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The Urgency of Police Abolition

And a Note on Moral Anti-Racism

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Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Police as technology of government | 6 |
| The modern cop and a brief comment on moral anti-racism | 12 |

We don't want the damn police anymore!

It was on May 25, 2020 in the US, and with COVID-19 infections at their initial peak globally, that an occurrence of police brutality caused an important shift in the struggle against *security dispositifs*. A Black man, George Floyd, was killed by a white police officer who pinned him down and kneeled on his neck for over nine minutes. As had happened in previous years with similar police murders, there were strong reactions by many sectors of the Black movement, with protests gathered around the motto that became a movement: *Black Lives Matter*. But the shift occurred with the emergence, from within the protests, of a concrete, specific, and immediate demand: Police Abolition.

On the one hand, this wasn't a very popular demand in the movement as a whole, in the sense that there were more reformist demands that were more vocalized. On the other hand, this renewed demand for police abolition managed to surpass a reliance on the criminal justice system for the case of George Floyd. This new situation triggered riots that precipitated the burning of the Third Precinct in Minneapolis, and spread the demand for police abolition across the globe. The global reach of the demand for police abolition was evident when, about a month after the burning of the Third Precinct, the June issue of the French journal *Lundi-Matin* published the *Manifeste Pour La Suppression Générale De La Police Nationale*, an abolitionist manifesto that directly mentioned the US protests. This manifesto was also a reaction to the constant violence against *Yellow Jackets* protesters, and the police violence in the *banlieues* of Paris against racialized people.

The *8 To Abolition* debate reached Brazil, where the demands were being discussed in some abolitionist circles and academic research groups. The urgency of police abolition in Brazil is undeniable. Globally, the Brazilian police is the most deadly, and Brazilian police officers have the highest mortality rate. This piece aims to put forward some ideas for how to elaborate an analysis of the police without yielding to reformist arguments that always leave intact the functions and the existence of the police.

In order to do so, we suggest, borrowing from Michel Foucault's *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-78*, that we need to understand that the police are more than an institution. The police are, first and foremost, a technology of government. As such, the history of the police is inextricably linked to the formation of the modern state and the means to administer and control the population. We must also shed light on the fact that the average police officers in their ordinary functions are practitioners of violence, and bureaucrats with weapons.¹ If our point of departure is the police as a technology of government, we are able to widen our sphere of action to include its abolition. Why? Because this perspective encompasses the police not only as a technology of control, but also as part of the subjective construct of contemporary citizenship, in other words, the ways of making, thinking, and imagining of the subject of today's *security democracy*: the *citizen-cop*.

Police as technology of government

We need to examine the police beyond the institution and the uniform. First, because the media and the entertainment industry constructs a particular discourse on the police and its functions. It is a discourse that always describes police officers as individuals capable of the most outstanding deeds, and enmeshed in moral dilemmas of duty and law. For this reason, when the institution of the police is criticized, there is always the pitfall of focusing on its excesses as exceptions. For example, in the movie *Elite Squad*, Captain Nascimento is a police officer riddled with personal dilemmas; he is extremely violent, but with a conscience that must be restored, and a sense of justice that, albeit objectionable, grants him a bit of "humanity."

Thus, the excesses of some police officers or a group considered a "bad batch" is criticized, but in the name of the pursuit of

its paroxysms in the forms of authoritarian and genocidal regimes like Nazi Germany and Italian Fascism, today, the sovereign power to kill—by means of state racism—has learned to be democratic. It operates, in democracies, through the police *security dispositif* turned international by its merging with the military—diplomatic *dispositif*. This colonization of politics by security—which does not need to be manifested in an authoritarian dictatorship—is present in governments throughout the whole planet. We call this process *security democracy*.

Thus, as a *security dispositif* in *security democracies*, the police operates its policies of control and death beyond the institution and its officers. The police produces order as security of the living beings on the planet, an *ecopolitics*. Living beings in this case are not just humans, but every living thing that is useful and a producer of obedience and order, everything that can be considered good and orderly. As for the living beings that do not correspond to this orderly productivity, state racism acts with its murderous cut, and kills or lets die.

