Title: Refusing police power: resistances and ambivalences to state violence

Summary: In this forum, we take popular critiques from the majority world as our starting point for critically interrogating assumptions that police power and state violence are or should be the basis of 'normal' statecraft or 'good order'. We ruminate on questions about policing's actually-existing and future legitimacy through a transnational frame by foregrounding various refusals of it. In doing so, the forum raises new questions about how people imagine and work toward abolitionist futures in practice across diverse histories and geographic contexts.

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Refusing police power: resistances and ambivalences to state violence

Rhys Machold and Somdeep Sen

Publics are increasingly scrutinizing policing's self-implied necessity and popular legitimacy. Following the police murder of George Floyd in 2020, the prospect of a world *without* police (Maher, 2022) entered mainstream media and policy debates. This moment has been borne out of long-term organizing, most prominently by the Movement for Black Lives and has reverberated around the world (Chua, 2020; Davis 2011; Taylor 2016). Critical scholars and activists have called for police abolition rather than reform, in favor of new creative, non-coercive, communal and life-affirming institutions to replace contemporary carceral structures (Kaba and Ritchie, 2022).

At times, however, policing's popular legitimacy has seemed impervious to these new pressures and anti-police consciousness. For instance, in the wake of the rape and murder of Sarah Everard

in South London by a Metropolitan Police officer on March 3 2021, a poll found that 70% of Britons (still) believed that the police were doing a generally good job. This represented a 3% *increase* in the Met's popularity from the prior YouGov poll conducted on March 1 2021 (Smith, 2021). This might suggest that subjects interpellated by police power remain difficult to dislodge, even in the present conjuncture. This reflects the apparent endurance of what Robert Reiner (2010, 3-4) calls "police fetishism", namely the "the ideological assumption that the police are a functional prerequisite of social order so that without a police force chaos would ensue".

This raises key questions about how policing's popularity developed in the first place. The classic sociological conception of statecraft presents violence as *the* vocabulary through which the state communicates with its subjects and maintains its authority (Tilly, 1992; Weber, 1946). This assumption remains central to how state power and authority is theorized. Though, as Louis Althusser reveals, this authority is sustained in the everyday through the "recruitment" of ideological subjects that happens when police hail a person on the street by calling out to them "Hey, you there." This rendering of a person into a subject rarely fails - not least because, once hailed, a person invariably recognizes that indeed "it is really him *[sic]* who is being hailed." (Althusser, 2008: 48) As such, Althusser importantly illustrates how police subjectivities are fabricated in mundane routines.

Across many parts of the world, however, the popular legitimacy of police power is not a given. For instance, marginalized communities in imperial metropoles, people living in ostensibly *post*colonial states as well as Indigenous people living under occupation typically view the police as synonymous with oppression and the very antithesis of justice. Even among elites in the global South, the police is often disparaged as an arcane leftover of colonialism impeding democracy and equality. Thomas Blom Hansen (2021: 83), for instance, notes that across South Asia, the police is viewed as an extension of "larger configurations of social and political power that manipulate law

and policing at their will." Likewise, Theresa Caldeira (2000: 83) cites an informant from São Paulo who puts things rather bluntly: "Look, if someone approaches me and says, 'I'm a bandit, I'm going to take you home,' I would accept it more than if a guy in a uniform approaches me saying 'I'm a policeman, and I'm going to take you home.'" Kenyans articulated similar anti-carceral sentiments at a Nairobi protest against the use of police violence to enforce the coronavirus curfew. One protester said, "The police have killed us more than corona" (Sperber, 2020; Pfingst & Kimari, 2021). Indeed, across the global South, the assessment that "all police kill and extort" is considered accurate (Denyer Willis, 2015: 133).

In this forum, we take such popular critiques from the majority world as our starting point for critically interrogating assumptions that police power and state violence *are* or *should be* the basis of 'normal' statecraft or 'good order'. While we are concerned with how 'the police' is understood by publics in particular contexts, we approach police power the more expansive sense of the fabrication of social order (Neocleous, 2000). We ruminate on questions about policing's actually-existing and future legitimacy through a transnational frame. By 'transnational' we are concerned with how the state polices spaces and bodies, yet without assuming its solidity, coherence, or geographic boundedness (Seigel, 2005). As such, we conceptualize police as always-already transnational, rather than a once quintessentially *domestic* institution with a *local* remit (Dubber and Valverde, 2006; Seigel, 2018: 26) that at some point 'went global'. This conception stands in contrast to the analytic of *globalization,* which implies that transnational relations are unprecedented (Cooper, 2001; Seigel, 2005). Relatedly, our approach departs from prevailing terms of debate about the transnational dimensions of police power, which argue that the movement of police personnel "beyond boundaries" and the rise of "global policing" or "transnational policing" represent recent, even unprecedented developments (Bigo, 2000; Bowling and Shepticky, 2012; Shepticky, 2007). Instead, we are inspired by the field of transnational history, which conceptualizes transnational relations as formative to the nature and

