

Worlds without Police

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As we write in summer 2019, we watch Hong Kong's police in riot gear launch tear gas, water cannons, and batons against democracy activists contesting China's intrusions on the city's semi-independent status and against the police brutality they have endured. With the rise of Brazil's far-right president Jair Bolsonaro, and his associate Wilson Witzel as governor of Rio de Janeiro, we are witnessing the dramatic rise and reemergence of police killings of Rio's citizens, concentrated in the urban communities inhabited largely by poor Black and Brown people. In the United States, we have just passed the fifth anniversary of Michael Brown's death and the acquittal of his murderer, Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson. We have also watched as the New York City police department finally fired Daniel Pantaleo, five years after he choked to death Eric Garner, whose last words, "I can't breathe," have become a clarion call against police brutality against Black people in the United States. In these five years, Erica Garner, driven by her father's murder to activism against unjust policing practices, died prematurely at age twenty-seven. She spoke publicly about her struggles with the stress of her activism; "The system," she said, "it beats you down."¹ Though not an activist, Ramsey Orta, who recorded Eric Garner's murder, has confronted persistent police harassment ever since and now faces sixty years in prison on drug and gun charges.² As with all instances of police violence, the effects of Garner's murder have radiated through communities far beyond the first victim.

Simply realizing the harm that violent and discriminatory policing causes does not lead automatically to a truly critical, or radical, understanding of what

can be done to address that harm. Yet radical ideas are effervescing. Incidents of lethal police violence against Black Americans launched Black Lives Matter in 2013, a movement now with global reach that mobilizes for a complete transformation of society—so complete that police would not just end their brutality, but would not be needed at all. The understanding that police are part of the problem and not the solution to endemic insecurity, social conflict, mistrust, and despair within communities has led people in disparate parts of the world to focus their activism on the need to reappropriate public resources from police to other services like education, health care, and affordable housing.³ Social scientists such as Naomi Murakawa and Alex Vitale have likewise argued that the problem is not militarization or excessive violence but rather the police force itself. The liberal focus on better training, accountability, and the purging of bad apples fails to move us any closer to a just society, because reforms, in Vitale's words, "leave intact the basic institutional functions of the police, which have never really been about public safety or crime control."⁴ Thinking about worlds without police helps us, to quote Vitale again, to "move beyond the false choice of living with widespread disorder or relying on police to be the enforcers of civility."⁵

Yet to many people, this idea that any society, and particularly one in our contemporary age, could function without police seems preposterous, inconceivable, like something to be relegated to the fictional realms of utopian science fiction or fairy tale pasts. The idea that police are essential to a functioning social order has become so embedded in our thinking that we fail to connect this belief to the fact that police forces often fail to reduce harm or foster social peace while in fact inflicting violent, even lethal, harm that ripples through and disrupts entire communities.

This issue's focus on "policing, justice, and the radical imagination" is motivated by urgent, contemporary concerns over police and by our conviction that history provides an insightful vantage from which to react to them. The modern, institutionalized police force, after all, is a recent development. To trace the global emergence of police throughout all time would be impossible here, but it is important to note that while police forces in the modern sense existed nowhere in the world until the nineteenth century, societies in all ages have tasked some individuals with the maintenance of order at a local level. Nobles and monarchs in ancient Egypt had private guards. Town residents in medieval and early modern Europe took turns as watchmen, sometimes as part of a rotating labor draft. Town walls contained the flow of people in and out of communities, and sentinels served to surveil them to look out for danger. Or we might see protopolice in the soldiers who took part in military occupations of cities in emergent situations like wars, invasions, and natural disasters, or the privatized slave patrols that later came under government control. The early state surveillance and punishment complex was always a public-private partnership, where citizens made "arrests" and fed and clothed prisoners,

and where private heads of household could contract agents of the state to punish their unruly dependents. Not until the nineteenth century did public security workers who bore the recognizable characteristics of modern police emerge: uniformed, quasi- or paramilitary forces employed by the state and empowered to use coercive force.

Police forces quickly became entrenched in the way the state functioned and in people's social lives and relationships. From the early nineteenth century on, the modern state was undergirded by the assumption that it could not exist without the police, because the disparate forms of violence meted out by individuals and communities needed to be concentrated in the hands of the state to protect private property. In tandem with the rise of police forces, then, we can also trace the development of the idea that institutionalized police forces are natural and organic parts of society.

In 1929, for instance, Brazil had only had a professional police force for just over a century. Yet in a book published in that year dedicated to the military police of the state of Rio de Janeiro, the author depicts the police as a timeless and organic part of the social body. He remarks, "There is no interest that more closely touches the individual and society than the prevention and the repression of crime. The police thus take responsibility for guaranteeing the lives and the security of property, thereby having a bio-social foundation." Police officers, he writes, are like antibodies that attack pathogens in the bloodstream. "The State, a complex entity, thus maintains the police to defend the social organism from an invasion of germs and parasites that are pernicious to the collective life of society."⁶ The historian's task is to reconstruct not only the institutional development and social formation of police forces but also to denaturalize the prevalent idea that modern governance and police go hand in hand, and that there is no way to extricate one from the other.

