

Policing the City: Violence, Visibility and the Law

Conference Description

The practice of policing in most of the world is premised on racial and ethnic profiling. Examples are myriad: ‘hot spot’ policing privileges deployment to ‘unsafe’ urban spaces inhabited by racial and ethnic minorities; everyday policing is *proactive*, quota oriented, stop-and-frisk empowered; Compstat statistical treatments of police districts rest upon a relative need for crime to justify budgets; police unions resist any sniff of staffing decreases; in many countries the dominance of plea bargains eliminates the burden of proof; civil asset forfeiture targets drug related assets under a War on Drugs logic; some governments have contractual obligations to maintain the occupancy rates of private prisons. The list of such policing ‘solutions’ goes on, circulating globally, packaged as ‘best practice’ and ‘efficiency’. To the more privileged majority populations, such practices are largely invisible, assumed important and rarely suffered. To those targeted by such policing, resistance –in the form of protest, legal defense and demands for police oversight - is deeply constrained by lack of resources and legitimate organization.

In the last few years, social media and other digital media have lent a new visibility to racialized police practices and police in some parts of the world, prompting a new wave of mobilizations like *Black Lives Matter* across America. The ubiquity of CCTV, cell phones and, increasingly, dash cams and body cams are inadvertently exposing larger social and political systems of institutionalized violence and systemic oppression. This is not only happening in the United States, but also in São Paulo’s *periferia*, in Paris’ *banlieues*, Johannesburg’s townships and Medellín’s *comunas*, where the shooting of young, black or ethnic minority men by police is otherwise assumed to be a mundane fact of policing, existing in a state of relative invisibility, well below the radar of public debate.

The world is increasingly connected in a new global system that both regulates the visibility of violence and the new ‘police’, guardians of systemic forms of violence. Take one example: In São Paulo, Brazil, police kill citizens at a rate of 2.4 per day. Recently, some groups of police have started to upload videos of their own violence to new media. Around the same time, technology consultants in Silicon Valley draft a document outlining the ‘community guidelines’ of user and client social media platforms. This document states what content can remain, and what must be ‘moderated’. Days later, in an office building in Manila, Philippines, a third-party worker views the videos of São Paulo’s police, and, using the consultant’s document, deletes the content permanently.

This new visibility has prompted new demands for checks and balances with regard to policing. Body worn cameras, ‘citizen journalism’ and the proliferation of ‘crowd sourced’ footage mean that scrutiny of police practices across the world is a broader public concern than just a few years ago when it was mainly the target of human rights organizations. This new scrutiny is meaningful, generative, and deeply resented by law enforcement agencies. In 2015, the Director of the FBI lamented that the ‘Ferguson effect’ made ‘good’ police work very difficult.

New media ‘transparency’ has made visible a pattern of routine violence against poorer citizens and minority groups that for many decades has been a foundational part of how governments and law enforcement function outside the purview of press coverage and ‘civil’ public debates. Such methods of ‘tough’ policing are largely invisible in the wider public and continue to enjoy substantial support from majority populations in many parts of the world. In the midst of recent public controversies about racially biased policing in the United States and Brazil, surveys show that a majority of white and middle class citizens continue to have strong faith in the police force. Large numbers of white Frenchmen support the harsh methods of policing and surveillance that have been administered in the *banlieues* for decades. The majority of the India’s fast growing Hindu middle class is supportive of the systematic targeting and over-incarceration of lower caste and Muslim males by the notoriously brutal Indian police.

These basic questions of how the police can ‘enforce order’, as Didier Fassin calls it, how the police can be held accountable, and should adhere to ideals of transparency, visibility and equality cut to the very heart of what constitutes a legitimate state. The very practice of policing will always reveal deeply fraught perceptions of a society’s tacit ‘social contract’: who is a true citizen? Who can be killed? Who deserves protection? Who can be punished, and how? Whose law is being enforced?

