

Bureaucrats with guns: Or, how we can abolish the police if we just stop believing in them

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Abstract

David Graeber's essay *On the phenomenology of giant puppets: Broken windows, imaginary jars of urine, and the cosmological role of police in American culture* (2007) is a ground-breaking yet unappreciated essay that re-evaluates theories of police. The central question animating Graeber's "interpretative" essay is: why do cops hate activist puppeteers? Graeber's "tenuous" answer is that police are a form of structural violence and that their power is derived from their cosmological or imagined status. The police are one of the central themes animating Graeber's work from the beginning of his career to the end. As an anthropologist, he repeatedly turns his attention to places that lack formal police institutions or maintain police forces utterly alien to modern sensibilities. These unusual places are the animus for his recasting of the traditional concepts of political theory: sovereignty, hierarchy, and the state. Graeber's later work, attacking bureaucracy and meaningless labour, continues his critical interpretation of police. It is impossible to understand the significance and importance of Graeber's scholarship, *in toto*, without understanding what he has to say about the police. Most importantly, what Graeber has to say about the police is an altogether original interpretation that should be of importance to those studying the police and to social movements seeking to diminish their political power. Some of Graeber's observations represent considerable challenges to the cause of police abolition, whereas others provide supporting theses that could aid our struggle against police authoritarianism. I conclude, contra Graeber, that the unreasonableness of the police is not sufficient for them to melt away.

KEYWORDS: bureaucracy, democratic theory, political anthropology, police abolition, social movements, sovereignty, David Graeber

Introduction

The opening line of David Graeber's essay *On the phenomenology of giant puppets: Broken windows, imaginary jars of urine, and the cosmological role of police in American culture* (2007) begins by saying it is an 'essay of interpretation' (Graeber, 2007, p. 375). Perhaps, this is the earliest sign that what comes next is intended to be grandiose. *Perhaps*, it should have been evident from the title. James Q. Wilson and George Kelling's broken windows theory, the *locus classicus* for conservative calls for law-and-order, is never mentioned or cited but haunts the text, meeting its match in the images of black bloc anarchists shattering the literal windows of capitalist institutions. For Wilson and Kelling (1982), broken windows were a metaphor for disorder. Heavy-handed policing was justified by appeals to neighbourhood safety, but that was mere window-dressing for the larger aim of protecting those in suits. For Graeber, those in black hoodies confronting the suits were the ones worth valorising. Anarchists, vilified as forces of disorder, were the ones seeking a more just world and embodying democracy in action. Standing between, separating *and* protecting, the suits from those in black hoodies were those in blue uniforms, or to be more exact, those in full tactical military gear emblazoned with the title: POLICE. Put another way, underlying the criticisms of the World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and structural adjustment programmes are police institutions, at once local and global, whose armed soldiers are the necessary counterpart to the institutionalised raiding and extortion by global bureaucrats. Police are partisans in a covert war against society. By claiming to "interpret" the police, Graeber intends to offer some *hardly* "tenuous conclusions" that advance upon traditional theories of police. What has always been striking to me is what little has been said about Graeber's interpretation of police within police studies or by police abolitionists.

The allure of Graeber's essay on police is not just its pretensions for grandeur. Who writes an essay about police in which the primary antagonism involves puppeteers? Or, for that matter, who can slip allusions to imaginary jars of urine into the title? Who in writing about police would ever claim to discern its cosmology? Underlying the claims of grandiosity is damn good storytelling. The hallmark of ethnography lies, in part, in the eloquence of its style. Graeber himself admits that his interpretation arose from an initial feeling of puzzlement. A benefit of Graeber's interpretative stance is that he seeks an honest accounting of the institution and its role within contemporary politics. The puzzle that drives Graeber's inquiry: why do police hate puppets and their puppeteers? Underlying the question is the absurdity of it all. Police at war with puppets is intensely comical. Juxtaposed with the seriousness of "interpreting" police is Graeber's mischievous giggle as if all it might take to undermine their mythic power and sway over soci-

ety is by pointing out their preposterousness. This, after all, is the strategic aim of activist puppeteers: to break the spell that the capitalist order holds over us.

This article is not just a summary or promotion of *On the phenomenology of giant puppets* (2007). Graeber's essay, in fact, is the basis for extended treatment in the final three chapters of his magisterial book *Direct action: An ethnography* (2009). The police are one of the central themes that animates Graeber's work from beginning to end. As an anthropologist, he repeatedly turns his attention to places that lack formal police institutions or otherwise maintain police forces utterly alien to modern sensibilities. These unusual places are the animus for his recasting of the traditional concepts of political theory: sovereignty, hierarchy, and the state. Graeber's later work, attacking bureaucracy and meaningless labour, continues his critical interpretation of police. It is impossible to understand the significance and importance of Graeber's scholarship, *in toto*, without understanding what he has to say about the police. Most importantly, what Graeber has to say about the police is an altogether original interpretation that should be of importance to those studying police and to social movements seeking to diminish their political power. Some of Graeber's observations represent considerable challenges to the cause of police abolition, whereas others provide supporting theses that could aid our struggle against police authoritarianism. Foreshadowing my conclusions, I do not think that Graeber's mischievous giggle is enough: the unreasonableness of the police is not sufficient for them to melt away.

Fragments of an abolitionist anthropology

The French philosopher Michel Foucault once made the bold assertion:

The great event of the 18th century, we always think of judiciary reform, the obtaining of liberties, etc., but what really happened during the 18th century was something important, *an invention* for which we don't give enough credit to its inventors, it happens that they were French, is the police. *The police are an invention* [my emphasis], in its modern form, of the 18th century and of the bureaucratic monarchies. (Foucault, 1977)

Foucault's assertion has always struck me as overly absolute and inaccurate.¹ Foucault reinforces the assumption that police are a modern European invention and forecloses any enquiry into pre-modern forms of policing and social control. Foucault never analyses non-European institutions, nor does he explain how pre-modern police institutions

¹ For those interested in reading more about Foucault's "secret history of police", I must shamelessly suggest my article on the subject (Johnson, 2014).

shape modern police institutions. Foucault provocatively positioned himself in opposition to anthropology, claiming: 'my aim is to define a method of historical analysis freed from the anthropological theme' (Foucault, 1972, p. 16). This might have been prompted by anthropology's disreputable roots in colonialism and the racist overtones of its portrayals of non-Western societies. The primary target of Foucault's opprobrium was humanism and the human sciences generally. For Foucault, anthropology was identified with assumptions about human nature, a search for origins, and a propensity for totalising histories. Anthropology has more to offer than thinly veiled racist presumptions about non-Western societies or teleological accounts of human progress. From a genealogical point of view, pre-modern and non-European forbearers to police institutions are important, as they were appropriated in the process of creating modern police institutions.

Abolitionists have repeated some of the assumptions that underwrite Foucault's "secret history of the police".² They proffer that the police are not necessary because they are relatively new, lending credibility to the thesis that a future without police is possible. This sentiment is best expressed in DeLesslin George-Warren's powerful art piece: "There Was A Time Before Police And There Will Be A Time After" (Figure 1).

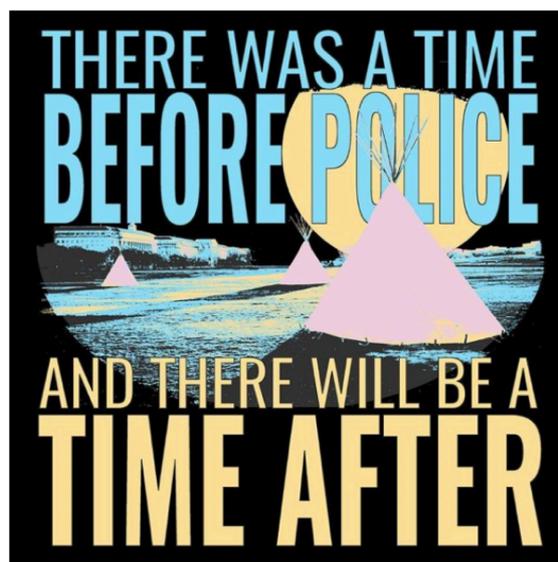


Figure 1: DeLesslin George-Warren's art piece

To take but one more example, see political theorist Geo Maher's statement in *A world without police* (2021): 'to paraphrase Ursula K. Le Guin, while the power of the police can

² I subscribe to the view, expressed by Joy James (2021), that there are multiple abolitionisms. To provide clarity for the uninitiated, abolitionists are largely united in fidelity to W.E.B. Du Bois' (1935) notion of abolition-democracy: a promise to upend oppressive institutions and transform them into care-based alternatives. The most notable abolitionist demands of police is to see them demilitarised, disarmed, defunded, disempowered, and disbanded. For two noteworthy clarifying statements, see McDowell and Fernandez (2018) and Lester (2021).

seem inescapable, “so did the divine rights of kings.” Once upon a time there were no cops, and that day is coming again soon’ (Maher, 2021, p. 11). Maher’s provocation evokes the phrase “Once upon a time”, implying that a world without police resembles fairy tales. Historically, though, if we understand cops as bureaucratic functionaries who wear blue uniforms, have badges and carry truncheons, there indeed was once a time without these officials. George-Warren’s design suggests that indigenous American communities did not rely upon the police, referring to the non-European, pre-modern, often non-state societies that Foucault wilfully ignores. David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow (2021b) likewise argue that indigenous Americans maintained an abolitionist justice system, refusing to spank their children, punish thieves or murderers, and/or take punitive action against tribal members. Both within-group and between-group violence was handled through arbitration. This prevented cyclical violence and sought to repair harms through the establishment of personal and social debts.³ Families and communities were held collectively responsible for the misdeeds of bad actors. A focal target of the indigenous American critique of modern European society was the harsh punishment system and general lack of freedom within coloniser countries. A word of caution: it is conspicuous that Graeber and Wengrow’s indigenous critique lacks indigenous voices.⁴ As a prominent cheerleader of ethnography, Graeber’s interest in indigenous politics relies too heavily upon its representation by non-indigenous observers. Indigenous communities have diverse political cultures and allusions to the contrary flatten thousands of distinct cultures.⁵

If Foucault’s assertion is overly absolute, I find the abolitionist supposition of a time before police a bit oversimplified. The political imaginary represented by the vast expanse of human history that was *unpoliced* is enticing and fascinating, indeed romantic. This history, though, is more complex than assumed, and it is my belief that abolitionists and political theorists should not be dissuaded by alternative histories that do not easily confer with our slogans. History is always an inconvenience for our theories, imaginaries, and ideals while not necessarily discrediting them. Whereas cops might be new, policing has a lasting history. In one respect, this might be an analytic distinction: police are an office; *policing* is a function. In another, proto-policing institutions also have a lasting

³ Friedrich Nietzsche theorised that punishment arose out of debt relations. Debts are a type of punishment and a form of social control. Far from the Americas, in Africa, Graeber describes the Lele people who paid a blood-debt as recompense for violent acts (Graeber, 2011, p.139).

⁴ The harshest assessment of the Occupy movement were critiques put forward by indigenous scholars. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang proclaim: ‘The call to “occupy everything” has legitimized a set of practices with problematic relationships to land and to Indigenous sovereignty’ (2012, p. 28).

⁵Worth noting: the book’s contents reveal a more nuanced position than the promotional article cited above.

history. Put another way: whereas cops might be new, sheriffs certainly are not.⁶ Whereas non-state and indigenous societies are powerful counterexamples to our repressive, heavily policed nation-states, these societies' lived politics and forms of social control are bountifully heterogeneous. There are fragments of history revealing both policed and *unpoliced* societies; both ought to be of interest, as should their convergence. Myself, I am enticed and fascinated by these manifold histories, and some of my research has been devoted to exploring pre-modern policing and the contributions of political anthropologists.

In which we consider the relationship between states and bureaucracy

It should not be surprising that Graeber, perhaps the most prominent promoter of anarchist anthropology, would have something valuable to contribute to abolitionist anthropology.⁷ Graeber identifies theories of the state and non-state political entities as two promising tenets of his non-existent science (Graeber, 2004). In *On kings*, Graeber returns to theories of the state to 'put some flesh' (Graeber & Sahlins, 2017, p. 65) on his own (early) definition and to deride the endless debate surrounding the origins of the state for creating a 'shop-worn concept' (p. 456). If the state has been over-theorised to the point of abstraction, the most promising, as yet unexplored, subject is non-state political entities. Here, it is revealing that the police play an outsized role. Whether ancient Athens can be classified as a state or whether kingdoms were states remains unclear. In Athens, Graeber dismisses the power of a police force staffed by slaves. Ancient Athens, along with countless other examples, lacks the characteristics of a state largely because it lacked a formal police apparatus. One of the basic assumptions of political philosophy is that a police force is a necessary and sufficient condition of a modern state. A central thesis animating my research is that many of these preconceptions about police are inaccurate. One of the significant insights of the recent proliferation of research into police is the need to disaggregate policing from the state.⁸ Succinctly argued by Lucia Zedner: 'the concept of policing as a state activity is now becoming an intellectual straitjacket' (2006, p. 82). States might require police, but policing is often voluntary, communal, privatised, and/or transnational. As put by Graeber: "'The state'" would better be seen as an amalgam of heterogeneous elements often of entirely separate origins

⁶ For those interested in reading more about this history, I suggest Zedner (2006) and Lambert (2020).

