people were crossing the English Channel concealed in lorries. People arriving thus were considered particularly burdensome for immigration staff, since they generally carried no identification and were vulnerable, requiring specialised care. Sudden clandestine arrivals could lengthen their shifts and demanded liaising with multiple actors -translators, health workers, housing staff. Anika and her colleagues spotted a surge in arrivals on Thursdays, which they baptised as 'lorry drop Thursdays'. Mixed with a touch of humour, she implied the working of mysterious forces which magical thinking helped to domesticate hoping to make those arrivals more predictable.

These kinds of tales, built on observable patterns and speculations, provide some degree of predictability in a field perceived as capricious and hazardous. In exploring the politics of magic and the legitimacy of magical thinking, these stories give valence to state officers' cultural scripts while at the same time orientalisising those told by the (some) people they police or dismissing them as parts of the 'market in asylum narratives' (Ticktin 2011, 137). The cultural valence of immigration stories hinges on the social positionality of the teller and the moral judgements made upon them. It draws on sedimented colonial racial taxonomies about canny, mischievous and mysterious 'Others' and is important to understand the alchemy of domination. As the cultural scaffold of policing, these stories remind us of its embodied and unstable character. Rather than seen as atemporal and impersonal interactions, policing encounters are shot through histories and relationships of domination, and are profoundly gendered, raced and classed. How these officers 'see' scenes and people -their

optics- is embedded in these social structures. Yet, as I show in the next section, this form of knowledge and power gives rise to a range of paradoxes.

‘It all depends on what week you go, as to what result you get’: Immigration magic and state illegibility

While many of the stories immigration officers tell themselves and others are oriented to make a chaotic and edgy social world readable and predictable, their work is dominated by hazardous and arbitrary practices and rules. In the eyes of their police counterparts, immigration enforcement is a sort of ‘dark art’ which they struggled to comprehend. Immigration magic, as they called it, is a double sword: on the one hand, it can solve policing problems by making ‘problem people’ disappear. As opposed to the feebleness of the criminal justice system, immigration enforcement is perceived as a quicker and more effective way for dealing with troubling people by ejecting them from the realm. On the other hand, its unorthodox and unpredictable working practices leave police and immigration officers baffled.

In this peculiar, magical world, rules are malleable and pliable, and outcomes are dictated by hazardous factors. For immigration, IO Jane explains, nationality is crucial because they deal differently with a person from Romania versus one from South Africa. Within each group, she further articulates, the criteria to render someone deportable fluctuates, with different teams at different points in time operating on their own idiosyncratic rules. Different and constantly evolving nomenclatures about strands of deportation routes circulate within the close circle of the immigration bureaucracy, demanding constant review to understand the ebb and flow of immigration enforcement and puzzling even the most scrupulous officers.

In one instance, two police officers arrested a woman from Romanian caught stealing 20 bars of chocolate in the city centre. IO Tabita explained that because she had only one conviction in her records she could not be deported. The officers asked whether the woman could be returned to Romania as she had not been working. Frustrated, Tabita explained that they were no longer able returned EEA nationals on that ground: ‘if they don’t exercise treaty rights, they don’t matter anymore. But if they have three convictions, they are out.’ The officers looked confused by the sudden changes of rules which just recently allowed them to arrest Polish people sleeping on the streets for immigration purposes. Sensing this sense of bewilderment, Tabita promised them that ‘once I have the thumbs up [to arrest EEA nationals for not exercising EEA rights, such as working or studying], I can give you a call’ and took the details of the police officers.

An experienced Police Constable who had worked along with immigration officers for some time, PC Lindsey articulated this frustration:

The goal posts [in Immigration Enforcement] get changed, and we have had Missouri,² and we have had a period of time where Missouri was flavour of the month and it was ‘yes he can go, yes he can go, yes he can go’, that is one week. The following week you will have exactly the same scenario, and they will say ‘no he can’t’, ‘well why not? Last week, yes he could’, and ‘our parameters have changed, what we are looking at has changed’, and it will be a frustration because

² He refers to ‘Operation Missouri’. This is one of the strands, an operational avenue, to deport foreign nationals who had accrued three or more criminal convictions. ‘Missouri’ is born out of the interpretation of statutory law and judicial rulings.

it all depends on what week you go, as to what result you get, and it can be... fractious because someone who could have gone last week, this week can't go.

Other than making *the law*, these officers make different rules as they go along. These are not mere personal styles, but practices that are consequential on the individuals being subject to their power. For instance, one of the officers I shadowed adopted the practice of recording police arrests in the immigration database, a notification that can have significant repercussions on the granting, extension or curtailment of visas, residence status or citizenship. Other officers did not take such approach. Another officer had 'lobbied' her manager to make driving convictions (such as a parking or speeding infraction) accessible to immigration officers so that they can be considered when making individual immigration decisions. Although potential consequential to individuals, the decision to make this information available to immigration staff was apparently not subject to any legal constraint.

