

REVIEW ESSAY

Police Work, Unbounded

Kirsten Weld
Harvard University

Stuart Schrader, *Badges Without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019).

Micol Seigel, *Violence Work: State Power and the Limits of Police* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

To scholars of labor and working-class history, police pose a problem—though, one less grave than the problem they pose to contemporary life in the United States, where roughly 10 percent of all homicide victims, and fully one-third of all people killed by strangers, die at police hands.¹ How should police be categorized, and are they worthy subjects for the field? They are workers, of course, but they are also front-line agents of state repression and shock troops for capital. They remain robustly unionized, at least by US standards, but their unions are regressive and politically conservative, more concerned with shielding cops from accountability than with building solidarity. As individuals, many hail from working-class communities of color, but as a social and political category, their effect is to rationalize, reproduce, and fortify axes of racial and class difference. Their labor power is undoubtedly appropriated to produce surplus value, but is the exploitation they suffer superseded—or, to use a newly vexed word, “trumped”—by the work they do as exploiters?

Recent books by Stuart Schrader and Micol Seigel transcend this problem, shaking us loose from binary thinking about the work of policing—and usefully so, because, as Seigel points out, misleading binaries are key to both police self-presentation and police legitimacy. A “trio of mythic ideas” (13) characterizes general US understandings of police: the notion that police are civilian, not military; that they are public or state agents, rather than private or market agents; and, finally, that they are local, rather than national or international. Schrader and Seigel demolish these narratives, demonstrating the interpenetration of police’s civilian and military elements, the promiscuity with which they

International Labor and Working-Class History

No. 97, Spring 2020, pp. 197–201

© International Labor and Working-Class History, Inc., 2020

doi:10.1017/S0147547920000010

straddle public/private divides, and their persistent engagement with the domestic and the foreign as, in Schrader's words, "a unified field of vision" (258). Their insights about policing's true nature, which in both books are archivally grounded by detailed examinations of the Cold War-era foreign police training outfit known as the Office of Public Safety (OPS), lead them to similarly bold arguments about capitalism and the state. After all, as David Bayley's classic formulation has it, "the police are to the government as the edge is to the knife."²

Noting that "even people who decry police abuses rarely interrogate the idea of police itself" (5), Seigel begins her book by theorizing the sprawling and diverse labors of police as "violence work." She argues that to focus unduly on homicides committed by uniformed police officers, as the opening paragraph of this review did, is to miss the point. Instead, she analyzes police power as a juridical principle, observing that its fundamental malleability and lack of clear definition has allowed it to colonize a far wider array of social and political functions than is typically recognized—and that most of these functions do not, in fact, involve acts of spectacular brutality, even though policing is just as lethal as it has ever been, if not more so. Nor do they usually have much to do with "crime," whether actual or imagined. Instead, with an eye to classic interventions by thinkers like Stuart Hall and Egon Bittner, the essence of police power for Seigel is its *potential* for violence in the service of capital, which usually does not need to be made manifest to inspire fear and obedience, and upon which uniformed police hold no monopoly. Violence workers, then, are any and all those who "represent and distribute state violence" (11), whether prison guards, private security forces, militaries, or even members of mobs or paramilitaries whose activities are unofficially endorsed from above. Violence work, in spilling forth from the ideological containers meant to hold it, reveals how the state spills forth from its own ideological containers, its supposed separation from the market a fiction so untenable that Seigel introduces the concept of the "state-market" to describe it.