⁷ Graeber's disdain for the label "anarchist anthropologist" later in life is noteworthy.

⁸ I could cite any number of articles or books here. For an exemplar review, see the Introduction to Micol Seigel's *Violence work* (2018).

that happened to have come together in certain times and places' (2017, p. 456). If an anarchist and abolitionist anthropology can be distinguished, the foremost challenge is detailing the complex relationship between the state and non-state political entities. Whereas innumerable political theorists have written about state origins, few have focused on the origins of political institutions. What remains to be developed is a political anthropology of institutional formation.

The study *Police: The first 5,000 years* has yet to be written. However, Graeber and Wengrow's *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity* (2021a) is a mighty first step in developing an account of institutional formation. Their tome is explicitly not a book about inequality; rather, Graeber and Wengrow experiment with new theories about state and non-state political entities. Here, they posit that 'the state has no origin' (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021a, p. 359). The fixation upon the state as the central unit of political analysis masks our understanding of the underlying practices which constitute it. Graeber and Wengrow endeavour, instead, to write a new political history and a theory to match it. Relying upon archaeological discoveries and a series of quirky ethnographies, they point to evidence of anomalous cases that invalidate the dominant linear theories of state formation. While attention has gravitated to the debate over the agricultural revolution, growing evidence of cities and states without rulers, police, and/or bureaucrats have made a lesser impact. Yes, Graeber and Wengrow conclude that grains do not make states, but just as important is their contention that police do not make states either. The traditional theory of political development maintains that increases in social scale necessitate the formation of police forces. An armed bureaucracy is an evolutionary springboard for the power to command large numbers of disparate strangers. The historical evidence tells a different story. Graeber and Wengrow point to expansive shatter-zones, heavily populated cities, and even states where decision-making power resided in community assemblies. Natchez, in present-day Mississippi, is cited as an example of 'sovereignty without a state' (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021a, p. 392). The Great Sun King had no apparatus of control. Tell Sabi Abyad, in contemporary Syria, is described as maintaining an extensive bureaucracy but one that was care-based and not equipped for violence. Graeber and Wengrow, in turn, propose new categories to theorise institutional and state formation. They identify three elementary forms of domination: the control of violence, the control of information, and the projection of individual charisma.⁹ First-order regimes exert only one mode of domination. Second-order regimes combine any two. Modern states are those that successfully wield all three.

⁹ This schema corresponds to a partition between sovereignty, administration, and politics.

In which we show how sovereignty and violence are difficult to abolish

Political theorists have led the way in decentring the state from heterogeneous political processes through debates about concepts such as sovereignty, hierarchy, authority, domination, etc. Graeber found that these theoretical debates had more purchase than those surrounding the origins of the state. His conclusion to *On kings* (Graeber & Sahlins, 2017) plays a crucial part in demonstrating this. Here, he states: 'Asking about the origins of sovereignty is very different than asking about the origins of the state' (Graeber & Sahlins, 2017, p. 456). If sovereignty is equated with the power to command and carry out arbitrary violence with impunity, it is evident that we are commanded and threatened by a surfeit of authorities that may or may not be state authorities. Amongst state authorities, there is also indeterminable variation. Police are an extreme case, given wide-ranging discretion, nearly incontestable authority, free use of violence, and substantial political influence. A standard principal-agent relation cannot explain the present political situation. There is general agreement that police power is overwhelming; however, the political power of police remains shrouded in mystery (a mystery both Graeber and abolitionists have been at the forefront of trying to solve). This is one reason that Graeber notes: 'in theory, of course, the traffic cop is different than the dictator' (Graeber & Sahlins, 2017, p. 458). An examination of the historical record, where at times police were enslaved and routinely tortured and kings were often powerless and ritually sacrificed, proves that the difference is not that one has more authority or power than the other. There has been a recent resurgence in strongmen dictators, but the long-term, steady trend has been an exponential expansion in the number and types of petty police tyrants roaming the streets. There is but one tyrant; petty tyrants, on the other hand, are legion. Our reflections on tyranny, particularly the tyranny of our age, must attain a conception of history that is keeping with this insight. One of the principal conclusions of the long 20th-century debate over sovereignty has been its intensifying decentralisation and the need to shift attention to police power.¹⁰

The problem with theoretical debates is that they involve essentially contested concepts and are rarely resolved. This is the tension that so constrains anarchists and abolitionists, often compelling them to issue grand and abridged accounts of the time before police and/or nation-states. The greatest challenge confronting abolitionist thinking is the draw of political realism. The general public has strong folk intuitions about the existence, possibility, importance, and/or preferability of *unpoliced* societies in the past, present, or future. Social movements must appeal to and aspire to change these deeply

¹⁰ The most notable combatants involved in the 20th-century gigantomachy over sovereignty include Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Giorgio Agamben. For a recent review, see Loick (2019).

entrenched common-sense beliefs (Woodly, 2015). Rightly or wrongly, most do not find abolition realistic. Graeber offers valuable insight into the challenge of political realism. Graeber distinguishes political ontologies of violence from political ontologies of the imagination (2009, 2011). Political realism and political imaginaries are locked in diametrical opposition. For activists and organisers hoping to craft persuasive slogans, proposals, or aspirations there is a demand that they be credible. Despite Graeber's reputation as a dreamer, he often refers to himself as a realist. His position is most explicit in his debate with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (and ode to Roy Bhaskar). Here, he claims: 'if one goes slightly further and argues not just that reality can never be fully encompassed in our imaginative constructs, but that reality *is* that which can never be fully encompassed in our imaginative constructs, then surely "radical alterity" is just another way of saying "reality"' (Graeber, 2015a, p. 28). The stakes of this debate revolve around whether witches, spells, fetishes, and omens are ontologically real. Graeber rejects ontological anarchy in favour of a realist anarchism. What is a realist anarchism? According to Paul Raekstad, the existence of politics without states demonstrates that anarchism is not constrained by realism (Raekstad, 2016). For Gearóid Brinn (2020), a realist anarchism cannot discount the role of power, the permanence of conflict, the need for practical strategies, the importance of history, and should shy away from normative claims.

Graeber offers similar constraints upon our political imaginations. The origins of sovereignty are different than the origins of the state because sovereignty existed before historic records (Graeber & Sahlins, 2017) and can be considered an elementary structure of human social existence (Graeber & Sahlins, 2017). Put somewhat provocatively: 'Kings can be killed; kingship *abolished* [my emphasis]; but even then, the principle of sovereignty tends to remain' (Graeber & Sahlins, 2017, p. 459). The implications of such a thought for abolitionists are obvious and daunting. Stuart Hall, along with his colleagues from the Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies, threw down the gauntlet long ago: 'Unfortunately you cannot resolve a social contradiction by abolishing the label that has been attached to it' (Hall et al., 1978, p. 1). Abolitionists have not yet responded to this challenge. Sovereignty (and we can include power, conflict, and even *policing*) is ostensibly ineradicable, certainly intractable.

This is one constraint. A second constraint, correlated with the first, is that violence is a first-order social and political force. The primary challenge that animated the long 20th-century debate surrounding sovereignty was the inability to evade or overcome the political realism, despite its dangerous implications, of Thomas Hobbes or Carl Schmitt. Graeber accepts this as well. He claims: '[T]o be a "realist" in politics has nothing to do

with recognizing material realities, it is about willingness to accept the realities of violence. Violence is what defines the ultimate truth of the situation' (Graeber, 2009, p. 505). There is no arguing with someone once they start beating you with a truncheon. In this instance, the challenge confronting abolitionists is made clear and formidable: the police act as a reality principle. 'These things are real because they can kill you' (Graeber, 2009, p. 510). Violence is a metaphysical force. Violence *is*, happens, and all are *forced* into response. Graeber asks us to consider the multiple and varied meanings of the word *force*:

Consider the following six sentences:

- 1) The police arrived at the square and opened fire on the protesters.
- 2) Several fell to the ground as the force of plastic bullets impacted them.
- 3) Others were forced to the ground and handcuffed.
- 4) Police then forced them into arrest vans.
- 5) As a result, the remaining protestors were forced to abandon the square.
- 6) The police force secured the area.

In sentence #2 "force" refers to simple physics... The usage in sentence #3 is close... but it blends into the more ambiguous usage in sentence #4, where likely as not sheer physical pressure (pushing arrestees, prodding, dragging, even carrying them) was supplemented by the giving of orders backed by implicit or explicit threat. In sentence #5, "force" refers only to the effects of fear of further physical attack. Finally, it is because of their ability to employ violence and the threat of violence, in the most efficient way possible to do things like clear streets, that the police can be referred to as "a force" (as they are in sentence #6). (Graeber, 2009, pp. 511-512)

This passage makes clear "the forces" we are up against. It is not hyperbole to refer to the police as a reality principle, a metaphysical force, or comprising a cosmology. Abolishing the laws of the police stands as much of a chance as abolishing the laws of the universe. If police power is overwhelming and the political power of police mysterious it is because these powers are composed of invisible forces and hidden realities. This is what Graeber means by political ontologies of violence. Policing assumes an ontological status as natural, as an "elementary structure", and as real. How does one confront such an enemy? If there is a contest between the political ontologies of violence and the political ontologies of the imagination, those wielding the truncheon, guns, and armed personnel carriers are winning.¹¹

¹¹ If states also depend upon the powers of the imagination, they have had more success in creating their police utopias precisely because they have utilised violence to make them real.

Why the police have no origin

Thus far, I have described the theoretical challenges that confront an abolitionist anthropology but have not yet addressed the real existence of *unpoliced* societies. *Unpoliced* societies have often existed as a euphemism for non-state societies. However, there is evidence of states without police and police without states. Graeber provides examples of each in his description of the ghost-state, clown police, and the Crow police.

It is ironic, certainly puzzling, that those most associated with anarchist anthropology have provided some of the strongest reasons for caution. Violence within non-state societies has been a long-standing debate by political theorists. Anthropologists, however, have led the way in establishing that stateless societies are neither inherently violent nor destitute. Karl Widerquist and Grant McCall conclude there is a consensus view amongst anthropologists acknowledging that violence and well-being in non-state societies (as in states) varies greatly (2016). Non-state societies are neither essentially peaceful nor excessively violent. The Hobbesian proviso has been effectively discredited; however, a vulgar anarchist anthropology still prevails. The foremost target of Graeber and Wengrow is not the reactionary Hobbes, but the romantic Jean-Jacques Rousseau. A lasting lesson of their new history of humanity is the widespread variety in politics and social life within both non-state societies and early states. Graeber's mentor, Marshall Sahlins, established his fame on the claim that hunter-gatherer societies were originally affluent. In *The original political society* (2017), Sahlins' pretentious swan song, he aims to disprove the existence of *pure* egalitarian societies by showing how politics and hierarchy prevailed within them. Despite their affluence and social equality, the existence of Gods and rituals within egalitarian societies provided a measure of political order. Gods command obedience. Rituals establish norms of communal conduct. Graeber and Sahlins posit: 'It follows that the state of nature has the nature of the state' (Graeber & Sahlins, 2017, p. 3). They argue that the traditional view of state and non-state societies as irreducible opposites is no longer tenable. There is a measure of sovereignty in stateless societies, as is there a measure of anarchy within states.

Anthropologists are keenly aware that when police disappear, life goes on and people carry on exactly as before.¹² Graeber's iconic example is the ghost-state of Madagascar. Before undertaking his field studies during graduate school, he was warned that state authority was in retreat and, in some places, entirely missing. Upon arrival, Graeber found the existence of the state alongside its non-operation. In both cities and towns,

¹² I am thankful to Jennifer Simpson for the reminder that were this true it would undermine the case for abolition. Social life in the absence of police is one of reduced violence.

there were actual police stations but little policing. Graeber suggestively refers to this as a 'ghost-image of authority' (2007, p. 164). All of Madagascar was involved in perpetuating this scam: bureaucrats, armed bureaucrats, and those they failed to govern. One reason was the historical legacy of French colonialism. Memories of arbitrary violence served as the common image of state authority; therefore, there was a strong cultural sense that the state should be emptied and stripped of its content. Graeber argued that this case study was useful for understanding both state and non-state societies.¹³ The *unpoliced* ghost-state of Madagascar was evidence of a popular anarchist concept: "provisional autonomous zones". Graeber (2007) notes:

One wonders if there might not be hundreds, even thousands, of similar communities in other parts of the world—communities that have withdrawn from and drifted away from the effective national governments and become for all intents and purposes self-governing, but whose members are still performing the external form and tokens of obeisance in order to disguise that fact. (p. 177)

If Graeber found something humorous in the heavy-handed policing of puppet activists, that same mischievous giggle is present in his analysis of the clown police of American indigenous communities. The funniest part of Graeber's ethnography of protest policing is the appearance of the Revolutionary Anarchist Clown Bloc. At a moment of crisis during the 2000 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, the appearance of clown activists interrupted the certain arrest of black bloc anarchists, allowing them to dramatically escape. Billionaires for Bush activists handed out fake money to the riot police for repressing dissent. Clowns attacked the Billionaires with inflatable mallets. The humour of the situation managed to subvert the laws of war that had previously defined the situation. Perhaps, the lasting lesson of Graeber's retelling of indigenous clown police is the need for a silly abolitionism: we can retain the presence of police so long as we outfit them in outlandish costumes, tricycles, and squirt guns.