For insight into worlds beyond police, and into the historical process that made it so hard to imagine these worlds, we need not return to the premodern age. As the works in this issue make clear, even studies of places and times during the age of professionalized policing have uncovered pockets, moments, and interstices—spaces without, alongside, or despite formal law enforcement institutions. Examples abound; stories illustrating the range of possibilities of worlds without police, from the radical to the reactionary, have entered our modern folklore: citizens taking over directing traffic during the famous blackout in the summer of 1977 in New York City; or the citizens of Kwangju, South Korea, pushing the police and military forces to the outskirts of the city to have an extraordinary five days of self-rule in May 1980, before those forces returned to violently level the citizens' uprising against the dictatorship.

What if we attempted to collect these case studies systematically, putting scholars of various disciplinary stripes in dialogue with activists to ponder these

questions together? This issue draws on a range of available resources and methods, including ethnography, political and legal analysis, social and cultural history, art history, literary criticism, and critical inquiry and visual culture by activists organizing to protect people from police violence and, ultimately, to dismantle state policing institutions. In the limited space between the two covers of this issue, we could only include a small—but, we hope, compelling—sampling of the ways communities have pursued public safety and social peace through a variety of means apart from formal policing institutions. The contributions here remind us of the powerful truth at the heart of the study of history: we need to historicize to denaturalize—to comprehend how features of our world taken for granted as necessary elements of a complex modern society emerged out of a historical process.

Envisioning a world without police requires a radical imagination, but contemporary organizers are not the first to attempt such a thorough overturning of social, political, and economic structures. Indeed, by invoking the word *abolition* to describe their aims, the multifaceted movements working to end policing and prisons recall a long history of such mobilizing. These contemporary movements evoke the legacy of abolitionists who fought to end chattel slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Abolitionists against slavery deployed multiple strategies. In the United States, for example, they aided enslaved people's escape to freedom by supporting the Underground Railroad and helping them to evade slave patrols, the proto-police forces that hunted those who dared to flee bondage. They lobbied for local laws opposing the Fugitive Slave Acts that put federal resources and legal mandates behind capturing enslaved people who freed themselves.

Abolitionists throughout the Atlantic world, however, did not limit their aims to assisting people who tried to escape to freedom. Rather, they sought to end slavery altogether. The abolition of slavery was an ambitious goal, given that slavery was built into the foundation of governance, social relations, prevalent racial ideologies, and the global and national economies. Enslaved people and free persons who fought for abolition mobilized on multiple fronts and ultimately shifted conceptions of slavery from a mostly unquestioned dimension of a hierarchical society or later, a necessary evil, to a corrosive institution that needed to be fully eradicated.

Even further, abolitionists understood how deeply embedded slavery had become in every facet of society. Indeed, the new society they envisioned and fought for required entirely new social, political, and economic relationships, moving away from the legal fiction of treating the enslaved as property and instead relating to them as people. Building on the radical imaginings of abolitionists, the Reconstruction that followed the US Civil War extended beyond the mere emancipation of enslaved people. It also sought to redistribute wealth (in the form of “forty acres and a mule” and other economic programs) and to empower Black people socially and politically with education, suffrage for all men, birthright citizenship, and laws prohibiting racial discrimination. Abolitionist visions and the promises of

Reconstruction were cut short, however, by racist terrorism and by compromises with those who refused to loosen their grip on a society built on white supremacy. Contemporary abolitionists in the United States draw on this legacy to inform their work to dismantle the carceral and policing institutions that, like slavery in the nineteenth century, to many seem so essential to social order as to be unquestionable.

As this historical sketch suggests, abolition as a keyword and an ongoing project of movements seeking to dismantle systems of state violence and social control is rooted in a US-centric genealogy. In the contemporary context, movements seeking the abolition of police and prisons, as Angela Davis argues, are “not only, or even primarily, about abolition as a negative process of tearing down, but also about building up, about creating new institutions.”⁷ Beyond the United States, struggles against policing similarly assume that its mere abolition is insufficient. As the organizers of *Reaja ou Será Morto/Morta*, a Black militant organization operating in Brazil, consider in their roundtable, uprooting formal institutions of police must also simultaneously tear down the towering racist infrastructure on which they are built in order to advance liberation at all. Indeed, *Reaja* organizers draw less on a genealogy of abolition than on the legacy of *quilombismo*, rooted in the flight from slavery and creation of self-determined maroon communities, to guide their work. They are not alone. As Micol Seigel reflects in her essay, *quilombismo* has inspired multiple liberatory communities over time and continues to motivate the work of organizations that confront or operate beyond formal police.