In today's democracies, there is no anti-racism without police abolition. This is the shift that is spreading to the whole planet. This affirmation of liberated life emerged in the protests against the execution of George Floyd. But a closer look will reveal that across the globe, the vast majority of people hate the murderous police. Outside the vital struggle that aims to dismantle the *security dispositif*, the diplomatic-police *dispositif*, we are left with a moral rhetoric of racism as prejudice and misconduct. We have to go beyond that if we want to stop counting the bodies of racialized people, no matter where the counting is being done. From the ghettos of Sao Paulo, the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro to somewhere in the streets of Soweto, Johannesburg; from the *banlieues* in Paris to the streets of Minneapolis or the Gaza Strip, in Palestine.

The urgency to abolish the police is in the urgency to be alive! The urgency of the affirmation of life as *anti-politics* in the struggle against state racism's sovereign politics of death.

not a mere issue of a political or ideological stance, but a tactical decision that demonstrates our resolution to see a definitive end to police violence. To choose the lesser of two evils became the condition of preservation and expansion of the *security dispositif*, and the continuity of the criminal justice system.

There is one question left: how does this technological ensemble of administration, control, and repression produce so much death? It is the question Foucault asked when dealing with bio-power as a technology that “makes live and lets die.” The answer is unequivocally the same: what allows a power that makes life to produce death is *state racism*. The latter produces the subjects that, in the name of life and production of order, must be eliminated or slowly killed, as they are always in conflict with this established order. In this sense, it is not by chance that, for example, *8 To Abolition* became such an important campaign in the wake of the George Floyd protests. The police is the direct operator of this *dispositif* of fatal intervention over racialized targets.

It is not a matter of misconduct or excessive use of force, it is how the *dispositif* works. Any anti-racist discourse that ignores this fact is a mere moral objection that describes racism as a kind of ethical misconduct that can be corrected by a moral ideal that condemns racism. That is why this stance usually refers to racist behavior as some prejudice to be remedied by some kind of moralizing awareness-raising or sanction (penal or social).

Historically, the police is a modern political technology that operates simultaneously as the sovereign power to kill, and the bio-political management of life of the population and its citizens. Since its emergence in the 1970s, the sovereign face of death of *neoliberal rationality* has been increasing. This is manifested in processes like *militarization*, *hyper-incarceration*, *judicialization of life*, *pacification* of impoverished urban territories like the *favelas*, or even in entire countries like Haiti and Syria. Once again, biopolitics, the management of life, leads to its paroxysm, death at a large scale. However, unlike in the mid-twentieth century, which saw

an honest, democratic police that respects human rights, and that shouldn't commit brutalities. The reformist discourse is renewed by representations of police officers—and the police—that are far-fetched, or simply projects a reformist ideal that is unreachable. This “reform package,” and this image of the police, ignores—or tries to conceal—that the police's core activity is the asymmetrical, unequal, and legitimized deployment of violence throughout the whole social body, and especially against those considered *dangerous*.

A critique of the police that tries to differentiate the good officer from the bad reproduces the normal logic of policing. This logic is disseminated by the entertainment industry through crime movies and television shows that are based on the shallow binarism of *good cop vs. bad cop*. Like in the movies, these images of good and evil are complementary and exist for the permanence of the police as an institution and a predominant political form of persuasion.

The police are a conjuncture of practices and technologies of administration, control, and repression of the population. The most precious technology of the modern arts of government, it is capable of being both individualistic and totalitarian, systemic and localized, reaching each and every person. Its emergence is related to the formation of the state's sovereignty, as a tool of the *Raison d'État*. Later, the police developed into an internal *security dispositif* of liberal governmentality that aims to assure the good governance of affairs and people in favor of the preservation and expansion of the state's government.

It is with this development that today's police practices emerged as a means to reinforce security in favor of the production of an unequal and asymmetrical order in capitalist societies based on the protection of private and/or state property. These practices comprise a very complex and heterogeneous set of strategies that articulate ways of reinforcing public health (social medicine), interventions in urban reforms (city planning), and

tools for the discipline of the labor force (forms of control and administration of workers, aiming at an increase in productivity).

Therefore, the history of the police is the history of technologies of government that goes far beyond their contemporary form; a form usually only recognized by the police's role as a repressive state apparatus, the image of the armed man in uniform on the streets or a police team repressing a protest. Actually, the history of the police is intertwined with fields of knowledge such as sociology, political science, and political economy.

