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Summary

A pivotal work of our time, *Violence Work* provides a much-needed corrective to contemporary liberal debates surrounding police's "brutality", "privatization" and "militarization" and associated impetuses for its "reform" that pushes us to consider other pathways forward, taking insight and direction from the long and robust history of abolitionist organizing. Our conversation and probing lines of inquiry here seek to enrich and think alongside this much-needed centering of violence at the core of police work, yet in such a way that equally avoids accepting state and colonial power as already all-powerful totalities.

Introduction

Micol Seigel's *Violence Work* (2018) has a number of merits, but two are particularly notable. First, it foregrounds the centrality of violence to policing, thus crucially underscoring how there can be no "reform" to police work. As Seigel contends, "*Police* does what the state (and market [...]) needs to do [...] Police realize – they *make real* – the core of the power of the state", tasks that are inherently violent (10). Second, it centers how forms of transnational relationality are fundamental to the operation of police work. The book treats these two dynamics as closely interconnected and mobilizes them to dispel three central myths or mythical borders pivotal to the legitimization of police, namely that police are (1) civilian rather than military, (2) public rather than private or market players, and (3) that they work (primarily) at the local/domestic level. In so doing, *Violence Work* mounts a timely intervention into current intellectual and public debates surrounding the "militarization" and "privatization" of policing and the problem of "police brutality", echoing other recent works from scholars including Deborah Cowen (2012), Alison Howell (2018), Naomi Murakawa (Camp et al., 2016), Nikhil Pal Singh (2017), Stuart Schrader (2019), David Correia and Tyler Wall (2018), and Mark Neocleous (2014), among others.

***Violence Work's* key contributions**

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Following Egon Bittner, Seigel argues that it is “the potential use of force that constitutes the quotidian power of policing [...]. That is the distinction between work that must be done by police and work that police could pass on to others: work that relies upon violence or the threat thereof” (2018: 9). On one hand, this approach moves away from the Foucauldian impulse “to treat ‘police’ as a verb” and attend to how “policing suffuses the flesh of the collective” as everyday people assume roles in the enforcement of norms (6). This approach, Seigel notes, while useful in attending to “the process of building hegemony, turns us away from the actual police. It proffers a slippery slope in which everyone along the famous “disciplinary continuum”, on out to the local kindergarten teacher, would be included” (6). Yet despite this impulse to narrow the focus, that is, to avoid treating police to an all-encompassing term, *Violence Work’s* focus on locating the violence at the core of police power equally insists on “broaden[ing] our vision to include the great range of workers whose activity depends upon the threat or potential for violence, because their authority relies on that threat. Indeed, the term “violence work” is useful precisely because it requires this broadening” (12). As Seigel emphasizes, “violence work is done by more people than the uniformed public police – so very many more” (13).

In addition to ontologically situating violence as the essence of police and by extension state power, *Violence Work* centers this violence in governing processes and capital accumulation. “[T]he reason the police power varies so widely,” Seigel argues, is “because it carries out the functions of governance. *Police* does what the state (and market [...]) needs to do, and that is potentially infinite” (10). In so doing – and drawing on the inspiration of Karl Polanyi, Timothy Mitchell and others – she focuses closely on the inseparability of the state and market as well as the anti-democratic repercussions of deference to “the market” as a technology of governing. In probing the “intimacy” between the state and market, Seigel employs the term “‘state-market’, as both adjective (as in ‘state-market power’ or ‘state-market violence’) and noun” (18). As she elaborates through a range of examples, the state and market are irreducibly entwined, despite at times appearing as distinct from one another. Indeed, Seigel’s reliance on the term state-market “helps focus the structuring matrix capitalism provides for the state, and vice-versa” (19).