Immigration decisions depend on factors that the individuals or the officers cannot fully control. The nationality of the person is of critical importance, as it is the availability of beds and seats in specific charter flights at any particular point. A source of significant frustration among police and immigration officers, this hazardous work routines means that many of the people they arrest are later released due to logistical obstacles. IO Joe explains the vagrancy of immigration:

every single job is different. You can't say one person is going to be removed and another is not, and I think that, to the police is very, quite unfathomable, to them... because they work within a very structured criminal justice system, they know what they're got to do. With us, we've got how many different nationalities? On a regular basis, maybe 20-30, each one has its own challenges, you know. This person, this nationality, you're never going to get a document for, so you've got to treat them different. This person, 'oh well, he's going to claim asylum' so you've got to treat them different... I don't think the police understand that each nationality presents us with a unique problem.

The hazardous, unpredictable and arbitrary exercise of power leave those subject to it bereft of agency and puzzled. Their fates are subject to the vagrancies of immigration and hinging on officers' moods, diplomatic games, and logistical arithmetic, and lead to confusion and helplessness. That felt sense of perplexity was patent in an exchange Tabita had with Maria, a woman from Iran who was arrested on suspicion of carrying a firearm and then referred to Immigration. Tabita visited her in the police cell to gather information on her status in the UK. 'It is a strange to have a woman [arrested for] carrying a firearm', she reckoned. As she questioned her, Maria explained in broken English that she carries a pepper spray to protect herself because she had been harassed and targeted in her neighbourhood. I was confused too by Tabita's insistence on her possession of a firearm. Apparently, Tabita drew from a police report the information on the firearm, which I did not sight. She told Maria that 'it is very serious offence to carry a firearm in this country', and that 'you should know about it having been here for so long. It's dangerous and you shouldn't be having that in your possession. I will make a note of this in your case, and it may damage your application [for asylum]. You can jeopardise the chances of being here'. The woman was shattered and broke in tears. She said that she never had intended to hurt anybody, and she only tried to protect herself. Maria's disquiet at not being able to understand the reasons for her arrest and its ramifications, and the difficulties to explain herself spelt the despair of being caught up inside a Kafkaesque maze apparently produced by a chain of bureaucracy's mistakes and miscommunication.

In other words, rather than producing a cognitive template to make sense of a strange, chaotic world, immigration enforcement practices show illegibility as hallmark of the state or, in Vena Das' expression, the 'state's signature' (Das 2004). In documenting the politics of waiting in the administration of welfare benefits in Argentina, Javier Auyero (2012) explored a very similar form of exercising power, wrought by uncertainty and arbitrariness. The discretion in the allocation of benefits, he noted, cannot be entirely explained by looking at the work of individual street level bureaucrats, but stems from 'above' -particularly the world of politics. He portrays this process as a 'game of chance' where 'ad hoc decisions dominate much of the distribution of resources' suffused by hassles and mistakes, where 'random changes in procedure, scheduling, the number and cash amount of instalments, and the requirement are the rule' (102-3). Randomness and arbitrariness, he argued, is a form of domesticating the poor which ultimately produces domination.

State magic: illusion and confusion

As storytelling and magical thinking permeates Immigration, it also reminds us of its importance for understanding state power more broadly. Far from being the beacon of rational bureaucracy, the 'state' works through illusion and confusion. The 'magic of the state', Taussig (1997) elaborates, emanates from a Hobbesian fiction and a mythical covenant creating an unified, embodied entity: an artificial man. 'The play of disguise no less than force and fraud emerges from the very interior of the rationality of contract' (125). The rational form that underpins its existence functions as veil of a fantasy, a fable, a fiction:

No matter how historically inaccurate this fable obviously is, it is nevertheless a telling account of the mythological principles inevitably and necessarily involved in modern state formation... these stories of the coming into being of the state are not only fantastic history but... precisely as fantasy are essential to what they purport to explain such that any engagement with the thing called the state will perforce to be an engagement with this heart of fiction... (124).

This fantasy or illusion of the 'state' as discreet, bounded, coherent and real is reproduced through different registers (laws, uniforms, buildings) and practices, in what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic power' (Bourdieu et al. 1994, also Hansen and Stepputat 2001). Rather than coercion, this power resides in its monopoly on sensorial registers and cognitive structures, forms and categories. This 'quasi-divine' cultural power to produce and impose categories of thought is where the modern state is more efficacious. Framed in terms of 'legibility', James Scott suggests that such authority emanates from the state's ability to monopolise a sensorial experience of knowing the social world -of 'seeing' and 'feeling' like the state- and devising a normative social order (Scott 1998, Cooper 2019). Legibility as a central problem of modern statecraft was particularly apparent in the context of European conquests as colonial administrators wrestled to render strange lands and people familiar. Through practices of seeing, naming, classifying and ordering the state *performs* sovereignty (Mitchell 1990, Bryant and Reeves 2021).