The story of policing, then, is ultimately a story about capitalism, and about the varied and sustained kinds of labor required to sustain it. Central among those for Seigel and Schrader is the labor of race-making, because race—which for the authors is *produced* by the violence work of police rather than being a prior condition that provokes it—is so essential to the operation of the state-market under racial capitalism. This was particularly true during the Cold War, in which the interlocking challenges of global decolonization, communist insurgency, and domestic urban unrest spurred the US government to find new ways to "shape social subjects and make impossible the intricacies of rebellion" (Schrader, 270). While the postwar order, both globally and within the United States, was supposed to be newly color-blind, sharp and enduring socio-economic inequalities gave the lie to liberal bromides about rights and prosperity for all. "Crime" and "subversion" were the labels given to the effects of these inequalities, and those labels became, as Schrader writes, "the political vocabulary and governing grammar through which unequal property

relations within, and grafted upon, a matrix of racial difference would be understood" (39). "Security" was a commodity whose scarcity was manufactured by violence workers, part of a project to pacify a global landscape in which rapid political realignments threatened US dominance.

Schrader and Seigel root their theoretical explorations of police power in the long and surprising history of OPS, the foreign police training agency founded by the Kennedy Administration in 1962 and housed in the United States Agency for International Development. Based on the postwar period's twinned reigning logics of containment and modernization, the idea was that police would serve as the "first line of defense" against crime and subversion, whether in Saigon or in St. Louis. US cops, many of them hailing from Midwestern municipalities like Kansas City or Wichita, assumed new roles as trainers of police forces in countries like Vietnam, Colombia, South Korea, Guatemala, and Indonesia. As Schrader puts it, "As the United States became the global policeman, it relied on these global policemen." (53) For many of those cops, OPS work was not their first international experience. A significant number were veterans of the US occupations of Japan, Germany, and Korea in the aftermath of the Second World War, and those who went on to serve as the architects of US foreign police aid, like Robert W. Komer and Byron Engle, derived key lessons from those ventures: that "professionalization" was essential to securing reliable internal containment from local partners; that decentralization of police organizations would assure the nimbleness and agility required to pre-empt subversion; and that, above all, policing was the heart of counterinsurgency.

The OPS was shuttered by Congress in 1974, a response to public outcry over the torture employed by OPS partners in places like Brazil and South Vietnam, but the initiative's powerful impact, both authors show, belied its relatively short official shelf-life. OPS officials trained over a million police officers in more than fifty countries, not only in technical skills like ballistics and fingerprinting and record-keeping but also in the philosophy and practice of US national security doctrine. They promulgated the notion of counterinsurgency as fundamentally proleptic, which is to say, that the struggle against unrest could and should antedate any actual eruption of unrest, and that even comparatively mild expressions of discontent with the US-friendly status quo had to be viewed as points along a dangerous slippery slope to outright rebellion, and thus crushed accordingly. They built close working relationships with conservative sectors across a host of national contexts, which served them well in their future violence work, which Seigel documents: as private security guards for oil pipelines in Alaska; as Drug Enforcement Agency operatives; as contractors for the Saudi regime, whose work implementing measures seeded by OPS in its waning days represented a clever workaround of Congressional restrictions on continued formal police aid; as pedagogues in the growing field of police training and education, which included the development and institutionalization of criminology. And they enshrined the paradoxical, counterproductive idea that security and pacification were necessary preconditions for development, a concept

used by reactionary regimes the world over to eradicate noncompliance in ways that often radicalized their opposition—showing, as Schrader writes, how “despotic power undermines its goal” (165).

