
WE PROTECT YOU

FROM YOURSELVES

The Politics of Policing



Democracia & Felix Trautmann (ed.)

BRUMARIA

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Title

“We Protect You From Yourself”

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Design and layout

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Publisher

Brumaria.
Santa Isabel, 28. 28012 Madrid
Spain.
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Collection

Hors dehors, n° 3.

Printer

Estilo Estigraf S.L.

This edition

September 2018.

ISBN: 978-84-949247-3-6

DEP. LEG.: M-29583-2018

a/political

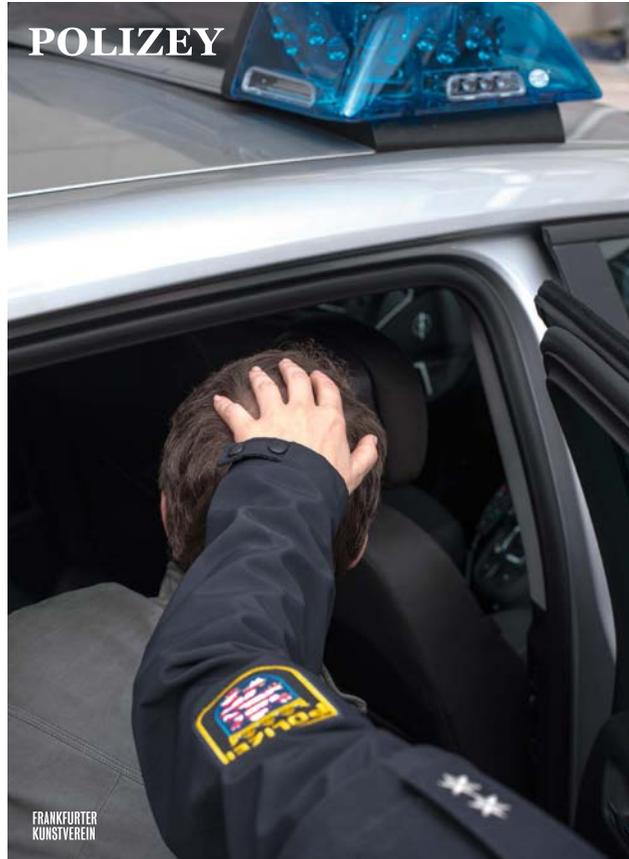
Cover

SILENCE, 2018
Democracia.
Poster edition.
Photo credits:
Gerardo Arpide Fito
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Poster of the lecture series “Polizey”, Frankfurter Kunstverein 2013.
Photo by Philipp Grünewald and Felix Trautmann.

“We protect you from yourselves”

The Politics of Policing

Introduction by *Democracia & Felix Trautmann*

Order never just is. It is always already confronted with the uncertainty of its reproduction. Preserving a political order and enforcing its constituting norms always seems to require an organisation that can be relied upon—just in case. This organisation is ‘the police’. In its modern appearance it has gained an extraordinary role and yet unquestioned existence in our every day lives. But how did it come into being? How did we come to live with it? What and whom does it really protect? From what exactly?

To question not only instances of police violence, but the very existence and function of the police may sound all too radical. After all, the police enforces the law and ensures that the ‘social contract’ is kept intact. The people whom the police protects assigned it the role of a legitimate force of order. But as can be witnessed every day, the people and the police are in constant conflict. While we all grow up with the police and many of us, as children, wanted to be the police, we remain ambivalent about its actions. Appreciated for their heavy duty and righteousness by many, the police is detested by others, and sometimes despised especially by those who benefit from its services the most. We feel the right to hate the police, especially due to the violence it exerts, and still we never envy it for the violence and social contempt it has to deal with. Then again, at times, we feel a relief to be policed in spite of everything. To protect and to be protected evokes intense political emotions, both within and against the police.

“We protect you from yourselves” is an attempt to understand the policing of social order and to find out what is at stake in today’s political situation. The intimate and historically close relation of order and police is the subject of this book. Its contributions share a critical interest in this relation. Most of them have evolved from an experimental project in the summer of 2013. Under the title *Powerlessness, a Situation*, the Frankfurter Kunstverein in Germany was the site of an exhibition curated by Holger Kube Ventura. It consisted of a display of works by the artists’ duo Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor as well as the artist collective Democracia. In parallel to the exhibition, Felix Trautmann organised an accompanying series of events on the subject of police, in which performing artists, academics and political activists took part. All elements of this project introduced theoretical and aesthetic positions in which the potential of powerlessness is considered as a driving force behind situationist forms of artistic and political practices. The present publication documents the art works by Democracia and the theoretical contributions on the subject of police.

The point of departure of all contributions is to challenge our understanding of the police by not taking its existence and rationality for granted. The historical circumstances of its creation that are closely associated with the change of political regimes, will also be taken into consideration. The old German notion of *‘Polizey’* can here serve as a leitmotif. With the emergence of modern polities since the late 15th century, *Polizey* mainly referred to the notion of order itself. It therefore allows to broaden the perspective on the political realm of policing today. As the relation of police and order remains an integral part of modern democratic politics, the unsettling role of the police is yet to be resolved. What prevents us even from the thought of a society emancipated from policing with its inherent repression and violence?