Being able to 'read' people and things, to make them legible, is precisely the role of the immigration officers and, by extension, of the police. As the fieldwork analysis above suggests, these frontline officers play a key part in building the cognitive scaffold of our globalised social world, through their everyday practices *and* narratives. Such practices and narratives crafted to rein in a world perceived as inchoate, boundless, and fluid, are underpinned by intuition and bespoke, informal tools and technologies to 'draw truth from the body' (Fassin and D'Halluin 2005, Ticktin 2011), and to contain and pin down fractal

identities. Although seldom recognised as such, the mundane immigration stories and narratives of the kind described in this article form part of the technologies of governance that enact the state in everyday life as authoritative entity that can ‘recognize, adjudicate and authorize’ (Hansen and Stepputat 2001, 10).

Yet, the ‘state’ as enacted through these practices is far from complete and knowledgeable. Metaphorically, the illusion of the state -like a theatrical play- is always at risk of leaking and of revealing its fictional nature. Hence, it demands constant reinforcement, sometimes through carnivalesque excesses (Mbembe 2001) in the form of infrastructures of virile, spectacular force (Brown 2010). Under contemporary conditions, border control technologies and practices are important sites for understanding the ‘state’ -even its European incarnation- as an incomplete and precarious project (Barker 2017, Reeves 2014, Aliverti 2021b). Because of their indeterminacy, the social and geographical borders are critical sites for unsettling the solidity of the state (Das and Poole 2004, 20). In theorising the state, Poole and Das argued that the margins -the spaces of incompleteness, disorder, blurriness between legal and illegal- are not its negation but its entailment. In other words, rather than seeing disorder as spaces yet to be conquered by state power, they provocatively suggest that these are precisely the hallmark of the state itself. We need to understand the state not through attempts to make reality legible and orderly, but rather the contrary, through its illegibility and disorder: ‘the state is continually both experienced and undone through the illegibility of its practices, documents, and words.’ (10). As Madeleine Reeves (2014, 21) observed, ‘[t]he work of bordering highlights the improvisatory work of everyday state formation, and affords an insight into a mode of governance in which power thrives less on rendering populations and places legible than on working the gap between life and law’.

The task of drawing the boundary between life and law is central for border control work. And yet, as frontline officers come to realise, such boundary is slippery and oblique, not only due to attempts to foul them (Author forthcoming) but in large part because the state’s own rules are unreadable. Confusion and illegibility pervade their everyday work. Illegibility, according to Das, emerges from the two dimensions of the state: the rational and the magical. The spectral presence of the state in society combines its rational mode -through invocations of legal and bureaucratic structures- and its magical mode, characterised by its obscurity and pervasiveness (Das 2004).

In making magic as centre piece to understand state power, Das, Poole and Taussig unsettles not only our understanding of the state, but a division of labour between state and society. Following Weberian and Foucauldian traditions, the modern state has been conceived as a rational, coherent, impersonal structure. As Tim Mitchell explained, ‘the nation state is arguably the paramount *structural effect* of the modern technical era... It includes within itself many of the particular institutions already discussed, such as armies, schools, and bureaucracies. Beyond these, the larger presence of the state in several ways takes the form of a framework that appears to stand apart from the social world and provide an external structure’ (Mitchell 1990, 90). On the other hand, ‘society’ is characterised as irrational, superstitious and credulous. These attributes have been particularly marked in the post-colonies, where magic stands as ‘a vague marker of otherness that freezes non-Western subjects in premodern time’ (Greenwood 2020, 2). Yet, while magic and the ‘dark arts’ have lost its prominence in modern Northern cultural imagination, its importance for shaping individual and institutional beliefs, views, and practices is undeniable (Fitzpatrick 1992, Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, Crais 2002). The law and its institutions are replete with symbols, rituals and myths, which are crucial for their authority and legitimacy. The grammar

of magic as a resource of the powerless to make sense of social maelstrom and to tilt fate, as it turns out, is increasingly appropriated by state workers to harness occult forces ‘in situations of rapid social transformation, under historical conditions that yield an ambiguous mix of possibility and powerlessness’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 283).

By exploring the storytelling and magic in the world of immigration officers, this article attempts to advance on the direction marked by these authors. In foregrounding them in the analysis of the British immigration bureaucracy, I seek to *exoticise* it -that is, revealing its myths and tales, and its magical efficacy- and break it open to underexplored dimensions and angles. Theorising policing through the magical tales officers tell themselves and their audiences, reminds us of its inextricably embodied nature and of its socio-cultural bases, and in turn of the fragility and instability of policing truths. As I argued, the British ‘foreigners’ police’ is particularly prone to this analysis given the prominence of unorthodox tools and skills to tame wildness and re-spatialise state power. The article then advocates for a rethinking of our conceptual frameworks, and opening up to new insights to better understand social control and power in a globalised world.

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