The story of indigenous clown police begins in central and northern California, migrates to the southwest Pueblo Indians, and ends in the plains amongst the Crow Indians. In California, the appearance of clowns was both funny and terrifying. They were adorned in elaborate disguises and only given authority during rare ceremonies. These rituals consisted of frenzied group dance parties with the police serving as the overseeing chaperones. Only men could be employed as clown police. They primarily came from a class of hobos or beggars within the community. Their presence was intended to terrify

¹³ There is resonance here with Pierre Clastres' description of anti-state societies and James C. Scott's studies of state evasion (Clastres, 1989; Scott, 2009).

those in attendance into participating and remaining subservient. Their purpose was to control misbehaviour. However, the rules of proper conduct were already arbitrary. It was forbidden, for example, to laugh at the jokes of clowns, telling jokes being one of their predominant tasks. The clowns, though, had the freedom to break all the rules and misbehave at will, often performing their duties backwards or walking on their hands. What Graeber finds remarkable about the presence of clown police is that they are the only people within these non-state communities who had the power to command, to punish, to levy fines, and even the authority to whip children.

As the practice of clown policing migrates, from central to northern California, to the southwest, and the plains, they begin to embody more aspects of an autonomous force. At first, the clown police only have powers during specific rituals, but eventually they maintained their enforcement power throughout the entire buffalo hunting season. At first, the clowns were thought to symbolise divine forces, Gods or fools or evil-spirits, but eventually they became regular community officials. By the time the practice spread to the plains, per Robert Lowie's description, the Crow police were not clowns, just police (Lowie 1948; Graeber & Wengrow 2015). The Crow police maintained an unequivocal authoritarianism in the absence of anything resembling a city or state. Remarkably, these police units would be disbanded yearly only to be reformed the next season. Police power consistently rotated within the tribe, a different clan serving annually. For Graeber and Wengrow, the seasonal transformations of tribal organisation are evidence of intentional choice, political experimentation, and social flexibility. Seasonality allowed for the shifting of power relations and the chance to renegotiate social relations. Arbitrary power was tolerable so long as it remained arbitrary. A systemic form of rule would transform temporary and ritual practices into lasting, institutional power, without respite or hope for further discussion.

The clown police and Crow police are evidence of "provisional police powers" (my phrase). Non-state, seemingly egalitarian, societies resorted to occasional, and eventually regular, policing practices. There are several conclusions that we can draw from this history.

First, policing begins in ritual. If police power is intermittent and discretionary then it can be discontinued. Their powers are derived from our acceptance. We must not accept policing as a universal human condition or elementary structure of human existence. Rather, an abolitionist anthropology begins with the contention that policing is a decisively human creation, a clownish one at that. That police first appear as clowns, as fools, as evil incarnate, played by beggars and social outcasts, demonstrates the dangers

and absurdity of their limited powers. The appearance of the clown police is meant to illustrate the ridiculousness of giving people such powers. To play with Graeber and Wengrow's wording, "the first police may well have been play police!". Their playfulness, though, ceases to be amusing once they start killing people. The imitation and subversion of power is superseded once it can no longer be questioned. Rituals form institutions. Short-term agreements become irreversible rules. Put powerfully by Graeber and Wengrow: 'If "the state" means anything, it refers to precisely the totalitarian impulse that lies behind all such claims, the desire effectively to make the ritual last forever' (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021a, p. 430).

Scandalously, Graeber has taken to accusing the French anarchist Pierre Clastres of plagiarising the American anthropologist Robert Lowie. Both argue that non-state societies design their social and political relations to prevent the emergence of a systemic power of command. Contemporary societies no longer wield a countervailing set of powers that constrain police power. Abolition is such a counterforce. Abolitionists propose a competing set of myths that undermine the mythical foundations of authority. While equipping those monstrous forces outfitted in riot gear with clown suits and water pistols is preposterous, the abandoned police stations in Madagascar are living examples of authority stripped of its majesty. Killer cops have been playing police for far too long. A future world without police might thereby require evidence of their historical ruin, the burned husks of their inoperable stations preserved as monuments signifying their newfound inability to kill, a bad omen warning against any attempts to reinstitute that power.

The second important conclusion that we can draw is that policing has no natural origins. Rather, police forces presume superiority by play-acting as supernatural. Clowns are not just amusing, they are terrifying. They are intended to evoke laughter but laughing at them is firmly forbidden. By donning the apparel of clowns, they transform their status within their communities and imitate metahuman beings. Gods originally held the power to command and order society before that power was appropriated by humans. The foundation of states and police are made possible by their claims to mythic and divine powers. This is the argument of Graeber's model: 'the "declownification" of sovereignty' (Graeber & Sahlin, 2017, p. 397; see Figure 2). What this means for those of us who are no longer faced with clown police but riot police, is untangling the supernatural, mythic, magical, fetishised status that police presume in our present societies. Is not the cosmological role of police in American culture due, in part, to their glamorisation by the media and Hollywood as superheroes?

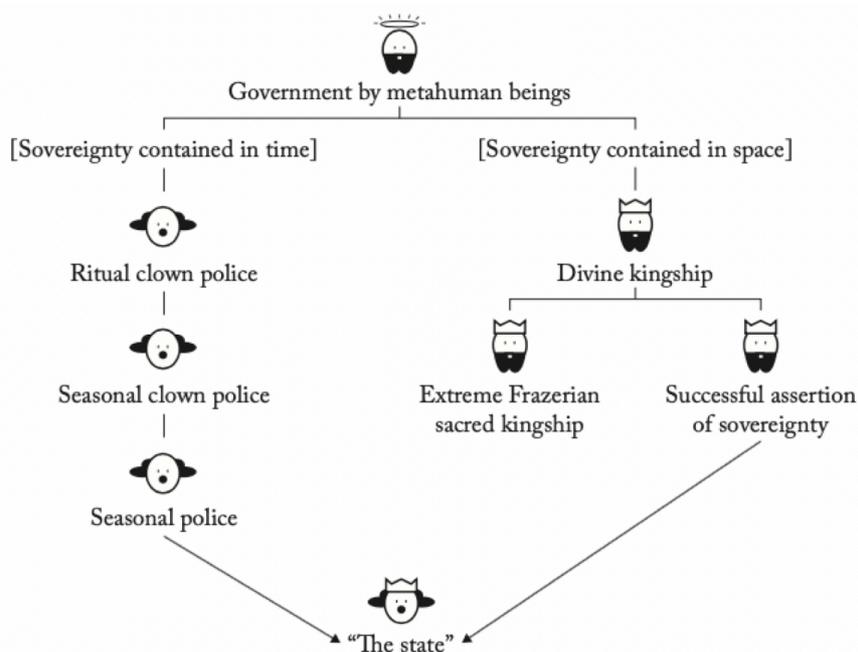


Figure 2: Declownification of sovereignty

Graeber and Wengrow (2021a) charge that: ‘Social science has been largely a study of the ways in which human beings are not free’ (p. 498). The theory that drives their new history of humanity is that pre-modern politics was a crossroads for self-conscious experimentation. Our ancient ancestors, in both small and large communities, were perfectly capable of political choice and, crucially, they had many more possibilities from which to choose. To go alongside their three elemental forms of domination, Graeber and Wengrow propose three forms of human freedom: the freedom to move, to disobey, and to reorganise social relations. Today, there is no exit from a globe fully controlled by police forces. We dare not disobey them. Their only law is force. Most importantly, humans have lost the ability to fundamentally alter the terms of our social contract. There is no choice but the unfreedom of police domination. An abolitionist world begins with disobedience despite the consequences. For Graeber, the most vital human freedom and political choice is the power to imagine different futures and alternative worlds.

Police: An ethnography

Activists understand the nature of police intuitively. They confront them on the streets and are *forced* to interpret their behaviour. Graeber calls this process ‘imaginative identification’ (2007, p. 405). Those in subordinate and vulnerable positions regularly put themselves into the minds of their oppressors. Graeber’s involvement in the global justice movement gave him first-hand experience of police. The final three chapters of *Direct action* (2009) are a continuation of the arguments he developed in *On the phenomenol-*

ogy of giant puppets (2007). The last third of the book is less an ethnography of direct action and the global justice movement than a study of the police they confronted on the streets. Graeber reveals that his interpretation of the police remains a frustrated one. Such an admission alludes to the mysterious nature of police that has been a common theme within police studies ever since Walter Benjamin referred to them as formless, nowhere-tangible, all-pervasive, and ghostly (Benjamin, 1978).

What is new and original about Graeber's interpretation of police? And what importance might it hold for the struggle *against* police that has roused so many? Police hostility directed at puppet activists is a captivating theme. It is not intuitive why police would spend their energy on disrupting non-violent, relatively harmless, certainly fanciful, puppeteers. Unravelling this mystery reveals a larger conspiracy. Puppet activists challenge the symbolic order which police defend and enforce. By asking their audience to imagine otherwise, puppeteers are more of a threat than the black bloc. One prefigures a world without police; the other justifies it.

Graeber's account of the policing of the global justice movement is of historic importance for the contemporary movement against police. Given that the police are the principal antagonists of Graeber's memoirs, it is worth asking why they were not the targets of more concerted movement opposition. The police waged street battles in defence of the IMF, WTO, Wall Street, and the Republican and Democratic parties. Global capitalism is dependent upon the force of *armed* bureaucrats. However, the lasting message of the global justice and Occupy movements was centred around structural adjustment programmes and economic inequality, not the need to demilitarise, disarm, defund, and disempower local, national, or global police forces. Graeber's essay demands a retelling of this history, one that reveals a closer affinity with abolitionist movements than commonly believed. This history holds valuable lessons for leftist social movements. So too, recent events have revealed the limitations of prior social movements and the need for *police-centred* social movement strategies.

Observation 1: Police are partisans in a covert war against society

Graeber follows the critical theory tradition in describing police as partisans in a covert war against society. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels described the liberal political order as a 'more or less veiled civil war' (Marx & Engels, 1972, p. 483). French post-structuralists invoked Carl von Clausewitz's famous dictum that 'war is the continuation of politics by other means' (Clausewitz, 1984, p. 87) to invert it into a new adage 'politics is the continuation of war by other means' (Foucault, 2003, p. 15; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Graeber recalls his experience with the global justice movement with a variety of war metaphors. The tear gas launched upon protestors is analogous to chemical warfare (Graeber, 2009). The street battles resemble war zones. *Ya Basta!* are deployed as hoplites. The police form security perimeters and protestors man communication and medical stations. There are both casualties and lines of retreat. Afterwards, everyone excitedly rehashes their war stories. It would be a mistake to dismiss this as metaphorical. Direct actions and confrontations with police follow unstated laws of war. There are rules of engagement for both sides. An important stipulation is that street actions remain a limited and not total war.

It would be misguided to discount the differences between policing and war. Riot police arrive fully militarised; they are, in fact, prepared for warfare. However, police are more restricted in their behaviour than military forces. Police are required to use less-lethal weaponry, for example. Police act without honour by systematically violating all the accepted rules governing armed conflict: arresting mediators, targeting medics and journalist, even puppeteers. Whereas police arrive equipped for war, protestors are constrained by different rules. One influence of the Italian *Ya Basta!* organisation was their *tute bianche* tactics: appearing as 'a kind of comic mock army of activists in helmets, padding, shields, and other inflatable inner-tubes, who attempt to storm police lines armed ... with balloons and water-pistols' (Graeber, 2009, p. xv). The ELZN, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, 'is the sort of army that organizes "invasions" of Mexican military bases in which hundreds of rebels sweep in entirely unarmed to scream at and try to shame resident soldiers' (Graeber, 2009, p. 227). Whereas police violence is considered *a priori* legitimate, even non-violent acts by protestors like non-cooperation or breaking windows is coded as non-peaceful. The militarisation of the police is juxtaposed with the de-militarised non-violence forced upon social movements. If street protests are a type of limited war, they are different from low-intensity conflicts. In most actions there is the performance of an insurrection without there being a real uprising. The war is limited and covert largely because it is one-sided: the reality is a counterinsurgency campaign upon pacified democratic social movements.