Crucially and relatedly, OPS, both during its heyday and after its demise, had a host of ramifications at home for the War on Crime and the carceral regime it produced, many of which remain open wounds in the United States today. The OPS served as a model for the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), created in 1968 to federally fund and consolidate law enforcement efforts in response to urban uprisings across the country. That LEAA money went primarily to police in its first decade, a funding stream that over time gradually directed larger and larger percentages of its block grants to courts and corrections as well, “jump-started mass incarceration” (Schrader, 114). New strategies for police professionalization developed abroad as part of (unsuccessful) efforts to reduce policing’s lethality, namely the use of tear gas and of “riot control” in the form of SWAT teams, proved just as useful at dispersing black protestors in Harlem and Detroit as they had in forcing guerilla fighters out of underground tunnels in South Vietnam—and in justifying the use of state violence in an ever-broadening range of situations. Even if the language of “counterinsurgency” still tended to refer to contexts outside the United States, the practices and protocols of counterinsurgent knowledge found ample and escalating use by police patrolling US streets as the Cold War wore on, outlasting the conjuncture that had originally produced them. The counterinsurgent notion of preventive, discretionary policing is easily recognized in the “broken windows” approach of the 1980s and 1990s, which refigured racialization through the pseudoscientific calculus of risk and threat potential. And probably the most important yield of police professionalization efforts—the fortification of police power by helping turn cops into a self-consciously autonomous political force with access both to generous federal subventions and to solid collective bargaining agreements—has caused violence work to proliferate, sold to a frightened public desirous of access to security-as-commodity and convinced that police power, whether performed by uniformed beat cops or any of the other multifarious bodies (ICE, DHS, Border Patrol, etcetera) today performing violence work, is the lever most capable of guaranteeing and directing its supply.

For all the consonance of the books’ major arguments, which would make them a wonderful pair in any teaching context, it is worth highlighting the distinctive contributions of each. *Badges Without Borders* is the definitive history of the relationship between empire, counterinsurgency, and policing in the modern United States. It is a triumph of exhaustive research, meticulous analysis, and sobering conclusions, using the recent past to demonstrate that calls for police reform, or nostalgic appeals to a postwar moment of comparative social peace, must reckon with this history, as well as with the parochialism of using only the continental United States as its field of inquiry. Of the “trio of mythic ideas” invoked by Seigel, Schrader is most closely concerned with the third: the shibboleth that police are local, rather than national or international.

He suggests implicitly—or not so implicitly, writing that “any assessment of the present’s relationship to the past must hold foreign and domestic in a single frame, as indissolubly linked, as co-constituted” (272)—that this conceptualization could and should be applied to other topics of research in the twentieth-century history of the United States.

In turn, *Violence Work* is a distinguished piece of political theory, concerned both with violence work’s concrete impact on the development of the US state-market and also with its more intimate, affective implications. Using the life trajectories of individual ex-OPS employees as her narrative through-line, Seigel builds upon insights from Stuart Hall and others about the profound dependency of the “private”—capital, markets, the security industry—upon the resources and authority of the “public,” so much so as to make the two spheres “in practice and in essence inextricable” (75). Ex-OPS employees illustrated this false divide so clearly, she shows, in their easy hopscotching between public and private violence, sustained always by federal monies and put to use for convergent purposes. But they were not alone in doing so; instead, violence workers “have blurred military and civilian boundaries throughout U.S. history” (120). As such, Seigel invites a reconsideration of other modes of violence work—vigilantism, lynchings, and Indian removal, to name only a few US-specific examples—using the theoretical tools her book provides. Noting that “prisons can be built and laws passed, but without the lever of police, no bodies will find themselves in cages” (185), Seigel makes indispensable contributions to the study of the carceral state, insisting convincingly that we must grasp the “vast and banal terror” (186) of police power if we are to starve state violence of the legitimacy upon which it relies.

Badges Without Borders and *Violence Work* coincide, again, in their closing admonitions; both of these books about policing conclude by urging their readers to think beyond the police. Liberal calls for police reform or demilitarization or a reduction in police brutality, the authors argue, miss the forest for the trees—not least because it was liberals who presided over much of the past half-century’s dramatic expansion in police power. Instead, Schrader and Seigel argue, what we must continually work to undermine is this: the legitimacy of state-market violence, in all its guises and forms. It is our whole contemporary order of capitalism and empire and white supremacy, historically produced and maintained by the violence work of police, that books like these help us grasp—and imagine a future beyond.

NOTES

1. Patrick Ball, “Violence in Blue: Police Homicides in the United States,” *Granta* 134 online edition (Winter 2016), accessible at <https://granta.com/violence-in-blue/>.

2. David Bayley, *Patterns of Policing: A Comparative International Analysis* (New Brunswick, NJ: 1985), 189.