The essays in this issue begin with tenth-century England and close with Seigel’s essay on current Brazil. Collectively, the works challenge a core tenet of the assumed inextricable relationship between the modern state and police: the belief that violence is necessary to the maintenance of public order. In medieval England, the three fundamental systems of institutionalized, coercive force—police, the judiciary, and incarceration—did not exist in their modern-day forms. As Tom Lambert notes in his article, we would be mistaken to imagine medieval England operating under a consolidated “Leviathan” form of state power. He argues, however, that we would also be mistaken to present tenth-century England as evidence of the need for coercive violence in shoring up public order. Indeed, both Lambert and Luke Fidler demonstrate how the “spectacular” violence we imagine associated with a place and time like Medieval England was, in fact, more like a projected fantasy on the part of the elites. As Fidler argues, in a social landscape where “punitive incarceration was rare,” art forms—often sculptures housed in public religious sites—illustrated different narratives of “violent, juridical encounters.” The maintenance of social hierarchy was coded as social order, and these “didactic public sculptures” served as a form of threatened violence to forge a public consensus.

The violence purported to be necessary to modern-day policing goes hand in hand with a notion of protection, especially the protection of property. In exploring how the early Medieval legal order was intensely preoccupied with theft, which

elites sought to control through violence, Lambert shows us a surprising counter-vailing force to elite threats: the messy, ground-level community operations of justice. Arguing that the extreme forms of violence proposed by the elite were in fact based on ideas about retributive justice, Lambert shows us how, in practice, “communal institutions and local political networks proved a formidable barrier to the practical implementation of the harsh retributive vision” of the early Medieval legal order.

In the violent global ordering demanded by imperial expansion, colonies became crucibles in which colonial powers experimented with the relationship between policing orders to naturalize the racial logics of violence and settlement. For colonized people, the undermining of colonial policing always involved challenging the legal authority of colonial states to prescribe social orders. Within the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century British colonial expansion, violence, and settlement, Gagan Preet Singh and Alex Winder each demonstrate the critical significance of communal justice systems both as the continuing basis for on-the-ground claims to local sovereignty and as resistance against violent attempts to break apart community authority.

Singh begins his article after the 1857 rebellion against British rule, an era of colonial power characterized by “judges and policemen.” Examining the 1913 Karnal cattle-lifting case, Singh focuses on how communities maintained the precolonial indigenous *khoji* system of cattle tracking in British colonial Punjab and studiously avoided the police, much to the British state’s confusion and dismay. Key to the seeming failure of the British colonial state was the fact that “colonial notions of individual property rights conflicted with indigenous understandings in which communities laid shared claims over property.” In Winder’s article, Palestinians similarly turned to the form of mediated “communal reconciliation” of *suhl* during the 1936–39 revolt against British rule and Zionist colonization, and the 1987–91 uprising against Israeli rule (or the “first intifada”). These were “complex structures” composed of “judicial committees, peace committees, or mediation committees,” which effectively worked to counter British or Israeli state objectives to fragment, isolate, and divide the community.

In both colonial Punjab and Palestine (under the British Mandate and later Israeli occupation), the forms of communal justice on the ground allow us to focus on community practices of justice rather than the language of protection that comes out of the policing and legal orders from colonial states. The state’s mandate and responsibility to “protect” also became a hallmark of the US imperial state’s mobilizing of the police in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when a show of force was considered a preventive measure against greater violence. Indeed, US liberal empire exploited this exact duality in characterizing the police both as the embodiment of state violence and as offering state benevolence. Toby Beauchamp focuses on the figure of the United States park ranger over the course of the

twentieth century as conservationists debated what kind of social role the ranger must play, with the effect that the effort to distinguish “rangers from ‘real’ police naturalizes and actively supports the ranger’s authoritative role in hierarchies of power.” Beauchamp argues that the ranger essentially naturalized policing authority in the national parks, formed by violent, forced displacement and seizure of land.

In other words, the state itself always deploys powers beyond policing via the broad realm of extralegal and extrainstitutional violence fundamental to the modern state. White supremacist vigilantism or privatized military labor exemplify the kinds of local “policing” that supposedly fall beyond the purview of the state, but that disavowal is precisely the point. A. J. Yumi Lee turns to Toni Morrison’s *Home*, a novel about a Black veteran of the Korean War, to bring these two realms of violent rule—a domestic Jim Crow United States and the foreign “police action” of the Korean War—into the same frame of experience, impact, and accountability. Noting that *Home* was published in 2012, Lee points out that Morrison explicitly stated in an interview that she wanted to challenge the idea of 1950s America as an idyllic time for the nation. Similarly, in their piece on the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, Cho-kiu Li and Kin-long Tong provide further insight on the mobilization of a distinct language, that of “security,” that emerged during the post-1945 era and naturalizes violent policing as an extension of the modern state.