The war by police upon democratic social movements is fought as a contest of images. The success of social movements precipitated the need for manufactured states of siege. Democratic demands for social justice had to be re-coded as hostile and threatening. Police required the imagery of war to justify their appearing ready for war. The policing of the global justice movement bears the hallmarks of a covert war. It is covert because it is

ambiguously represented as both a war and not-a-war. It is covert because its one-sidedness must remain hidden.

The disguised war is legitimated through its mediation by corporate media. Media often wilfully ignore actions, leaving most with the impression that they never happened. When the public does hear of movements or actions, they are purposefully misrepresented. Police depict themselves—and the media dutifully parrots their talking points—as responding to disturbances and violence, not as the ones instigating violence and attacking peaceful protests. The war between police and social movements is largely a propaganda war. Graeber calls this ‘symbolic [or mythological] warfare on the part of the police’ (2007, p. 386). The media advertise images of protestors breaking corporate storefront windows to undermine the legitimacy of actions and to legitimise widespread police brutality. The black bloc becomes an accessory-after-the-fact for police propagandists. Graeber rejects this framing. Puppeteers are easy to accept as protagonists, and the black bloc is easy to deride as outside agitators. Graeber never recounts any expertise in paper mâché but does describe his participation in black blocs. Another aspect of the war of images is the coordinated police lies, the most audacious involving protestors wielding jars of urine. The media repeat police statements as uncontested facts. Even when these statements are demonstrated to be false, corporate media never issues retractions. After the success of the 1999 WTO demonstrations in Seattle, police across the country began issuing public warnings about dangerous tactics used by protestors, including reports of jars of urine being thrown at police. There is no evidence of this happening or organisers ever considering such tactics. Graeber presumes that the case of imaginary jars of urine is more about ‘rallying the [police] troops’ (2007, p. 391) than denigrating anarchists in the eyes of the public.

The coordination of police talking points reveals something vital. The police response was not local, but national, even transnational. The police are assisted by neutral non-governmental institutions. The corporate media are not a check upon abusive governmental power but assets in an orchestrated police campaign. The police, for their part, play the role of foot-soldiers in a war *undeclared* by nefarious forces kept off-screen. This is the secret which cannot be told. Graeber means this quite literally, retelling the story of his involvement in a small anti-racist action in Morristown, New Jersey and its depiction by a local newspaper, the Bergen Record. He was aghast at the report that anarchists incited a clash with police when it was the opposite that occurred. He concludes: “‘Police provoke confrontation; protestors respond with restraint and defuse the situation’ is simply untellable’ (Graeber, 2009, p. 463). Corporate media cannot report on

police violence without framing it as *a priori* legitimate, nor do they report on social movements without framing them as illegitimate.

Police and media act as *partisans* in a covert campaign to disparage and discredit democratic social movements. Graeber cites extensively from the literature on police studies. It is a shame that he never cites or discusses *Policing the crisis: Mugging, the state and law and order* (Hall et al., 1978). Stuart Hall and his colleagues authored the definitive account of the conjoined role of police, media, and political elites in the creation of law-and-order campaigns:

When the official reaction to a person, groups of persons or series of events is *out of all proportion* to the actual threat offered, when “experts”, in the form of police chiefs, the judiciary, politicians and editors *perceive* the threat in all but identical terms, and appear to talk “with one voice” of rates, diagnoses, prognoses and solutions, when the media representations universally stress “sudden and dramatic” increases (in numbers involved or events) and “novelty” above and beyond that which a sober, realistic appraisal could sustain, then we believe it is appropriate to speak of the beginnings of a *moral panic*. (Hall et al., 1978, p. 20)

The orchestrated response to the global justice movement is evidence of a manufactured moral panic and orchestrated police campaign. Whereas Hall et al. qualify their analysis through their position that institutions act out roles based upon structural constraints, I disagree and believe that their and Graeber’s analysis is evidence of a political conspiracy. Put another way, moral panics are the structural logic that enables political elites to launch police offences.

Police partisanship reveals their political function. Police mythology largely revolves around their role as crime fighters. Police sociologists have largely discredited this myth. Graeber follows suit by pointing out that ‘maybe six percent of the average police officer’s time is spent on anything which can even remotely be considered “fighting crime”’ (2007, p. 401). Police studies have defined the police mandate as order maintenance, not law enforcement (Bittner, 1974; Neocleous, 2021). This corresponds with Graeber’s (2007) own noteworthy definition:

Police are a group of armed, lower-echelon government administrators, trained in the scientific application of physical force to aid in the resolution of administrative problems. They are *bureaucrats with guns* [my emphasis], and, whether they are guarding lost children, talking rowdy drunks out of bars, or supervising free concerts in the park, the one common feature of the kind of situations to

which they're assigned is the possibility of having to impose [quoting Bittner] "non-negotiated solutions backed up by the potential use of force". (pp. 401-402)

That police are not employed for the purposes of crime control is attested to by Graeber's experiences with the global justice movement. Puppet activists do not commit any crimes. Most demonstrations are entirely legal. Police, though, freely attack and arrest all those involved. Most charges are later dropped and police never face any sanction for wanton brutality, 'for the very reason that police know activists will never be prosecuted in a criminal court, there are few limits to police behavior' (Graeber, 2009, p. 448). The police do not maintain a general, public order, but intervene on behalf of a specific order, on orders. The most revealing moment, but sadly never elaborated upon, of Graeber's account of the police's anti-puppet crusade is when he fields answers to the question: why do police hate puppeteers? Max Uhlenbeck contends: 'Obviously, they hate to be reminded that they're puppets themselves' (Graeber, 2007, p. 393). The function of police is *political*. They are *partisans*. They wage a covert campaign and utilise overt violence on *behalf* of a political and economic system and *against* civil society.

Graeber's definition of police is understated. The bureaucratic theory of police implies that they are constrained, non-partisan, and politically neutral. Their partisanship, their hidden political role, their militarised mission, exposes police as an anti-democratic institution. Police are deployed to preclude the very possibility of democracy ever happening. Liberal democratic states claim to pacify political violence by providing a forum for non-violent contest but rely upon institutional violence to criminalise the use of public forums.¹⁴ As powerfully expressed by Mark Neocleous:

We hear a lot these days about coming insurrections, screams against the system, urban rage and multitudes mobilized. Yet is it not also the case that insurrections are crushed, screams silenced, rage calmed and mobilizations halted? And is the police power not the key to this? (Neocleous, 2021, p. 42)

Put by Graeber: 'police see themselves as engaged in a political contest with protestors... [as] acting on behalf of the political regime that employs them to prevent protestors from achieving their aims' (2009, p. 466). Police partisanship represents a foundational challenge to democratic theory. Their participation in a *covert* war has meant that this challenge has often been unseen and unsaid. Police reveal the masked authoritarianism at the heart of all liberal democracies. Police enforce an absolute non-equivalence of

¹⁴ Graeber's ethnographies are a remarkable contribution to the study of protest policing. Despite being one of the most prominent figures within the global justice and Occupy movements, Graeber's work is conspicuously absent within much of the literature.

the state in its relation to society. The political power of the police rests in their unique capacity to wield violence in defence of state interest. In his chronicle of the Occupy Wall Street movement, at a moment of group indecision, Graeber (2013b) put this challenge most eloquently:

Nowhere in the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution does it say anything about America being a democracy... Men like George Washington were openly opposed to democracy. Which makes it a bit odd we're standing here under his statue today... most of us are here because we still don't think we're living under a democratic system in any meaningful sense of the term. I mean, look around you. That SWAT team over there tells you everything you read need to know. Our government has become little more than a system of institutionalized bribery where you can get hauled off to jail just for saying so. (p. xv-xvi)

Observation 2: The global justice and Occupy movements were more focused on police power than commonly assumed

The traditional retelling of the global justice and Occupy Wall Street movements highlights their criticisms of economic injustice. Graeber's memoirs tell a different history. In *Direct action* (Graeber, 2009), the first description of a meeting involves a border action, in the hopes of bringing attention to the expansion of border policing alongside free trade agreements. Graeber's first diary entry reports on an action aimed at immigration detention facilities. In Graeber's words: 'no one in America knew any of this was going on' (2009, p. 17). In a New York City Direct Action Network (NYC DAN) meeting there is a scheduling conflict with a Critical Resistance protest. Supporters of Mumia Abu-Jamal play a pivotal role in the protests at the 2000 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia. NYC DAN maintained a Police and Prisons Working Group. There is coalition work with the Mohawk Nation. Graeber and his movement partners wanted to see the WTO, IMF, and World Bank *abolished*. 'They did not wish to see those institutions reformed' (2009, p. 354). In Graeber's ethnographies, there are multiple references to the abolitionist movement, lengthy discussions about anti-racist organising strategies, police and prison practices were focal targets, and the policing of the movement is the driving narrative focus and theoretical puzzle to be solved.

Graeber rewrites the traditional narrative of the global justice movement. The targets of movement opposition were not multinational corporations or even globalisation. Rather, Graeber and his comrades protested international institutions. The public was little aware of their increased importance within the globalised economy and their role in administering corporate extortion and raiding. Graeber celebrates the global justice

movement as the first antibureaucratic leftist movement of the new century (Graeber, 2015a, p. 31). The IMF, WTO, and World Bank are synonymous with the global expansion of neoliberal economic policies, but just as important is that these new institutional forms revealed the presence of a global bureaucratic system. For Graeber, the protection of this new configuration of power by militarised police was not accidental. Neoliberal economic policies were contingent upon an expansion in anti-democratic forces. The riot cops pepper-spraying defenceless protestors is the mirror image of the unelected global bureaucrat legalising the appropriation of natural resources.

The recent waves of anti-police protests obscure just how radical the position of the global justice movement was at the time. Anti-police sentiments attract strident criticism still, even after heightened public awareness of police malfeasance. At the height of the law-and-order era and the Global War on Terror, police abolition was not as much controversial as it was unimaginable.

Graeber's abolitionism is best demonstrated in his public dispute with Chris Hedges. Graeber, for his part, wanted to abolish even the peace police! Hedges raised the ire of many by referring to the black bloc as the cancer of Occupy (Hedges, 2012). Hedges derided Occupy Oakland as a rogue element within the larger Occupy movement. Missing in Hedges' analysis was an awareness of local political factors. The 2009–2010 University of California tuition hike protests predated and influenced the Occupy movement. Galvanised by the slogan "Occupy Everything, Demand Nothing", students occupied various administration buildings. However, this pales in comparison to the importance of the 2009 killing of Oscar Grant by transit police. The execution of Grant and the violent protests that followed were a precursor to the killing of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. By the time of Occupy Oakland, the local community was in a pre-established militant confrontation with the police. Geo Maher, abolitionist theorist and participant in these protests, declared:

I'm going to insist as stubbornly as possible, that if there was a fundamental source, not for the *presence* of Occupy Oakland, but for its peculiar *radicalism* and the mantle of national leadership it assumed, this source was to be found in the Oscar Grant rebellions and the political lessons these rebellions contained. (Maher, 2012)

The occupation of Frank H. Ogawa Plaza was inaugurated by renaming it the Oscar Grant Plaza. Combating police violence by the Oakland Police Department was the central target of Occupy Oakland, not the political influence of the 1%. Hedges' criticism is symptomatic of a liberal misreading of the Occupy movement. He outright maintained

that discussions of policing or racial justice distracted from the more important message centred around economic injustice. This was an inaccurate representation of the entire Occupy movement. The encampment in Zuccotti Park only came to national attention after a series of violent police responses. A video showing Deputy Anthony Bologna pepper-spraying a group of defenceless women went viral. This was followed one week later by the mass arrest of 700 protestors on the Brooklyn Bridge. Occupy was borne through police brutality. Graeber took exception to Hedges' moral condemnation of militant tactics. The labelling of fellow protestors as a cancer that need to be excised was an explicit call for violence against them:

Time after time, what it has actually meant in practice is either (a) turning fellow activists over to the police, i.e., turning them over to people with weapons who will physically assault, shackle, and imprison them, or (b) actual physical activist-on-activist assault. (Graeber, 2012)

Hedges condemned militancy but supported violence directed against fellow protestors. Hedges sought to appoint himself as the moral authority of Occupy and empower an informal cadre to unilaterally police the movement. Graeber lists multiple episodes in which self-appointed peace police attacked their comrades. Appeals to non-violence often shroud in-group violence. Hedges commentary represented an insidious paternal authoritarianism that easily creeps into movement spaces. Graeber's reply, in turn, reveals the difficulty of conflict resolution and harm reduction. Police cannot be so easily replaced by a peace police (a contradiction in terms).

Tobi Haslett's (2021) rumination on the 2020 George Floyd Uprising ends with a shocking anecdote:

Last spring I was reminded of the demonstration where I first saw windows smashed: I was 20, at the 2012 march against NATO in Chicago, just after the "end" of the Second Gulf War. Among the gathered thousands—scraps of a flouted pacifist left—was a group the others hated for its frank aggression toward the police. Today they're known as antifa; back then the term was "black bloc." At the end of the march, a group of them grappled with armored riot cops, shattering the glass of a fast-food franchise before being cuffed and dragged away. But my clearest memory is of their chant, which I found myself joining. It rang with then-recent outrages—the murder of Oscar Grant, new incursions into Palestine, and the crackdowns in Syntagma Square: "*Oakland, Gaza, Greece! Fuck the police!*" None of us had ever heard of Ferguson, Missouri.