In his 1977-78 course, Foucault tells us that "from the seventeenth century, 'police' begins to refer to the set of means by which the state's forces can be increased while preserving the state in good order. In other words, police will be the calculation and technique that will make it possible to establish a mobile, yet stable and controllable relationship between the state's internal order and the development of its forces."² In short, the police, which emerges in Europe linked to the sovereign state, will have as its primary objective the good use of state forces inside its territory for the realization of the splendor of the state.

The police are the direct instrument of the *Raison d'État*. Its operational tool is statistics: the knowledge of the state about itself. But this emergence of the police-form, or of the techniques of the sovereign police, will mutate, with particularities and different knowledges coming together in different European countries. Nonetheless, all these particularities will become the form and functions of the modern police, or the associated forms of state intervention in societies like we have today. In the territories colonized by the European nation-states, the particularity of the police will be, in a complementary manner, related to flogging, brutality and mass killing, for the splendor of the colonial state.

Following Foucault's genealogy of the state in this same lecture series, in calling attention to the police as the decisive element in the operation of modern government practices, we will notice that the formation of police technologies will bring together

is to create a new police, even if the problem is the police itself. So, today we even have a "police" for the police.

Let us demonstrate the large presence of the police in the life of every citizen in Brazil. In the Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil, Article 144, from Chapter III, deals with public security, its environments and functions. In the Article, there is a list of different kinds of police: "I – federal police; II – federal highway police; III – federal railway police; IV – civil police; V – military police and military fire brigades." Many regulations, functions, protocols, recommendations, codes of ethics and conducts stem from this Article of the constitution.

Add to that list the private police, security companies, and extra-legal police. We can also mention the illegal enterprises for the defense of property that are a part of this *regime of illegality*, the so-called *militias* or criminal organizations. There exists an infinite variety of police, and even then, nobody is safe; quite the contrary, each and every person is a suspect and we are all called to police the conduct of others and of ourselves. So, the *citizen-policemen* is disseminated, with its form of political being and public life linked to police practices and control. And even with so much police, the so-called "crimes" or "conflicts with the law" keep happening frequently. But not only that, these varieties of police protect the agents of lethal violence. When this violence becomes unmanageable, the first solution is to create the police of the police or other forms of judicialization of conduct and life.

Finally, there are also institutions, NGOs, research groups, and even human rights movements that, when confronted with police violence, not only deny this violence as inherent to the police, but even create ways to fight this violence that imitates police technologies: action plans, regulations, and surveillance practices.

Those are actions that not only renew faith in police controls, but become a tenet for the expansion of the police and *security dispositif*. That is why we must put forward the question of police abolition, and refuse the step-by-step or reformist solutions. It is

That is why—when we demand the abolition of the police—we need to understand it beyond the institution, and beyond the uniform and the individuals in it. To understand the police as a technology of government, and to follow its changes through history, is to be aware of reformist discourses and critics of only certain police behavior considered excessive or abusive. They only argue for a new police, and the renewal of administration and control.

This critique perpetuates the play of practices and counter-practices that changed the sovereign police into a set of practices of biopolitical government, with the repressive police as *security dispositif* for the preservation of the internal order. Police abolition must be a fight against governmental reason, against the state as a way of doing and thinking, the state as a category of reading reality. The anti-police movement must also be *anti-political*, understanding politics as a set of techniques of government of some over others. Otherwise, any critique of the police will be only an announcement of a new police or of the dismantling of the practices of containment with different names.

The modern cop and a brief comment on moral anti-racism

Jumping forward in time and space, let us focus on the figure of the police officer today. Whenever something is written or said about the police, only the legal functions of the police, as established by law, are considered. This is largely due to the influence of media discourse and falsifications. Nonetheless, the police, as an institution, a function, or even a form of behavior, have multiplied in ways never imagined before. There is no place where you cannot find some modality of police or police behavior of the most varied kinds. At the same time, the police mentality is so ingrained that the first solution that we can think of in the face of a new problem

specific knowledges and various institutional practices. Foucault shows that in Germany, at the time not yet a unified territory, the police was a creation of the university, the *locus* of a police science.

