

“Dear Citizens, This Is Your Police”

In Praise of the Police-Free Zone in Hamburg

CrimethInc.

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“Dear citizens, this is your police,” proclaimed a loudspeaker from behind a line of armored water cannons on Friday afternoon, July 7. A handful of unarmed young people dressed in bright colors were playing with an inflatable protest prop in the middle of an intersection on Willy-Brandt-Strasse over a kilometer away from the site of the G20 summit. A moment later, the water cannons attacked, knocking people down under the force of the blast. This scene played out again and again throughout the week, as over-equipped police bullied and terrorized the population of Hamburg. *These are your police.*

The next day, during Saturday’s peaceful, permitted demonstration, the police once more could not restrain themselves. After the march, as tens of thousands of people danced, shared free food, and listened to speakers at Millerntorplatz, a line of water cannons and riot police on Helgoländer Allee yet again attacked the crowd with jets of water. Detachments of fully-armored riot police pushed into the crowd, helmets on, weapons at the ready, prepared to violently assault anyone in their path.

At moments like this, when an occupying army attacks a peaceful population without provocation, it’s clear who the enemy is. For many people throughout the world, this is not an exception that takes place during a summit like the G20, but their ordinary day-to-day experience of police. At Millerntorplatz, the crowd was able to immobilize the riot police, surrounding them to block their path and sitting down in front of the water cannons to protect the rest of the demonstration from them. Yet police are not always so easily deterred, especially when they are dealing with demographics that lack social power or acting under cover of darkness. Later on the night of July 8, when the police attempted to reassert their supremacy in the Schanze neighborhood, witnesses saw a policeman snatch a full bottle of beer from an ordinary bar patron and break it over his head. Peacefully sitting down in front of them is not always enough to keep them at bay.

This is why people mobilized to defend themselves and Hamburg in general from the invasion of riot police: not just because of specific excesses associated with the G20 summit, but in response to the structural role police play in imposing an oppressive social order characterized by tremendous imbalances in power.

The role of the police is to impose this order at any price. They don’t just “maintain order,” as if order were some neutral state of affairs; they enforce a particular order, a particular set of power relations. This is the link between the G20 and police brutality: they are different aspects of the

same social structure, viewed at different levels of scale. To counter the disproportionate control that the G20 leaders have over all of our lives, it is necessary to be able to face down the forces that serve them.

Both the G20 leaders and their flunkies in uniform tell us that the order they enforce is for our own good, and some of us are naïve enough to believe this. Every monarch in history told his subjects the same thing—so did Stalin, Mussolini, Hitler, and the perpetrators of the Inquisition. The most basic principle of a free society is that no one else is entitled to decide for us what is good for us; we have to be free to decide this for ourselves. By protecting the privileges of the super-rich and imposing the agendas of politicians, police deny us the space and resources to live our lives on our own terms, chipping away at our liberties until all that remains to us is to choose which products to numb ourselves with.

As the technologies available to the police have become more and more complex, this process has accelerated. In the movie *Terminator* starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, released in the Orwellian year 1984, the future is imagined as a war in which artificial intelligence conducts military operations to wipe out humanity. Yet just as it is still cheaper (in the era of “surplus humanity”) to employ cheap human labor in sweatshops than to fully automate the factories, rather than killer robots we are seeing human beings integrated into a vast inhuman repressive apparatus. Each police officer is a piece of fragile flesh within a machine of metal, roboticized inside as well as outside. If you peer through the visor of his helmet, you see the human inside, his personality almost entirely swallowed up by the machine, his sense of personal responsibility abdicated. The rank and file officers are still sort of recognizable as human beings; the officers serving in the special forces vanish entirely within their Robocop uniforms.

In this context, the only hope for humanity lies in creating spaces beyond the control of the police, in which we can renegotiate our relations without their interference. This is why the police-free zone that Hamburg locals and other demonstrators created in the Schanze neighborhood on Friday night was such a victory.

Some have criticized the rioters who barricaded the Schanze district and drove out the police for hours as being “apolitical,” engaging in “mindless chaos.” On the contrary, nothing is more political than creating such a space like this, in which we may once again become the protagonists of our own social and political lives rather than letting the authorities impose their order on us. For those who value freedom, nothing is more pressing than to experiment with how to create such spaces, developing tactics that can face down the violence of the state.

Anyone who was inside the Schanze district during those hours of freedom knows it was considerably less violent there than in the areas of Hamburg in which the police were charging, beating, gassing, spraying, and water-cannoning people. The violence of people struggling against their oppressors cannot compare to the militarized state violence of an occupying force like the police who were brought to Hamburg from all around Germany.

The far right will take advantage of the events of July 7 to pass more repressive laws and invest still more resources and legitimacy in the police. We have to respond by working hard to delegitimize the police in the public eye and explaining why people would throw off their control. The authorities cannot succeed in repressing us if we continue to emulate the model that people courageously demonstrated in Hamburg. They will only succeed if we rely on laws and politicians to protect our rights, ceding them legitimacy and power over us.

There remains room for improvement, of course. So much effort went into pushing back the police and destabilizing their control of downtown Hamburg that there was little energy left

to make something beautiful happen in the liberated area that opened up. Yes, a couple shops were looted, and people painted art on the walls, but we have to demonstrate the world we wish to create, so people will be able to understand what we are aiming for when we oppose those who currently control the world. This is not simply a reactive project, in which we respond to the initiatives of the authorities and throw off the existing forms of law and order—it must be a fundamentally creative endeavor, in which we illuminate new paths, new possibilities. Next time people open up a police-free zone, let's fill it with the lives we all deserve.

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