What is telling in Haslett's commentary is his recasting of the anarchist, militant left as important predecessors to the tenor of the Black Lives Matter uprisings: disavowed and abandoned by liberals at the time, now redeemed in history.

Observation 3: Hollywood cops play the same role in contemporary U.S. American culture as Gods or spiritual forces in the state of nature

Graeber is fascinated by the political power of magic. The disappearance of the police in Madagascar was replaced by widespread belief in spiritual forces. Neighbours got along due to fears of curses or superpowers. Graeber's ethnographies include elaborate interpretations of premonitions and spells. Witches are notable political actors. Graeber's debate with Viveiros de Castro is precipitated by Graeber's rereading of the African tradition of fetishes. Non-state societies are ruled by beliefs in Gods and spiritual forces. Metahuman beings are the abstract power that maintains the social and political order. For Graeber, politics is animated by myths and illusions. Police power is one such myth. Originating as a ritual practice, policing is now predicated upon its enduring necessity. Political theorists have long depicted the police as sacred protectorates of the *polis*. Polities have thereby afforded police special powers and status. The mythic power of police in our societies is revealed in their glamorisation by the media, Hollywood, and in television. Graeber calls this the Hollywood Movie Principle.

The culture industry has fashioned a romance with the abstract police figure. Cable television has perfected the police procedural, reproducing spin-offs on every channel. Local media hosts daily segments for police spokesmen. Western films revolve around state formation, depicting the creation of law out of anarchy. Clint Eastwood is the iconic image of the hero's journey, beginning his career as a frontier vigilante with no name and reinventing himself as a cop willing to fight dirty. Eastwood's police hero Harry Callahan is culturally relevant beyond his entertainment cache. Serialised throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Dirty Harry personified the cultural shift in favour of law-and-order policies. His willingness to get his hands dirty was adopted as the ethical imperative of all police work. If police do not take extreme measures to combat the presence of "the bad guys", they become responsible for future harms done upon society. Put eloquently by Vanessa Wills: 'Police officers see themselves as patriots who sacrifice their ethical "cleanliness" in order to do the "dirty" work of putting away "bad guys"' (2016). In Britain, Sherlock Holmes and James Bond embody structural variants of the same theme (Graeber, 2015a, p. 78; see Figure 3). Holmes is a private detective; Bond an international policeman. Whereas Dirty Harry embodies the moral duty of police work, James Bond is an extra-moral superhero. Post-Dirty Harry cops become increasingly detached from

cinematic realism. The action-hero genre largely consists of maverick cops taken to extra-worldly feats and gratuitous property destruction.

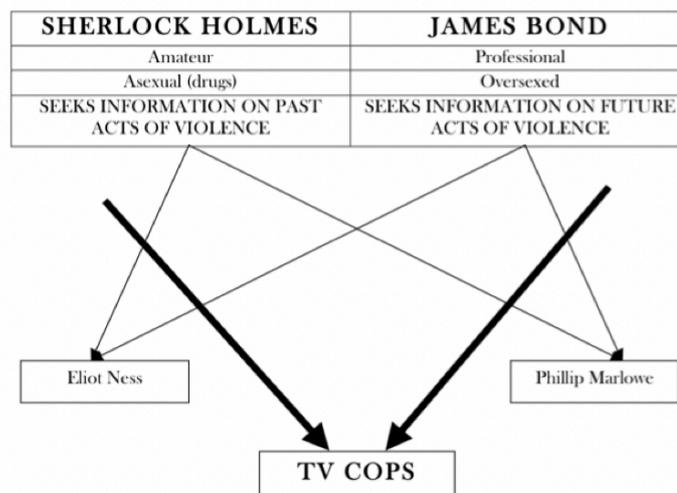


Figure 3: Structural analysis of Sherlock Holmes and James Bond as police prototypes

Police loom large within the superhero genre as well. The first of the Batman movies opened with the following dedication: “WE WISH TO EXPRESS OUR GRATITUDE TO THE ENEMIES OF CRIME AND CRUSADERS AGAINST CRIME” (Martinson, 1966). Batman, after all, was born from a mugging gone wrong. Batman’s origin story is based upon the fear of disorder. Gotham is depicted as overrun by criminals of every type: common criminals, organised gangsters, and supervillains. Batman is called into action due to state failure and organised abandonment. In some stories, the police’s hands are tied and they cannot effectively respond to criminal threats, in others their hands are in every pocket and symptomatic of Gotham’s sweeping corruption. Batman is a lone figure called upon to protect the social order in the absence of police. If dirty hands are the guiding ethical imperative of police work, Batman’s vigilante justice is its highest expression. Ultimately, it becomes impossible to detach Batman from the police apparatus. In some stories, he acts in concert with the police; in others, he is hunted by them. He is presented as both a threat to the legal order and politically useful. Batman illustrates the conceptual limits of sovereignty. Batman is a liminal police figure, expressing fears concerning lawlessness and the authoritarian desire to fight dirty, evoking a political imaginary that legitimises policing. The superhero genre illustrates the mythic foundation of police power: police violence is always already vigilante justice.

However, so too, vigilantes wield violence in the name of the police mandate. Violence is a singular remedy for all social problems, and ought to be the right of anybody, public official or concerned billionaire, who claims the mantle of self-defence, social protection,

or vengeance. So says those who defend police authoritarianism. It is telling that the superhero most characterised by his use of gratuitous violence, the Punisher, has become the hero of choice for the social forces defending police violence. The Punisher's unrestricted violence is precisely what appeals to white supremacists *and* armed agents of the American state (Philips, 2021). The Punisher is a metahuman being representing the actions and ideologies of George Zimmerman, Kyle Rittenhouse, killer cops, and the fascist social forces who celebrate them.

U.S. American popular culture lionises police as mythic, extra-moral figures. Graeber refers to politicians as the modern-day example of heroic societies. Perhaps, the police, particularly as they are depicted by Hollywood, are a better example. After all, politicians are universally despised by the general public. Police superheroes are charismatic figures devoid of bureaucratic personality or self-serving interests. The fictionalised versions of police capture the public's imagination, playing the role of metahuman beings who personify and reproduce authoritarian mythologies. Authoritarian ideology is based upon this lethal combination of libertarianism and communitarianism. The free use of violence is legitimate on behalf of communal self-defence. Without vigilante justice, disorder reigns. For Graeber and Wengrow, the first attempts at large-scale administration of sovereign violence are the historical origins of political evil. 'It's the addition of sovereign power, and the resulting ability of the local enforcer to say, "Rules are rules; I don't want to hear about it" that allows bureaucratic mechanisms to become genuinely monstrous' (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021a, p. 426). I would like to take this comment a step further. The modern state becomes genocidal at the moment in which vigilante and bureaucratic violence is valorised as a form of heroism. The Hollywood Movie Principle laid the groundwork for an insidious form of police authoritarianism. The fictional depiction of authoritarian desires and fears justifies the impunity of police violence in the real world. The license to kill is the political imaginary that animates a homegrown fascist movement within the United States.

Thesis 1: The police abolition movement is a global social movement against a fully-formed global police network

Graeber ends his ethnography of the global justice movement by alluding to the formation of a global police state. Global police state is a three-word oxymoron. Terminology does matter; I prefer to speak of a global police network. States are territorial entities, national not global. Police are normally cast as local institutions, categorically not global. Police assuredly wield political power, but rarely hold higher office nor do they establish state policy. In many liberal democracies, police are autonomous and free from state di-

rection. Local, state, private, and transnational police organisations cooperate across borders. Despite its conceptual illegibility, a fully-formed global police network presently exists.

The basic characterisation of police is of a state institution entrusted with establishing internal security. A central thesis animating my research is that many of our preconceptions about police are inaccurate. We must disabuse ourselves of the notion that police are solely delegated to internal security. Beginning in the 19th century, police departments have established cooperative relationships with their foreign counterparts, eventually forming transnational police organisations and regional security agreements, such as Interpol and the Schengen Area. President Theodore Roosevelt made police the central metaphor expressing a new vision of the U.S. American state. The Spanish-American War precipitated the emergence of an aggressive, imperial foreign policy. The U.S. intended to act as a regional policeman. Upon taking possession of the Philippines, military command used police forces to fight a dirty war against the indigenous population. The occupation of the Philippines led to the creation of gendarmeries in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua. Throughout the Cold War, under the auspices of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and State Department, the U.S. created, developed, and trained foreign police forces in over fifty countries. As stated by CIA agent Robert Komer: 'The police are in many cases a far more effective and immediately useful counter-subversive instrument than the military' (Kuzmarov, 2012, p. 12). This point was popularly reinforced by Colonel Mathieu, the antagonist of Gillo Pontecorvo's *The battle of Algiers* (1966): 'To know them means to eliminate them. Consequently, the military aspect is secondary to the police method.'¹⁵ One of the great successes of an earlier generation of transnational activists was the abolition of the Office of Public Safety (OPS) in 1974 (Schrader, 2016). The OPS was the government programme responsible for foreign police assistance. Such assistance resulted in untold disappearances, torture, killings, and mass murder. Despite abolition, global policing has intensified in the decades since. The New York Police Department, a municipal force employing over 50,000 officers, maintains permanent stations in London, Lyons, Hamburg, Toronto, and Tel Aviv. Over ten thousand U.S. police officers have received advanced training in Israel through the Law Enforcement Exchange Program. The post-Cold War international security environment is typified by transnational criminal networks, private military contractors, peace-keeping operations, and security-sector training operations (such as the decades-long, now failed, U.S. American mission in Afghanistan). Areas of limited statehood are

¹⁵ The prominence of U.S. police-training operations is depicted in Costa-Gavras' loose trilogy: *Z* (1969), *State of siege* (1972), and *Missing* (1982).

labelled national security threats and building up the institutional capacity of weak states is a focal task of U.S. foreign policy. The Global War on Terror involved the projection of force overseas alongside an intensification of homeland defence. The formless, all-pervasive terrorist enemy indicated its diffuse permanence. Differences between police and military forces remain pertinent, but so too does their blending. Police see themselves as acting without rules. Torture, indefinite detention, and leadership decapitation revealed an increasing willingness by U.S. military forces to violate international law and liberal norms. Counterinsurgency doctrine develops dual military and policing strategies to pacify occupied territories. Appeals to human rights and a stated responsibility to protect have justified military interventions designated as police actions. The U.S. now claims a special status, not as a regional policeman but as the lone country permitted to patrol the planet as a global policeman. It is necessary to identify the special role of the United States in creating and sustaining global police networks, in claiming the right to act as a global policeman, but local, regional, transnational, and private police forces exist most everywhere. All one has to do is cross a heavily policed border to see vastly a different manner of policing. Nevertheless, they all remain uncannily familiar. As put poetically by George Lipsitz: "The empire is "in here" as well as "out there" (2004, p. 282). U.S. American Empire is heavily fortified by indirect rule, including through foreign and transnational police forces. Despite this, authoritarian, imperial competitors to U.S. American unipolarity have intensified efforts to capture and weaponise Interpol, the most well-known transnational police organisation. After all, foreign police forces, historically and quite consistently, have committed massacres and atrocities both with *and without* the permission of the global hegemon.

There is a disjunction between the academic study of global justice and the global justice movement. Whereas the study of global justice revolved around normative appeals for distributive justice, the global justice movement targeted bureaucratic institutions and neoliberal policies. Whereas the former hoped cosmopolitanism, democracy, development, and human rights could enable more egalitarian outcomes, the latter proved how global institutions employ liberal language for institutionalised extortion and raiding. This is not a case of mutual neglect but opposed ideologies. The prelude to the European Debt Crisis was the police killing of Greek 15-year-old Andreas Grigoropoulos. The Arab Spring began with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor subject to repeated police harassment. The first protests of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution targeted National Police Day. Both the European Debt Crisis and the Arab Spring inspired the Occupy movement; however, their origins in police violence have been written out of the traditional retelling of these histories. Despite a focus upon bor-

der policing and immigration detention centres, the global justice movement did not develop a critique of global police power. Graeber's final comment attempts such a critique, pointing beyond the WTO, IMF, World Bank, and structural adjustment programmes to an amorphous network of interconnected transnational police agencies.