While on one hand challenging the myth of the state and market as separate, independent entities, *Violence Work* equally challenges the ideological and political borders of police work. It employs the history of the (U.S.) police “to show police constantly and frequently

crossing the borders supposed to contain them” (13). Grounding her analysis in the U.S. Department of State’s Office of Public Safety (OPS) (a federal agency established within USAID in the early 1960s to fight global counterinsurgency that included training the police forces of allied foreign nations), Seigel shows how the work of OPS traversed borders conceptually, materially, and technologically. Directly linking “lessons learned” from civil disorder domestically to Cold War communist counterinsurgency campaigns, OPS, Seigel shows, “opened many portals for exchange between US and foreign police work” (35). This included hiring municipal police to export lessons of U.S. domestic policing overseas, police who upon returning to the U.S., integrated those experiences abroad into domestic police work. OPS “easily, constantly stepped out of the ostensibly civilian realm into the world of politics and war” (70). These “constant crossings and exchanges,” Seigel notes, “define state power in the modern world” (50).

This relational focus, however, is not merely descriptive of police in its actually existing forms. Seigel convincingly shows how these routine transgressions of the political and geographic boundaries of police have been predicated on comparisons between rural locations in the global South and U.S. cities that both enabled these circulations to take place and made possible the exchange of ideas, logics and tactics between police and military. She deftly demonstrates how such comparisons and actually-existing forms of connectivity provided the raw material (in terms of language and logic) that enabled policymakers and citizens to make the case for new law-and-order interventions. Indeed, such “crossings”, Seigel argues, have been central to defending the ideological parameters of violence work (127).

In addition to their ideological productivities, *Violence Work* suggests that these crossings were profitable. Seigel argues, for instance, that “Understanding the profits derived from police assistance helps to clarify that what we are tracing is a history of neoimperial exploitation” (108), later emphasizing that “violence workers are *workers*: people whose labor power is appropriated to produce surplus value” (148). Moreover, a focus on the “laborers and the crossings their work entails reveals the inseparable nature of the state and market in capitalist democracies [...] Their crossovers highlight the work state officials do to justify the violence required by capital by stabilizing the notion of the state [...]” (120). The point of all of this, however, is not that the borders of police are irrelevant; it is instead to show that the borders of the police “are conceptual, not absolute” (14). In other words,

despite constantly defending policing's ideological borders as well-defined and immutable, *Violence Work* provides striking evidence of how police never, in fact, respect them in carrying out their work.

Our Queries

Violence Work is compelling and powerful in all kinds of ways, only a small part of which can be covered here. Our discussion is intended to probe and productively engage how we might conceive of the critical questions (and answers) this book poses for how we conceptualize and critically intervene in violence work. In particular, we query the formulation of police power and violence work as it relates ultimately to the interests of capital and empire, which animates a central part of the book. Second, and relatedly, we ask what kinds of limitations might inhere in *Violence Work's* conceptualization of borders and relationalities and propose some possible ways around them.

One of *Violence Work's* central propositions is that the exercise of, or the potential to, exercise violence is the essence of police (and state) power. While the political imperative undergirding this approach is clear and polemically significant, it may also, unwittingly, constrain us analytically. Here Beatrice Jauregui's (2016) *Provisional Authority* based on police in India is a particularly provocative counterpoint to *Violence Work*. Although similarly foregrounding how everyday police work is saturated with violence (both spectacular and invisible), she seeks to challenge "master narratives of power, sovereignty and the originary violence of the law that have come to dominate contemporary scholarly and popular discourses about the police" (Jauregui, 2016: 12). Indeed, she argues, "Police coercive authority *qua* violence is rather one vital (and sometimes fatal) means to various ends that, like other means – from unofficial gifts to legal decisions – hang in the air as a potential force that may be applied or denied contingently and exigently" (13). In this reading, police authority (including the exercise and threat of coercion) can be best apprehended as necessarily contextual and conditional rather than absolute. While Jauregui's analysis is less politically radical than Seigel's, it provides an important counterpoint that illuminates the significant political stakes of how we represent the relation between police violence and the power it commands. Defining policing *as* violence work, even as it critically centers violence in analysis of police power, may both unduly overplay the extent to which this order-making is always based exclusively on the threat of violence *and* the extent to which police violence is necessarily authoritative. The framing of police work as violence work may unwittingly forward a deterministic conception of state power and limit our ability

to theorize the multiple (and sometimes contradictory) roles of police power, as well as the situated circumstances where its enactments of authority break down. This is the possibility that *Provisional Authority* delivers, highlighting potential trade-offs and rigidities entailed in committing to the conception of policing as violence work.