Foucault identifies, in his writings dedicated to the forms of governance, something that in German was called “*Polizeiwissenschaft*, the science of police, which from the middle or end of the seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century is an absolutely German specialty that spreads throughout Europe and exerts a crucial influence.”³ Parallel to this theory of the police as a political science produced in Germany, in France—already a centralized administrative state with a demarcated territory—the police at the time were conceived and operated by the emergent state bureaucracy. The police would work by means of decrees and regulations intended to control and circulate commodities in the emergent cities. If in Germany the police was a creation of the university, in France it was a creation of the state bureaucracy with the purpose of regulating goods, people, and wealth.

What is essential from these references gathered by Foucault is not the compilation of facts that comprise the history of the modern police. The reason to put together these references is to understand, genealogically, how the formation of the police comes from within the relations of knowledge-power that shaped modernity. That is to say, the police is related to the arts of governing, *i.e.*, the means to know and control subjects, which is not limited to a judicial instrument or a set of state apparatuses. This genealogy shows the positivity of the police-form in the formation of the modern state. The police is a *dispositif* with specific functions, objects, and well-defined objectives for the production of an order, the regulation of commerce, the administration of cities, and the disciplining of the subjects.

In short, the positivity of the police, back to the origins of what would become the modern police, is the production of the bourgeois society in the historical sense of the term. This is the positivity of the newborn police: to produce the bourgeois order rooted

on property. Parallel to these practices, in the European colonies, this art of governing and producing order would have more functions, namely the hunting down of the non-subjects: the savages of the earth, and the people brought there as slaves.

As Foucault summarizes, the police will have a specificity of functions detached from the law: the police deals with the ordinary, the minute, while the law must deal with the important tasks of the state. “In other words, police is the direct governmentality of the sovereign qua sovereign. Or again, let’s say that police is the permanent *coup d’État*. It is the permanent *coup d’État* that is exercised and functions in the name of and in terms of the principles of its own rationality, without having to mold or model itself on the otherwise given rules of justice.”⁴

This definition is important today for an analysis of the police as a technology of government. Even if this sovereign form of the police has changed in the centuries that followed to become what we know today as the repressive police, this independence or autonomy from the law would endure. This endurance is justified by the necessity of the police as a form of intervention to deal with a set of urgent matters that the law is incapable of predicting. The consequence is that police officers see themselves as citizens from a different category, free from abiding by the law, subjected to special rules and regulations that other citizens are not. In the face of the law’s rigidity, police control remains elastic.

Nonetheless, this form of sovereign police was subjected to criticism at the end of the eighteenth century, altering its form, dismantling its functions into other fields of action. This critique came from an emergent knowledge that opposed the artificiality of sovereign intervention through the police *dispositif*. This perspective argued for a “natural environment” susceptible to regulation, and opposed to a police state (*Polizeistaat*).

A group related to this emergent knowledge was responsible for making this critique—a group that, as Foucault said, is almost a sect: the economists. This knowledge, *Political Economy*, would address

an object of government that is no longer a group of heterogeneous subjects, but a common field, almost a natural environment, that would become society, or what today we call civil society—in opposition to a political society (the state). This division was made possible by the emergence of a measurable field of intervention, one produced by the statistical knowledge of the state. This field of intervention would be the population itself, a field made possible by statistical knowledge and by a political economy dealing with society as a population, a “species-body”, capable of subjection to biopolitical control and administration.

Therefore it is through the articulation of the knowledge of political economy and the practices of management of the population that a dynamic relationship would develop within the mechanisms of security. This articulation would produce the modern definition of liberty, setting the transition from a sovereign governmentality, through the sovereign police, to a liberal governmentality that would shape the modern police.

In fact, the emergent governmentality at the end of the eighteenth century would dismantle sovereign police functions. On the one hand, the management of the population would be exercised through urban policies and social medicine, while on the other, forms of direct intervention and repression emerged to prevent disorder: the repressive police that we know today.⁵ “Economic practice, population management, a public law constructed on the respect of freedom and freedoms, and a police with a repressive function: you can see that the old police project, as it appeared in correlation with *raison d’État*, is dismantled, or rather broken up into four elements—economic practice, population management, law and respect for freedoms, police—which are added to the great diplomatic-military apparatus (*dispositif*) that has hardly changed since the eighteenth century.”⁶ So we have, briefly, the range of functions of the modern state through political technologies that function well beyond direct state intervention.