There is growing awareness of an expansive, diffuse, and interconnected global police network. Graeber's allusion to a global police state presaged the recent interest in the study of global policing.¹⁶ A fully-formed global police network is terrifying precisely because of the assertion of full-spectrum control and totalising domination. Everywhere bureaucrats with guns enforce state authoritarianism on behalf of a global capitalist system. The struggle against U.S. police is therefore also a struggle against a global policing. Abolitionist Angela Y. Davis has posited the need for 'movement intersectionality' (2016, p. 141). As summarised by Ashley Bohrer and Andrés Fabián Henao Castro (2019, p. 151): 'If one follows the Israeli Occupation far enough, one finds oneself on the streets of Ferguson or in Standing Rock.' Movement intersectionality entails solidarity with the victims of police violence everywhere, in France and Nigeria, Israel and the Occupied Territories, Honduras and Brazil, the Philippines and China.¹⁷

Thesis 2: A strategic goal of the police abolitionist movement is undermining police mythology

The ultimate protagonist of Graeber's essay *On the phenomenology of giant puppets* (2007) is the magical, imaginative powers of activist puppeteers. Enormous *papier-mâché* puppets are non-threatening, fantastic creations. They are intended to illustrate the promise of democracy, the human capacity to reorganise our social and political relations. The mythic power of puppets lies in imagination: the power to make people believe that another, better world is possible. Puppets attempt to break the spell that the capitalist order holds over us. So too, police power can only be maintained by widespread social acceptance. To break the spell of the capitalist order it is also necessary to break the spell of police authoritarianism. While riot police man the barricades, authoritarian myths impose cultural barriers to social change. Police authority is an imagined barrier that pre-

¹⁶ I could cite any number of articles or books here. For two quite different perspectives, see Schrader (2019) and Robinson (2020).

¹⁷ The comparativist case against police abolition is one of the stronger arguments against a hyperbolic, excessive abolitionism. Low rates of police violence and incarceration in developed countries have been taken as evidence of an "abolition of degradation" (Whitman, 2003). Peter J. Katzenstein (1996) points to Japan and Germany as two examples that demonstrate that repressive police institutions can be reformed and reimagined as less-repressive. I defend a hyperbolic, excessive abolitionism directed against the authoritarian high modernism of countries such as Japan and Singapore, Sweden and Germany.

cludes the possibility of *unpoliced* alternative worlds. Police mythology holds that there is no alternative to police violence. Breaking the spell of police authoritarianism is thus an ideological effort to overcome the figurative, imagined walls that prevent social progress.

The repression of non-violent activist puppeteers is contrasted to the free movement afforded black blocs. For Graeber, this is a strategic order of police command. Puppets prefigure a world without police, while the black bloc confirms the need for police. The targeting of activist puppeteers reveals the covert war by police upon democratic social movements. A political ontology of imagination confronts a political ontology of violence and finds only unremitting force. The criminalisation of non-violent tactics compels social movement actors to use more militant tactics. However, militancy is a limited, tactical response to police brutality. According to Graeber, only the political powers of the imagination, the capacity to change deeply entrenched common sense, is a durable strategy for democratic social movements.

Graeber puts forward a theory of change dependent upon changing people's minds. For social movements to be successful in diminishing the political power of the police they should focus their strategic efforts at undermining the mythical foundations of police authority. Graeber heroically believes that social movements have the capacity to undermine the symbolic and mythological order of things, to break through the imaginative wall that the police order holds over us. This is the crux of Graeber's strategic summation. It is the only place in the text where he offers any recommendations on how to confront the political power of the police. I have always been struck by the grandiose and hopeful, overtly abolitionist, vision that Graeber lays out: police will simply melt away if we just stop believing in them.

In a limited sense, Graeber is right. The principal goal of the police abolition movement involves depriving police institutions of their social and political support. Imagination is a powerful tool of political struggle. The unconditioned demand to abolish police entirely is premised upon the possibility of radical alternative ways of being. Abolitionist imaginaries have made people question their most basic political assumptions. The abolition movement is an organised counterforce skilled at undermining the myths which form the superstructural base upholding police power. Police are neither necessary, non-partisan, nor worthy of heroic veneration. The indomitable mythology of police as politically untouchable has shown noticeable cracks and fissures in the past few years. Much of this is due to a growing awareness of actual police behaviour. Images of police murders have scarred the collective consciousness, forcing many to pay attention when they

would have otherwise not. Political realism has propelled public outcry beyond that of political imaginaries. Alongside countering the mythologies underwriting police, the abolitionist movement must continue to popularise anti-police sentiments. If police play a role as metahuman beings within political life, it is imperative to expose them as social monstrosities.¹⁸ However, just as useful, is making them appear stupid and ineffectual. Mocking police as clowns is no joking matter. My point is that political imaginaries are one tool amongst many. Political education, to mention one example, or satire, to include another, are similarly capable of challenging common sense beliefs. The political power of the imagination is necessary but not sufficient for social movement success.

Thesis 3: Police have overwhelming power, the political power of the police remains intractable, be it resolved that the police will not just melt away

This one, though, I will have to leave for future comment.

Are police bullshit?

David Graeber's involvement in the global justice movement was not without consequence. He was exiled from Yale University after a public and messy tenure dispute. Despite the impact of his scholarship, no U.S. university was willing to hire someone notorious for political activism. Graeber absconded, instead, to London, where he would reside for the remainder of his life. After the publication of *Debt: The first 5,000 years* (2011) and his widely reported involvement in the Occupy Wall Street movement, Graeber achieved a fame uncommon to the ivory confines of academia. Graeber was, for a moment, one of the world's most known public intellectuals. As an anarchist, allergic to the magnetism of vanguardism, Graeber's entry into the academic star-complex was ironic and something of a poison pill. Graeber would lament that his more scholarly works during this time, such as *On kings* (Graeber & Sahlins, 2017), produced little fanfare, whereas his public-facing work found a vociferous audience. It is worth re-considering these later, more popular, books as they develop themes explored in earlier works but now transformed into biting cultural commentaries on contemporary social and political life. The police continue to loom large.

Bullshit jobs: A theory (Graeber, 2018) was an accidental book. What started as a so-called "rant" for an obscure leftist magazine ended up translated into over a dozen languages (Graeber, 2013a). That late capitalism was oversaturated in meaningless occupations

¹⁸ I remain unconvinced that anti-police pejoratives, such as "pigs" or "bastards", are efficacious. Wilbur is a beloved childhood memory for many, symbolising the innocence of humans and animals alike. Children borne out of wedlock do not deserve to be castigated. *All cops are Derek Chauvin* more effectively distils the essence of police fascism.

struck a chord. Surplus labour these days is mostly busywork. This is the only of Graeber's book in which police make no appearance, an absence I find vexing. Graeber describes five types of pointless labour: flunkies, goons, duct tapers, box tickers, and taskmasters (Graeber, 2018). Police are literal goons. Their major function is to wield violence on behalf of governments. Graeber's goons, in contrast, are hired mainly to deceive; they are metaphorical, not literal, goons. Public relations specialists and call centre employees are the ideal types. Goons are defined in such a way that police officers do not match the criteria. The book begins with a discussion of a literal goon, a mafia hit man in this case, who serves as an example of someone who does *not* have a bullshit job. Socially harmful jobs, it seems, are not necessarily pointless. The mafioso might enjoy their work or find it honourable, and most are not paid a regular wage or salary. Police are closely related to the gangster.¹⁹ Both are types of violence work. However, police officers are duty-bound to use fraud and deception, and their work is definitively a form of wage labour. The hitman might abide by a code, but they are aware their actions cause personal and social harm. Cops act dishonourably, but most claim that their work is necessary for the public good. These contradictions are telling. Police are a borderline case that undermines Graeber's theory.²⁰ Abolitionists have cause to describe police work as unnecessary and detrimental, and Graeber would agree with them, but his theory provides no adequate way of explaining how or why.

Police are bullshit!²¹ Their work is based upon myths and lies. They habitually cause more harm than good. For Graeber, none of this is sufficient. His original definition of pointless, unnecessary, and detrimental work loses its meaning as soon as he refines his definition to be based upon subjective belief. Bullshit, at least for Graeber, is in the eye of the beholder. Whereas the call centre employee knows that their activity is vacuous and without purpose, police have built elaborate mythologies justifying their presence. Police have unusually intense libidinal investments in their work and its social status. The function they perform on behalf of governments is essential, at least for governments. Few would deny that violence is effective. Amongst Marxists, police are the necessary condition for *any kind* of work, meaningful or meaningless. Rightly or wrongly, the gen-

¹⁹ Cops and robbers share an elective affinity. One necessitates the other. In areas of limited state capacity, corruption is the principal means of income for local police. This is not accidental. Charles Tilly notoriously referred to police as a quintessential protection racket and the foremost example of organised crime (Tilly, 1985, p. 169).

²⁰ Graeber fails to provide a great explanation why the mafia hitman is not a bullshit job. The focus on honour and wages is erroneous. The obvious answer is that the mafia hitman finds their work purposeful because the labour they perform is essential for their employers. Violence works. The same logic applies to police. Police might be socially useless, but they are assuredly politically useful.

²¹ Thank the stars for Harry Frankfurt (2005) who has made the study of "bullshit" a respectable one.

eral public finds their work vital and reassuring. Lots of essential workers, in contrast, are alienated, disillusioned, disenchanting, exploited, disrespected, and unappreciated. Therefore, subjective beliefs remain a faulty criterion. Bullshit jobs become just a matter of perspective or ideological dispute.²² Meaningless work is different from alienation or exploitation. The latter refers to the products of our labour and how well workers are paid or treated; the former reveals an inability for them to imagine spending their lives doing anything of value. Police work is bullshit, and it matters little whether the average cop ever imagines doing something better with their time. Socially useless labour is better defined by Graeber's first intuition: police perform jobs that are pointless, unnecessary, and detrimental. What makes this dilemma perplexing and worthy of analysis is that police can be socially harmful while convinced they are essential, sacred protectors. They are sincere in their beliefs while disinterested in its truth. Police are disciples of an anti-realist tradition dominant within authoritarian ideologies. The logic of authority is predicated upon a self-assurance in search of exigence. The necessity and efficacy of police, for this reason, is more an example of bullshit than it is a noble lie.

The absence of social utility derived from police forces is better depicted through Graeber's criticism of modern bureaucracy. *The utopia of rules: On technology, stupidity, and the secret joys of bureaucracy* (Graeber, 2015b) was additionally promoted as pulp non-fiction, albeit in the form of a series of essays. The ur-text was originally presented as the 2006 Malinowski Memorial Lecture for the London School of Economics and is a notable contribution to the study of bureaucracy.²³ Graeber's foil are the preeminent theorists of the subject: Max Weber and Michel Foucault. Even though he sharply disagrees with both, he attributes their popularity to the recognition that bureaucracy is a fundamental problem within contemporary politics. Contra Weber and Foucault, Graeber concludes that bureaucracy is a form of "structural stupidity".

Political scientists have theorised that bureaucratic institutions are autonomous sites of authority, not mere means to the ends of political elites (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999). Despite their rationalist reputations, institutions are prone to pathological behaviour. Often this takes the form of the regressive tasks that Graeber labels bullshit: a preponderance of red tape, doubling of duties, and the wasting of resources. The unbridled excesses of police power are not due to micromanagement or busywork. Theirs is a sadistic pathol-

²² Some have tested Graeber's claims and found the empirical evidence uneven (Soffia et al., 2021; Delucchi et al., 2021). Subjective beliefs are notoriously difficult to quantify, and this data does little to disprove the growing prevalence of pointless labour.

²³ The original title was *Beyond power/knowledge: An exploration of the relation of power, ignorance, and stupidity*, subsequently changed to *Dead zones of the imagination: On violence, bureaucracy, and interpretive labor* and then *Dead zones of the imagination: An essay on structural stupidity*.

ogy. Their form of technical efficiency is shoot first, ask questions later, and automatically refuse retroactive recriminations. Police institutions are exceptional cases of bureaucratic dysfunction. They are insulated from reproach, normalise their own deviance, obfuscate their operations, and respond to all street-level problems with violence or the threat thereof. Even moderate reformists are now willing to admit that the high rates of incarceration and police killings in the United States are proof of an organisational culture prone to excess. Modern, contemporary politics cannot be a paragon of rational management so long as it cannot unmake its most irrational creations.

The pathological dysfunction of present-day police institutions is not due to mission drift. Precisely the opposite. If Graeber was reluctant to refer to the police as bullshit, he was willing and eager to identify them as the preeminent example of structural stupidity. By this he does not mean that all cops are Frank Drebin. Bureaucrats themselves are not stupid. Given their role as institutional actors that are compelled to enforce rules thoughtlessly and manage haphazard social relations. The systems they serve are inane. The systems they serve make unthinking obedience a precondition of employment. Stupid structures are therefore impervious to dedicated public officials or well-meaning reforms.