Our second line of inquiry revolves around *Violence Work's* approach to conceptualizing how violence serves the state-market. On one hand, it scrupulously challenges the coherence of the state and its (supposed) distinction from the market. Yet while Seigel fruitfully engages with Timothy Mitchell to theorize the state as *state-effect*, her conception of the state-market does not necessarily cohere with Mitchell's broader interventions in this regard. In *Rule of Experts* (not explicitly taken up in *Violence Work*), Mitchell, like Seigel, argues that the creation of markets is connected with repression/coercion in a fundamental way that is unduly and frequently downplayed or made to look somehow peripheral in pro-market liberal formulations. In such accounts, violence is portrayed as an "unforeseen, unfortunate, intermittent, and probably temporary side effect of the shocks that accompany the expansion of the global market" (Mitchell, 2002: 297). Yet he also argues against a more doctrinaire Marxist position that treats violence as a coherent "instrument of capitalist development" (297-8). This approach, he argues, represents violence as "'a common contingency' [...] It aids the logic of capital, but, as an element of randomness and unpredictability, or as a means of simply forcing the pace of history, it must be contingent or external to the logic of history itself" (298). Mitchell argues against both liberal and Marxist formulations of violence-economy relation, suggesting that they unduly present violence as "something residual", i.e. as an unforeseen side-effect or simply as something that accompanies or aids capitalist development. This approach to violence as secondary, according to Mitchell, problematically subordinates it to a broader logic that drives history, namely that of capital. For Mitchell, then, centering violence in the making of markets requires an insistence that it be apprehended on its own terms (rather than being derivative of something larger).

We find this impulse instructive. Critiques from settler-colonial studies are instructive in troubling aspects of economic reductionism inherent in some modes of conventional Marxian thought. As scholars of settler-colonialism including among them Glen Sean Coulthard (2014) have argued, in making Marx's core insights relevant to settler-colonial relations and forms of Indigenous resistance, it is necessary to shift the analytic frame away from the traditional focus on the proletarianization of workers in commodity production toward "the subject position of the colonized vis-à-vis the effects of *colonial dispossession*" (11). Indeed,

he convincingly argues that doing so demonstrates that settler-colonial dispossession and its dynamics of rule cannot be reduced to an economic calculus:

[T]here is much more at play in the contemporary reproduction of settler-colonial social relations than capitalist economics; most notably, [a] host of interrelated yet semi-autonomous facets of discursive and nondiscursive power [...] Although it is beyond question that the predatory nature of capitalism continues to play a vital role in facilitating the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples [...] it is necessary to recognize that it only does so in relation to or *in concert with* axes of exploitation and domination configured along racial, gender, and state lines” (14).

Following Coulthard, we want to suggest that to ascribe an economic essence to settler colonial projects is to dangerously overlook the motivations, desires, and anxieties that animate settlement and potentially attribute an economic instrumentality and coherence that hardly exists in the annals of settler colonial formations.

One need only look to Palestine to see how an argument about settler colonial violence as necessarily driven by the imperative of generating surplus value, falls apart.³ Wolfe (2012: 137) coined the term “preaccumulation” to name the “aggregate historical endowment that settlers brought with them [to Palestine]”, which amounted to a subsidy by Zionist donors that did *not* require a return to profit. The fact of these metropolitan capital flows and other material endowments is itself hardly noteworthy. Yet, while the colonization of Palestine was centrally dependent on the circulation metropolitan capital like all other forms of colonialism, Wolfe employs the term preaccumulation to underscore that the “*freedom from the discipline of the bottom line* set Zionism apart from other colonial projects” and which literally made the Jewish state possible (153, emphasis added). Moreover, the case of the separation barrier in Gaza is instructive of how settler-colonial violence is not reducible to capitalist economics. This infrastructure functions as a means of separating, confining and policing a “surplus population” – it reinforces an ideological project that requires the sequestering and removal of the demographic “other”, rather than facilitating this population’s exploitation as a primary motivating factor. This is not to say that the production of surplus is altogether absent, but rather that the settler-colonial project in Palestine is not necessarily subservient to a calculus of capitalist economics and may even be directly at odds with its presumed dictates.