This conference tries to address current questions of policing, visibility and legality, as well as and the underlying fundamental sociological correlates, from a global and comparative perspective. Our ambition is to bring together scholars who have studied policing practices in the Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe with scholars who study and engage racialized policing and incarceration in North America. Our ambition is to bring together perspectives that draw on ethnographic evidence, legal studies, statistics and critical analysis of race and ethnicity in an intense global conversation on policing, visibility and law over two days at Stanford University.

The conference is organized by *Urban Beyond Measure*, a research initiative that since 2013 has promoted scholarly conversation on how a deep understanding of the lived realities and historical trajectories of burgeoning mega cities in the Global South can help us re-conceptualize urban theory and engage with urban experiences in the 21st century.

Urban Beyond Measure is directed by James Ferguson, Sylvia Yanagisako and Thomas Blom Hansen.

The conference organizer is Graham Denyer Willis, University Lecturer in Development Studies and Latin American Studies and the University of Cambridge. Graham is a Visiting Scholar at the department of Anthropology at Stanford University in the Winter and Spring of 2017. The conference coordinator is Firat Bozcali, who is writing his dissertation on smugglers in Kurdistan in the Department of Anthropology at Stanford.

Conference Program

Wednesday, March 29, 2017

9:00a – 9:15a	Opening Remarks
9:15a – 10:30a	A Keynote speech by Professor Cheryl Harris, UCLA
10:30a – 10:45a	Coffee Break
10:45a – 11:45a	1 st Panel: Policing and Messages of Control “Police Action and Collective Violence: In Support of Hannah Arendt’s Skepticism about the Scapegoat” Jonny Steinberg, Oxford University “Kin, Police, and Journalists: Querying the Policing Function through Sexual Assault News Coverage in India” Amrita Ibrahim, Georgetown University
11:45a – 1:00p	Lunch
1:00p – 3:15p	2 nd Panel: Spheres of Endurance ““The system in American isn’t interested in assisting people of color’: How repeated institutional failures shape beliefs about the criminal justice system among heavily policed groups” Megan Comfort, RTI International “The Black Box of Police Torture” Laurence Ralph, Harvard University “Security Agents as Citizen Subjects: Rights of Police in India and Beyond” Beatrice Jauregui, University of Toronto <i>Chair/Discussant:</i> Kevin Karpiak, Eastern Michigan University
3:15p – 3:30p	Coffee Break
3:30p – 5:00p	3 rd Panel: Global Diffusions, Popular Practices “Policing as Pacification: Counterinsurgent Order-Making in the Marvelous City” Markus-Michael Müller, Freie Universität Berlin “Hyper visibility and the visibility of recognition” Julia Hornberger (Wits University, South Africa)

Thursday, March 30, 2017

9:00a – 10:15a	A Keynote Speech by Didier Fassin, Princeton Institute
10:15a – 10:30a	Coffee Break
10:30a – 11:30a	1 st Panel: Spheres of Distinction “To Police and be Policed: Multiple Perspectives on Racialized Law Enforcement in a Diverse and Changing City” Akwasi Owusu-Bempah University of Toronto “Ritual Propriety and Legitimate Force: Policing, Violence, and Sovereignty in the Republic of China on Taiwan” Jeff Martin, University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign
11:30a – 12:45p	Lunch
12:45p – 3:00p	2 nd Panel: Policing, Abandonment and the Emergent “Content Moderation and the ‘Command Centre’ in Technological Capitalism” Graham Denyer Willis, Cambridge University “From Agorism to Opsec: Dark Web Markets’ Shifting Relationship to the State” Robert W. Gehl, The University of Utah
3:00p – 3:15p	Coffee Break
3:15p – 4:45p	3 rd Panel: Policing and the Political Afterlife “Refusing to be governed: State delinquency, police terror and the politics of un-governmentality in an afrocolombian shantytown” Jaime Amparo Alves, City University of New York

The conference meetings will be held at Stanford Humanities Center and open to public