Stupidity is the result when structural violence meets actual violence. Anyone who has struggled against a labyrinthine bureaucracy knows there is no reasoning with arcane rules or paper-pushers. Overzealous civil servants are maddening because they are in positions of power but have scarce decision-making power. Even if gatekeepers themselves do not carry arms, there is always someone, in the final instance, who can be called upon capable of maximum force. Jonathan Weinberg (2017) surmises that: 'Graeber's argument in this book is that police shootings and bank bureaucratic runarounds have the same roots' (p. 1098). However, the relationship is not one of equivalence. Police shootings condition our acceptance of bureaucratic runarounds. Bureaucrats compel obedience based upon threats that police can always be called upon. Structural violence is thus an imagined form of violence but conditioned upon the ever-present possibility of actual violence. Police are the expression of bureaucracy in its most essential form. Bureaucrats outfitted, not with rubber-stamps and filing cabinets, but with guns and prisons cells. Violence is the ultimate non-discursive deed and, as Graeber is one to suggest, the preferred weapon of the stupid. Anyone with a truncheon and a license to use it indiscriminately has the privilege of not listening to what others have to say. As stated, 'one can see, here, precisely how bureaucratic power, at the moment it turns to violence, becomes literally a form of infantile stupidity' (Graeber, 2015b, pp. 80-81). This is a pos-

sible explanation why police focus the brunt of their brutality upon those who look different and/or advocate for alternative points of view. If dealing with bureaucracy and bureaucrats is never any fun, it is telling that armed bureaucrats arrive the moment anybody starts having any. If the function of police is to maintain order, this refers to a capitalist and racial order that is a fundamentally stupid and unnecessary order. Bullshit jobs are bullshit because they serve bullshit systems.

For Graeber, leftist social movements have failed to develop an adequate critique of bureaucracy. Conservative movements, on the other hand, have successfully exploited the public's disdain for bureaucracy for destructive purposes. Social democrats, in turn, have sought to defend good governance. They have failed to articulate that valuable public sectors (education, health care, social services, etc.) have faced devolution as the expense of bloated budgets devoted to organised violence. Graeber, ironically, late in life, found himself an informal advisor to British opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn. After Corbyn's defeat, Graeber opined that the electoral defeats of democratic socialists have been due to their myopia regarding bureaucracy. Rival political parties each represent different classes of administrators. Whereas U.S. conservatives are the party of violence work, liberals claim to stand on behalf of care work. Police, in large part, are the social base of Trumpism, whereas teachers and nurses are the most prominent figures promoted by social democrats and socialists alike. This schism has intensified throughout the global pandemic. Teachers and nurses are front-line workers, whereas police have led the campaign against vaccine mandates. The confrontation between these two classes is a defining struggle of contemporary politics, a point missed when the focus is only upon class conflict. As put by Graeber: 'One might speak of the beginnings of a veritable revolt of the caring classes, global in scale' (2020). The principal failure of leftist social movements and centre-left political parties has been their non-recognition of this embryonic uprising and the dilemma of sectoral conflict. In the U.S., the continued allegiance of the Democratic Party to a class of police troops who hold them in utter contempt is one of the most pressing present-day political paradoxes.²⁴

Police are archetypal bureaucrats. For many, they were the first bureaucrats. For this reason, police are the preeminent example of pathological bureaucracy in an era of ever-increasing bureaucratisation. Police was the original term for the national administrative state. The historic, expansive meaning of the term "police" has been lost, and it is now

²⁴ Graeber, for his part, concludes that the professional-managerial class, this includes liberals, swears fealty to proceduralism. Budgets can be gross misaligned with our values so long as they were decided upon according to the specified rules.

assumed that police are a bureaucratic subset distinct from other institutions. Mark Neocleous illustrates why this is not the case:

What was once medical police became “social health” and then “the health service”; what was once the police of poverty became “welfare” and then “social security”; what was once the police of the market was handed over to organs with names such as “the Food Standards Agency”; what was once the police mandate for street cleaning was handed to municipal and health authorities. (Neocleous, 2021, p. 18)

Police maintain a special, vaunted status within the state bureaucracy. They are the institution amongst a series of subordinate institutions. Caring for the public welfare is often considered a supplemental governmental responsibility, whereas violence the state’s essential prerogative. Stupidly, police consume a vast proportion of municipal, state, and federal budgets. In an era of acute austerity, socially responsibly fiscal policy is attainable, but only if states forgo their vast expenditures on necropolitical institutions. The revolt of the caring classes requires direct confrontation with the stranglehold that violence-workers maintain over the national purse. To repeat myself: this is all bullshit! Police are the paradigmatic expression of social stupidity: an institution which serve no socially beneficial purpose, but apparently, one that we are stuck with and that comes at the expense of institutions which could serve the public good. Graeber’s celebrated diatribes against bullshit jobs and bureaucracy provides a captivating framework for defending the cause of police abolition. Police are superfluous and unsound, unessential and deleterious. Most importantly, abolition is a promising advance for leftist social movements because it expresses a popular distaste for bureaucracy, alters the public debate over fiscal policy, and has the potential to vastly expand care-based services.

Police will not just wither away

‘I have had dreams that... that affected the... non-dream world. The real world’ (Le Guin, 1971, p. 11), or so says George Orr, the main character of Ursula K. Le Guin’s parable *The lathe of heaven* (1971). David Graeber points out that most fantasy worlds are purged of bureaucracy. Graeber focuses his commentary upon J. R. R. Tolkien, the betrayal of this tendency by J. K. Rowling, and the autonomy afforded to players of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Fantasy in this instance involves elves, orcs, wizards, and dragons; in other words, surreal worlds that closely resemble our pre-historic or present-day worlds but are outright impossibilities. Compared with the traditional stories told by police historians, indigenous clown police, for example, might as well be dismissed alongside beliefs in sor-

cerers and warlocks. Science fiction stories are not the same as fantasy, but they do share a resemblance. Whereas fantasy has a resonance with the past, science fiction typically involves tales of the future. Science fiction relies upon imagined worlds that are remotely possible. For this reason, the genre is awash in bureaucratic fantasies. *Star Trek*, after all, was written by a former member of the Los Angeles Police Department. Science fiction mirrors our own fantasies about the future, revealing, whether we want to admit it or not, that police are forever bound to be nearby.²⁵ Ursula K. Le Guin is an iconic representative of both fantasy and science fiction genres, famous precisely because of their subversion of these conventions. Le Guin's Orr is no magician; rather, like Franz Kafka's Gregor Samsa, he is quite ordinary. Both George and Gregor are bureaucratic types, working dead-end jobs. Both, also, find that their dreams are endowed with a weak prophetic power. Whereas Samsa wakes up an insect, Orr's dreams become manifest. Orr's power to turn his dreams into reality becomes something of a living nightmare. *The lathe of heaven* (Le Guin, 1971) is a telling fable about the ability of our dreams to incur into the real world, but also a warning about the dangers of what we spend our days dreaming about.

Graeber has centred the power of imagination as a transformative political force. He establishes a political ontology of the imagination as the sole rival to a political ontology of violence. His concluding statement as an anthropologist concerns the lasting freedom to reimagine our social and political relations. His lone recommendation for the breaking of police power is to contest their cosmology. The power to imagine otherwise is to render the possible. It remains conceivable that enough people can be convinced to give up their allegiance to police, to stop believing in them as non-negotiable solutions to social problems. Once again, for Graeber, the onus is upon our subjective beliefs. Personal or public opinion, however, is no match for systematic coercion. Capitalism and authoritarianism do not require our belief in their enduring reality; their legitimation is enforced by literal goons. Police institutions will not just evaporate. I argue here, via some very tenuous conclusions, that Graeber puts too much significance on the political powers of the imagination. Alternative or imagined worlds are enticing and fascinating, indeed romantic, but the whack of a police baton is an assured reminder that we are trapped in this world, an actually existing totalitarian nightmare.

²⁵ Is this not the deceptive lesson of N.K. Jemisin's rejoinder to Le Guin's *The ones who walk away from Omelas*? If Le Guin's allegory is a moralistic demand for prison abolition, Jemisin's *The ones who stay and fight* (2020) is a testament to the impossibility of a world without police. In Jemisin's Um-Helat, extra-judicial capital punishment is carried out by so-called social workers. For what crime? Learning about the past, i.e., learning about the horrors of our world. If the responses of my students to these two stories is any indication, their overwhelming preference for Um-Helat over Omelas, once again, disproves William James' adage. Killing is socially accepted so long as the victim is guilty of breaking the rules.

Abolition is haunted by the spectre of political realism. Rightly or wrongly, most do not find abolition realistic. Abolitionists have generally recognised this as a guiding challenge. One of the hallmarks of abolitionist theory is the repeated insistence that *unpoliced* worlds are more common and credible than assumed. Take for instance, Geo Maher's concluding statement (and title phrase): 'A world without police is not a utopia. It is *real*, and in some sense, it already exists' (Maher, 2020, p. 227). Or Charmaine Chua's lasting lesson: 'Abolition is a horizon, not an event' (Chua, 2020, p. 130). I would be remiss if I did not also cite Ruth Wilson Gilmore's sagacious saying: 'Abolition is about presence, not absence' (Gilmore, 2019). Each of these figures depict abolition as practical and not prone to empty idealism. Abolitionists expose the present world, fully saturated with police, as consisting of fantastic wizardry masked by the flimsiest of curtains. A world without police is realised every moment when people solve problems without them. Abolitionists plan police obsolescence. Mutual aid networks and transformative justice organisations are growing in number and impact. Actually-existing-abolitionism is revealed by the presence of counter-institutions wielding social power in the shadows of the state. Life-affirming associations devoted to harm reduction, care work, and mutual accountability are promoted as empirical evidence in the here and now that dreams of future worlds freed of oppressive institutions are not inconceivable. Despite the theoretical cleverness, abolition is equally reliant upon the use of political imaginaries. For radical transformation to be made credible, imagining alternatives is both a goal and strategy. There is a growing awareness that police institutions are irredeemable and cannot be so easily amended. However, the unreasonableness of police is not the basis for their disappearance. To put this differently: imagining alternative worlds without police does not make our heavily policed world any less present. As Graeber contends in the concluding sections of *On the phenomenology of giant puppets* (2007, p. 410), this is *the* 'anarchist problem', a problem that persists continually. There are plenty of believers amongst us; the problem is that the non-believers are the ones holding all the guns.

This essay is a critical analysis of what David Graeber has to say about police and its importance for his life's work. It should not be read as an attempt to rebrand Graeber a cryptic abolitionist. He was quite aware of abolitionist organising and influenced by their work. He even, at times, describes his work as contributing to abolitionist theory and praxis. It is my argument that his research and activism were more attentive to police than commonly assumed. Graeber is one of the leading representatives of contemporary anarchism, of course his work bares likeness and sympathy to anti-racist and anti-police viewpoints. The words that we use to describe ourselves are often inadequate for measuring our beliefs and actions. Distinctions do matter though. Abolitionist

thought is unique in its approach and history. Abolitionists have generated fresh insights that are valuable for thinkers and social movements of diverse interests or ideologies. There are, as previously noted, multiple abolitionisms, ranging from the defunding of police departments to the burning down of precincts as preferred public policy outcomes. What this essay does argue is that Graeber, as a famous social movement figure, is an informative interlocutor for a comparative-dialectical analysis of the waves of protests in the early decades of the twenty-first century. The global justice movement, Occupy Wall Street, and the re-emergence of democratic socialism provide a valuable set of lessons for social movements fixed upon diminishing the political power of police. The abolitionists movement likewise reveals shortcomings within these prior protest movements and the demand for *police-centred* social movement strategies.

It is a common, not entirely untrue, stereotype that the global justice and Occupy movements were white-led social movements. The media caricature of the participants of the global justice movement were trust-fund environmentalists from Eugene, Oregon. The encampment in Zuccotti Park was portrayed as akin to the Grateful Dead coming to town. The whiteness of these movements was not a hindrance so much as an attribute for those like Chris Hedges. As stated by political scientist Joel Olson in his essay *Whiteness and the 99%* (2012):

This is the sinister impact of white democracy on our movements. It encourages a mindset that insists that racial issues are “divisive” when they are at the absolute center of everything we are fighting for. To defeat left colorblindness and the distorted white mindset, we must come to see any form of favoritism toward whites (whether explicit or implicit) as an evil attempt to perpetuate the cross-class alliance rather than build the 99%.²⁶

These criticisms are buttressed by Graeber’s admission that the 99% includes police. Also damning is his repeated insistence that successful revolutions are dependent upon police laying down their weapons. In *Direct action* (2009), Graeber discusses the dilemmas of racial tension and white privilege in movement spaces. Predominately white anarchist groups face a strategic trade-off: should they spend their energy organising within their own (white) communities or concentrate on building multiracial coalitions? The trade-off is existential: should they focus on their own oppression and liberation, or act in solidarity with other, more oppressed groups? It is not one or the other. However, Graeber still concludes that racial divisions ‘regularly rip direct-actions groups

²⁶ This is a good moment to address the overly general, ambiguous “we” and “us” used throughout this text. Easy to call-out in student essays, impersonal pronouns remain a guilty pleasure, hard to kick. It remains unclear who we or us refers to, or to whom it does not. All of us might be policed, but *some* are more policed than others.

apart' (2009, p. 241). His prominent example is the Love & Rage Anarchist Federation, which dissolved after a series of debates in the late 1990s, in which race was a hotly disputed topic. Joel Olson, quoted above, was a member of Love & Rage and active participant within these debates.²⁷ Olson is a prominent example of the abolitionist line and, hence, a valuable counter-perspective to Graeber. The black radical tradition exhibits a culture and practice of resistance largely ignored by socialists and anarchists. Olson looked to W. E. B. Du Bois for the conviction that the colour-line was the driving conflict within U.S. politics. Du Bois argued that poor whites accepted material deprivation in exchange for privileged social status. The breaking of the cross-class alliance amongst white citizens requires addressing racial domination with the same fervour as economic exploitation. The capitalist order is also a racial order. Multiracial coalitions should not be a perquisite for anarchist organising, so much as the result. Anarchists must also put their efforts into overturning white supremacy. Put by Maher (2012): 'Identifying white privilege *within* movements is fundamental, but it is useless if we don't then turn toward the revolutionary practice of attacking white supremacy as a system.'