This does not make Zionism exceptional but simply makes broader dynamics in settler colonial domination especially clear (136-7). Nick Estes’ more recent work on settler

³ See Salamanca et al 2012 for an excellent and crucial discussion of settler colonialism in Palestine.

colonialism in North America has unsettled the typical conception of the relation between value and territorial dispossession in a slightly different way. As he notes, “our [Indigenous] lands, and lives, were targeted not because they held precious resources or labor to be extracted. In fact, the opposite was true: our lands and lives were targeted and held value because they could be wasted – submerged, destroyed” (Estes, 2019: 12). This too, rather than some historical constant reflecting a singular violence-capital relation, represented a shift from other moments in the conquest of the Americas. As Estes notes elsewhere, this wasting of lands through planned flooding was “*unlike* during the previous century, when Indigenous land was coveted [by settlers] for its endless bounty” (2019: 134, emphasis added).

These productive efforts to rethink core terms of reference in relation to the making of markets and settler-colonial domination bear crucially on where we begin in trying to make sense of state violence against racialized Others in settler-colonial contexts, but also more broadly. Here we want to suggest that starting from Seigel’s position that violence work is subservient to or derivative of the state-market and its imperative of surplus value generation, though not always or necessarily inaccurate, can unduly oversimplify the divergent imperatives that violence work in fact serves in forms of domination and dispossession across multiple sites. In doing so, it can also elide the core economic tensions and contradictions that violence work plays in dispossession and domination.

Violence Work makes a number of bold and productively unsettling claims about the geography of the police and its violence that are highly convincing. While conclusively showing that the (conventional) borders of police are mythic, fictional and always-already transgressed in practice (Machold, 2020), Seigel devotes less explicit focus to the frictions at play in the various crossings it chronicles. While the case of OPS supports Seigel’s argument, elsewhere reference is made to Alaska as merely “another node on an ever-expanding global circuit” of violence work and capital accumulation (98) and to the border crossings of police over the public/private divide “without a blink” (127). Here we ask: how might we attend to the different relationalities between sites and actors that shape transnational police work? Darryl Li’s (2018) work on carceral circulation in the global “war on terror” offers one way forward. Productively foregrounding the tensions inherent between multiple sovereignties and their relations and circulations in the workings of U.S. global power, Li invites us to

grapple with how “empire mobilizes multiple state sovereignties as a way of structuring and mediating unequal power relations” (2018: 464).

Conclusion

Violence Work is a pivotal work of our time presenting a much-needed corrective to contemporary liberal debates surrounding police’s “brutality”, “privatization” and “militarization” and associated impetuses for its “reform.” Seigel critically disabuses us of any such prospect – as *Violence Work* makes clear: police reform doesn’t and can’t work for one very specific reason: its essential function is to do the work of the state, which is violence. Just as critically, as Seigel underscores and other recent work echoes (LeBrón, 2019), race is a premier organizing logic of state violence that is reinvigorated and entrenched through the transnational circulation of violence workers, their logics and capital. It so follows, Black and brown bodies will bear the brunt of that violence: abolition, then, is about racial justice rather than the amelioration of state violence’s most visible excesses. In so doing, Seigel pushes us to consider other pathways forward, taking insight and direction from the long and robust history of abolitionist organizing. We are indeed indebted to Seigel for foregrounding an abolitionist politics and mobilizing them to trouble the terms of current debates about police reform. Our conversation and probing lines of inquiry here are intended to enrich and think alongside this much-needed centering of violence at the core of police work, yet in such a way that equally avoids accepting state and colonial power as already all-powerful totalities. To this end, Estes’ concern with undoing settler ideology using the provisional term “settler onticide,” i.e. “the destruction of a settler ontology” in the sense of the “things that grant them settler privileges” (Denvir and Estes, 2019), might chart some fruitful possibilities for writing against state power and its ideologies as we theorize their workings.

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