emergence of police power (Brogden, 1987; Go, 2020; Seigel, 2018; Schrader, 2019). As Julian Go (2011) points out, empire is a quintessentially "transnational formation" evidencing how political power is unequally exercised over less powerful populations categorized as inferior. This attention to the colonial and imperial origins of police power helps to reckon with its irreducibly racialized character (Pingeot and Bell, 2022; Singh, 2014; Brucato, 2014; 2020; Denman, 2020; Guariglia, 2023). By starting from policing's colonial origins and civilizing missions, race-making comes into view as foundational to policing, even though the particular imbrications of policing and racism are neither singular nor uniform across time and space (Yonucu and Parker, 2023). Indeed, we argue against conflating police power's transnational and racialized character with its universality in the sense of being the same everywhere. There seems good reason to revisit Walter Benjamin's (2007, 276) influential claim that "the police may, in particulars, everywhere *appear* the same" (emphasis added). Benjamin's phrasing itself seems to invite engagements with how this appearance came into being but also a probing of its limits. As more recent works have begun to elaborate, the actually-existing nature and extent of how police power operates as well as publics' relations to it are more geographically variegated and even contradictory than critical commentators tend to acknowledge (Jauregui, 2016; Waseem, 2022; Brucato, 2020; Machold, 2020; 2024).

This forum's contributions further such debates and wider conversations on police geographies (Coleman, 2016; Herbert, 1997; Kaufman, 2020; Loyd, 2020) by challenging hegemonic conceptions and representations of the relations between police power and its publics across multiple sites, geographies, and scales. Together, the contributions invite us to reconsider whether or to what extent the ideological interpellation of police subjects and their status as popular constituencies is as automatic or self-assured as Althusser seems to suggest.

To this end, we foreground various refusals of police power. Here we mobilize the analytic of refusal to capture the multiple repertoires and strategies through which communities seek to disrupt and undermine the assumed normalcy of police power. Drawing on decolonial and Indigenous scholarship, *refusal* is characterized by the disavowal of power and its presumed authority. Acts of refusal – some more overt than others – hold the potential to reconfigure relations between dominator and dominated as people work to build lives otherwise (Simpson, 2014; Bhungalia, 2020). Crucially, however, refusal does not represent "an unchanging agentic position" but instead "constitutes a terrain of ongoing struggle" that gives rise to different forms of subjectivity and agency in relation to structural violence and state power (Oza, 2023: 95).

This forum grapples with this terrain and includes examples of refusal in the form of active resistance (Elliott-Cooper, 2021; Sen, 2020: 54-88), which seek to disrupt the normalcy of police power. Deniz Yonucu illustrates how Istanbul's racialized and working-class minority activists refused to be fearful of police, representing active resistance to the assumption that police power and state violence should be the basis of 'normal' statecraft. Equally, in taking departure in the mass shootings at Uvalde, Texas in 2022, Geo Maher underlines the uselessness of the police and sheds new light on the possibility of abolition and resisting the presumed universality of police power. In recognizing the varied positionalities of communities affected by police power, this forum expands the arsenal of refusal to include subversive and ambivalent approaches. These may not seek to materially abolish police and policing but nonetheless stand defiantly, against the assumption that the state *must* speak to its citizens through violence. This form of refusal includes the favela-led approaches to mitigating police violence in Rio de Janeiro in Desirée Poets's contribution, which engages public authorities to undertake policy reform. Gagan Preet Singh describes the ambivalent Dalit response to policing, which traverses beyond the 'abolitionist/reformist binary', recognizing the inherent casteism of policing in India, yet has not inspired a self-conscious repertoire of abolition.

Through these various histories and strategies of refusing police power, this intervention reflects on how abolitionist praxis is not simply a matter of potential futures-to-come but already alive in the past and present. In doing so, we seek to open space for reconsidering the worldliness of abolitionism. It is crucial to emphasize that the prevailing disdain for police in the global South has not typically translated into wholesale calls to defund or abolish policing institutions. Paradoxically, the routine and spectacular extra-judicial police violence experienced by ordinary people – a key reason *why* police are so widely derided – is also the very basis of the (semblance of) legitimacy that they continue to enjoy (Denyer-Willis, 2015; Jauregui, 2016; Khannikar, 2018). This forum raises questions about how people imagine and work toward abolitionist futures in practice.

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