The role of the police in democratic as well as in authoritarian state politics have proven that the police force never only protects our lives and averts dangers. It enters the public, sometimes only in order to clear the streets. The fact that the realm of today’s police ever expands, due to new technologies, practical means and that it intervenes in new ways into the private sphere, echoes the old and legally unbound police. Even today, police activities extend far beyond the physical presence of uniformed officers and include less visible, sometimes invisible, manoeuvres as well as new media, aesthetic and even aestheticized strategies. Although one may not regard this as a relapse into the old logic of policing within the pre-modern authoritarian state, it nevertheless reveals a troubling truth about police work today.

Art and artistic practices can be one way of such a revealing. The forceful visibility of the police that we are confronted with in public every day as well as its invisible work that we may encounter can themselves be reflected aesthetically. From the seemingly friendly cop on the beat to the fierce appearance of the riot policeman we are confronted with rather strong images of what the police is and in what ways it calls for order. Questioning this understanding, the works of Democracia critically traverse the logic of these forms of appearance. This offers a way to reflect the habitual consumption of these images, not the least in mass media, in which we are presented indistinctly with the state's brutality as well as its firmness in the defence of constitutional norms. As opposed to this ambivalent image, Democracia propose an image in which the police present their own unexpressed ideology. Especially through the emergence of generalised dissent from representation in liberal democracies and a reactivation of the workers' struggle in face of the austerity measures dictated by the European Union, the police was brought back into the collective imagination as a symbol of repression. The aestheticized close-up of policemen can stir up the idea of the police force as an agency without individuals.

The series of texts in this book will engage with the question of how exactly and how lawfully the police works, and on the other hand how disproportionately, or even excessively, it makes use of its force and authority. Endowed with the state's monopoly on legitimate use of force, the police remains implicitly involved with all kinds of political practices. In order to develop a critical approach towards it one also needs to consider the police's internal structure and forms of organisation. After all, policing is work. It comes as no surprise that the vast majority of policemen are members of the working class, and thus have a social background with its own set of conflicts (Luis Navarro). Obviously this means that policemen have to be recruited, trained and motivated (Alf Lüdtkke), and can themselves become subjected by new logics of management (Kendra Briken).

But how do we understand the police without being part of it? Are we ever able to confront the police without at the same time being policed? One of the most insightful and highly challenging approaches to police has been achieved through anthropology and ethnography. Two contributions of this publication are the re-

sult of ethnographic studies that pursue the question of policing under conditions of social inequality (Didier Fassin) and of racism (Vanessa Thompson). Both texts force us to reconsider our critique of police violence with regard to those who are most often and severely confronted with it.

To understand the police as a potentially violent force, in spite of its authorisation by the state, reveals how paradoxically violence is itself inscribed in its legitimisation. Situated, sometimes indistinguishably, between force and violence, a now classical theory of the police develops this paradox through a critique of its physical as well as administrative violence. This is subject of three contributions that encounter the bio-political and aesthetic aspects of police (Francesca Raimondi), the contingency and proportionality of the use of violence (Fabien Jobard), as well as the philosophical approaches to its critique (Daniel Loick).

In this sense, not only the obvious violence of police action should be addressed. Policing takes place long before, often unnoticed, and sometimes while we expect it the least. The social and socialising role of police within political and educational institutions becomes a relevant matter at the beginning of modern politics. The transformation of *Polizey* into today's police was the subject of a play conceived but never finished by the German poet and playwright Friedrich Schiller. It proves to be of a remarkable foresight for the work of police under today's conditions of a society of control (Anja Lemke). The logic of theatricality and spectacle remains vivid in the modern image or phantasmagoria of police. It can be traced back to the question of authority and order itself (Daniel Villegas). It then becomes clear how our everyday lives, customs and actions have always already been the subject of policing and its forms of knowledge and surveillance. The police, as many of the collected texts show, is always already there—with us. Ultimately, this means that to be is to be policed (Felix Trautmann).

But who are we? How do we protect ourselves from the violent, discriminating, and depoliticising effects of the police? And, *who protects us from ourselves?* The present volume of art works and texts is an invitation to consider the everlasting indeterminacy and contingency of order as well as the role of the police within

it. After all, the police not only claims to protect us from ourselves but, somehow unwillingly, also lets us gain insight into who ‘we’ are. The police itself can provoke the thought of a political practice that allows us to become who we want to be.

We, the editors, would like to thank everyone who contributed to this publication for making it possible. Besides the contributing authors of the texts we thank Ann Marie Utratel and Guy James of Guerrilla Translation, Juan García-Berdoy, Claudia Lanza and and Sebastián Tobón Velásquez for translating and proof reading all the texts. We are especially indebted to Holger Kube Ventura who initiated the project which was the point of departure for this book.

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