Joel Olson's anarchism exhibits a commitment to abolition that Graeber's lacks. Their differences are significant. Olson advocates for race-centred social movement strategies, including a focus on institutions, such as police, that are structured by racial dominance. The Love & Rage slogan "Governments don't fall by themselves!" is a stark contrast to the performance of insurrection without the corresponding intention or strategy to precipitate the real thing. Olson offers a corrective to the tactical reliance upon provisional autonomous zones and summit protests. Movement building is necessary to broaden the political base, create cross-identity alliances, and grow organisational capacity. Movement building provides tangible victories in a durable war of position. Increased competence and power enable social movements to act as dual powers within society, more effectively challenging the state and police for legitimacy. It would be unfair to say that Graeber is uninterested in movement building. He is largely famous for his success as a movement builder. However, by putting the emphasis upon consensus-building and the use of political imaginaries, forming power is disregarded. Graeber's hope that police will just melt away is contingent upon endless discussions and mass acceptance of political alternatives. It is the height of foolhardy optimism to rest a theory of change upon the hope that police will unilaterally disarm. Joel Olson's hope (2009), in contrast, is that 'the scene might just build a movement.'

²⁷ See Olson (1997) and Olson (1998).

Dilemmas of race, violence, and social movement strategy also loom large in Graeber's brief history of U.S. social movements in the last four decades of the 20th century. For Graeber, the Civil Rights movement is an anomalous case of non-violent tactics proving effective. Graeber blames black radicals for eschewing democratic processes and excluding white members, arguing that this led to the dissolution of key organisations and a durable decline in political power that lasted decades. Nothing is said about the decapitation campaign of black leadership by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Nor does Graeber address the series of urban rebellions in response to police brutality. Direct democracy is a challenging task for organisations operating under totalitarian regimes. Unorganised uprisings were critical for the making of the Civil Right movement. The politics of the street, which challenged the politics of the ballot-box, took two, conjoined forms. Further, nothing is said about the 1992 uprising in Los Angeles, nor does Graeber address the formation of abolitionists organisations such as Critical Resistance. Graeber is surely guilty of a bit of left colour-blindness. So am I; so are many of us. However, black-led and race-centred social movements have histories and strategies that Graeber's brief analysis misses. The police abolition movement is a legacy of these histories and has captured the collective imagination like few others. The abolitionist movement is a black-led and race-centred social movement. The abolition of slavery, the lynch mob, segregation, prisons, police, and other forms of institutionally reinforced racism has been the long, enduring dream of the black radical imagination. Put another way: insofar as race is the central organising feature of U.S. American politics, it is imperative that we recognise how race-centred movements have put racial terror organisations, such as the police, at the centre of their tactics, strategies, and aspirations.

The U.S. state stands at the precipice of a covert civil war. The storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, 2021 involved the performance of seizing power without a corresponding intent to actually claim it or a strategy of what to do with it. Ultimately, the QAnon Shaman outfitted in a clownish headdress and face paint standing atop the empty Senate Chambers was a fitting substitute for the Trump Administration. That police stood by and enabled the storming of the Capitol foretells their passion when they are eventually ordered to crush leftist social movements. The far-right is not opposed to state or police power; they desire state power as a means to employ police power. Police violence is not solely for the benefit of political elites, but the desired end of white nationalists. It is necessary to describe the U.S. American far-right as allegiant to a home-grown form of *police fascism*.²⁸ They brandish their own flags and celebrate their own

²⁸ For those interested in reading more about the "fascism debate" within U.S. American politics, I must shamelessly suggest my article on the subject (Johnson, 2019).

mythic vigilante superheroes. The Thin Blue Line and Punisher skull have become symbols of a fascist political project that defends a license to kill.

The burning down of Minneapolis' 3rd Precinct, on the other hand, was the first glimmer of a *real* proto-revolutionary moment. The George Floyd uprisings were qualitatively different from the urban rebellions of 2014 and 2015 largely because they began with laying siege to a fortified castle of police power. This was not stochastic property destruction, but a targeted action against a singular institution known to terrorise whole communities. Those who gathered in the late days of May 2020 were not interested in seizing state or police power, but in destroying it. They discovered that not all protests are fated to end in beat downs, tear gas, and arrests. Victory, even if ephemeral, lays in the burned wreckage of an unusable base for projecting police terror. The burned husk of the state's repressive apparatus did far more for the powers of imagination than ginormous *papier-mâché* puppets. In that moment, the police abandoned their heroic privilege and meta-human authority while running for their lives. For abolitionists, such as myself, 'it was glorious indeed' (Maher, 2020, p. 1). Police are not just institutions of racial terror; they are active partisans in inhibiting democratic social movements. The juxtaposition of these two events, the storming of the Capitol alongside the burning of the 3rd precinct, portends two alternative futures, one an impossible hope the other a terrifying assurance.

The George Floyd uprisings, in Minneapolis and elsewhere, followed similar anti-police uprisings in Ferguson, in Baltimore, and elsewhere from 2014 to 2015. The Black Lives Matter movement is a black-led but also multiracial movement. The work of building and sustaining multiracial coalitions, however, remains fraught. Strategically, movement success has largely been due to street actions and *uncivil* disobedience. The most explosive moments of these anti-police protests lacked the consensus-process that Graeber fetishises. Non-profit organisations and political leaders, however, have thrived in their efforts to co-opt and pacify the energy which propelled the movement. Direct democracy missing within the grassroots, has resulted in movement capture through indirect command by established institutions.²⁹

The re-emergence of democratic socialism has expanded the terrain for leftist social movements. Bernie Sanders' primary campaigns followed and emulated the Occupy Wall Street movement. The general assemblies of the Occupy encampments were directly inspired by anarchists, such as Graeber. However, their defeat, largely through the police repression, exposed a valuable lesson. The political power of the 1% remains invol-

²⁹ For two representative statements, see Shemon and Arturo (2020) and Soto and Terrell (2021).

nerable without a class of political leadership and a set of public policies aimed at dispossessing them of power. The Bernie Sanders movement was limited because it was based upon the economic populism of a liberal strand of Occupy. The political power of the 1% remains invulnerable so long as police power is overwhelming. The Black Lives Matter network has not pursued an electoral strategy. Democratic mayors have increased funding for police. The policy reforms pursued by the Obama, Trump, and Biden Administrations have sought to strengthen the capacity of U.S. police forces. There is a set of actionable public policies that could diminish the political power of police. Abolition represents an untapped source of antibureaucratic populism. Abolitionists have succeeded in establishing police defunding as a public policy position. Defunding the police is the policy plank of the democratic socialist wing of the abolitionist movement. "Defund the police" effectively distils the strategy and reasonableness of abolitionists; however, it also inadequately translates public anger over state-sanctioned police executions into a budgetary dispute. Without political power and the political will to exercise it, abolitionist imaginaries and the soundness of their public policy proposals remain hollow. Police have been empowered in the wake of uprisings against them. This is not due to public opinion, but the intransigence of liberal political leaders. The mystery of the Democratic Party's allegiance to a class of armed bureaucrats that despise and oppose them is due to the structural necessity of police for projecting state power. Police are partisans in a covert war against society. Police maintain the incommensurate authoritarianism of states, spanning the breadth of the entire world, lording over and dominating society, through means of hi-tech violence, including guns and bullets, body armour and teargas, prisons and borders, totalising surveillance, through bureaucratic rule, in concert with talking heads and courts of law, in defence of a capitalist class immersed in institutionalised raiding and extortion. There is no democracy with a political evil so profuse.

I am an abolition pessimist. Through public policies and/or insurrectionary fervour, I desire a world without police authoritarianism. Despite these dreams of utopia, our once and future reality is assuredly dystopian. A world without police is less probable than the continued hoarding of finite resources, ecological collapse, political dysfunction, maintained by ever-increasing and sophisticated forms of police violence and terror. Abolitionist organiser Mariame Kaba (2021) has popularised the adage: 'hope is a discipline' (p. 26). My pessimism should not be mistaken for defeatism. Our chosen ideologies are not contingent upon the realisation of our loftiest ends. Rather, it is an honest accounting, but also one based upon an assumption that abandoning hope is the first step to bringing about a real state of emergency. Commonsense folk optimism is one

cause of widespread political apathy. We have been disciplined into a hope without promise. Abolitionist Andrew Dilts proclaims that justice is conditioned on its failure (Dilts, 2017). So too, abolition is premised on its assured failing. Mark Neocleous, one of the most prominent critical theorists of police, describes police (quoting W. P. Prentice) as ‘original, absolute, and *indefeasible* [my emphasis]’ (2021, p. 21). Neocleous is another cryptic abolitionist, someone of impeccable radical bona fides but who does not adopt the language of abolition.³⁰ Abolitionists would do well to heed his warning: *police are indefeasible*, meaning their power cannot be annulled. A peculiar nature of police power is its automatic immunity to eradication. We are not free to renegotiate or radically transform our heavily policed societies. The abolition of police remains impossible via liberal democratic means. Liberal democratic states retain police as background support, a recourse to a tremendous, terrifying power in the final instance. As Stuart Hall and his Birmingham School comrades admitted: ‘The history of radical politics... is the history of missed conjunctures’ (1978, p. 250). If Hall et al. (1978) once thought that ‘there is light at the end of the tunnel—but not much; and it is far off’ (p. 316), the window of opportunity for radical social change has breached an irreversible threshold. The empty promises of the future are foretold in the repeated failures of the past. Our collective dreams for emancipation have always been messianic, a horizon that never arrives. Hope dies last. It is not possible to shed the tyranny of police terror through thought alone. Abolitionist hypotheticals, therefore, have a limited material force. Imagined futures are the last refuge for those who cannot reason with a world gone mad. The imaginative wall that Graeber, and so many others, have sought to overcome and tear down is a mystical revolutionary fantasy. There are real walls. They have names and addresses. They house armaments and prisoners. It requires no magic to make them crumble and wither away. We know their melting point because we have burned them down before and will do so again.

Acknowledgements

This article is dedicated to You Know Who. May his mischievous giggle continue to echo.

³⁰ See Brucato 2020 for a thorough explanation why.

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Povzetek

Esej Davida Graeberja O fenomenologiji velikanskih lutk: razbita okna, namišljeni kozarci z urinom in kozmološka vloga policije v ameriški kulturi (2007) je prelomen, a premalo cenjen esej, ki ponovno ocenjuje teorije policije. Osrednje vprašanje, ki animira Graeberjev "interpretativni" esej, je: zakaj policisti sovražijo aktivistične lutkarje? Graeberjev "tanek" odgovor je, da je policija oblika strukturnega nasilja in da njihova moč izhaja iz njihovega kozmološkega ali namišljene-ga statusa. Policija je ena osrednjih tem, ki animira Graeberjevo delo od začetka njegove kariere do konca. Kot antropolog se vedno znova osredotoča na kraje, ki nimajo formalnih policijskih institucij ali ohranjajo policijske sile, ki so popolnoma tuje sodobni občutljivosti. Ta nenavadna mesta so animus za njegovo preobliko-

vanje tradicionalnih konceptov politične teorije: suverenosti, hierarhije in države. Graeberjevo kasnejše delo, ki napada birokracijo in nesmiselno delo, nadaljuje njegovo kritično razlago policije. Nemogoče je razumeti celotni pomen Graeberjevega ustvarjanja, ne da bi razumeli, kaj ima povedati o policiji. Najpomembneje je, da je tisto, kar ima Graeber povedati o policiji, povsem izvirna interpretacija, ki bi morala biti pomembna za tiste, ki preučujejo policijo, in za družbena gibanja, ki želijo zmanjšati njeno politično moč. Nekatera Graeberjeva opažanja predstavljajo precejšnje izzive ukinitvi policije, medtem ko druge nudijo podporne teze, ki bi lahko pomagale našemu boju proti policijski avtoritarnosti. V nasprotju z Graeberjem ocenjujem, da zgolj nerazumnost policije ne bo dovolj za odpravo policije.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: birokracija, demokratična teorija, politična antropologija, odprava policije, družbena gibanja, suverenost, David Graeber

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