But as Lee’s discussion of *Home* and Li and Tong illustrate, people challenge the predetermined nature of “security” by creating alternative systems and communities around care and safety. These community-based forms of care and safety, we should note, fully take into account how the violence that the state inflicts through policing happens within both the exercise of juridical power and the realm of extralegal action. In her reading of *Home*, Lee traces how the protagonists eventually reckon with their trauma within a community separate from “the statist framework of punishment and retribution.”

But the legacies of colonial rule in postcolonial states, in terms of centralized police forces, are highly varied. In looking at postcolonial Nigeria, Samuel Fury Childs Daly attributes the country’s “ineffective policing” and the incarceration rates that rank “among the world’s lowest” partly to how British colonial administrators explicitly avoided replicating “large European-style forces” in their determination to extract as much control as possible under “tight budget” constraints. Also viewing the police as corrupt, people created and participated in different forms of community-based “vigilantism,” which can subvert or, at times, support those in power. The public has also refused the legitimacy, authority, and reach of the police in Hong Kong, where, according to Li and Tong, many people had initially viewed the police as “uncorrupt and reliable” at the point of the 1997 handover from Britain to China. The Hong Kong police at that point symbolized the city’s status as a Special Administrative Region (SAR), distinct from the rest of China. However, as Li and Tong argue, it was the public’s reaction to the Hong Kong police’s tactics against

student protesters in 2014 that galvanized many on the streets, as the Hong Kong police began to appear like an extension of Beijing state power. The cases of post-colonial Nigeria and Hong Kong shed light on how the police are embedded socially, and how publics can read, negotiate, and refuse the social authority of the police while also creating parallel infrastructures of power or community.

In looking at community-created alternative structures, Micol Seigel asks us to reflect on how, even when looking at organizations that question the state's monopoly on the use of violence, scholars have persistently failed to break free of a paradigm that assumes the centrality of the state. "It seems difficult," Seigel notes, "to imagine that these formations might simply be something else, something different, something for which we do not (yet) have a name." Her essay, in part, examines the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (First Command of the Capital), or PCC, a "political formation" that has come out of Brazil's "brutal prison system," composed of "people in prison, formerly imprisoned people, family members, and neighbors in the districts these cities most heavily police." Seigel then challenges us to unsettle the most basic element we often associate with the state: "the monopoly on force." Could the meting out of violence within the PCC, in consideration of the broader social infrastructures its members have transformed, mean "something else, something different"? Seigel has us consider "reciprocity" and not the retribution Lambert delineated in his article on tenth-century England. The focus on reciprocity also forces a reconsideration of how people forge meanings in social relations, rather than precluding the possibility of such a social reconfiguration by viewing such a project only through the template of "state" power.

As many of this issue's contributions demonstrate, carving out spaces beyond policing requires not just the absence of engagement with institutions of state violence; it also necessitates the presence of other social structures and relationships that support communal well-being and social peace. Singh reveals how people in rural northern India relied on systems of tracking and community councils to resolve cases of cattle theft, which enabled them to provide restitution to victims of theft in ways that aligned with their notions of communal property and restored social relationships, all while avoiding repressive colonial systems. As Winder shows, *suhl* and accompanying enforcement systems were crucial to Palestinian efforts to disempower British and Israeli state police, which simultaneously supported their resistance movements.

Winder's examination of *suhl*, however, reveals that these anticolonial justice systems also relied on coercive violence. Indeed, conflicts among Palestinians simmered beneath their anticolonial solidarity, and movement leaders deployed disciplinary violence to enforce cohesion against British and Israeli colonizers, as well as social norms seen as essential to the resistance. Similarly, Seigel uncovers how the PCC were more effective than official police at maintaining social order in the

neighborhoods and prisons where they worked, but their methods, too, could enforce that social order with violence, including killings.

As these examples demonstrate, it would be wrong to characterize these times and spaces that operated outside of, and even antagonistic to, police as utopian societies, as free of injustice or violence. This issue aims neither to idealize the actually existing police-resistant spaces it investigates nor to offer models that we propose should be recreated. Rather, we seek to consider what new relationships and ways of dealing with violence and harm might emerge when we focus our gaze on those specific historical moments when people chose to carve out communal relations that operated beyond police.

In present-day Chicago, a city notorious for police violence, grassroots organizers have long called on the city to divest from policing and prisons and to invest those massive resources into institutions rooted in community that actually promote safety, like centers of education and physical and mental health, or community centers and gardens. While insisting on community investment, these organizers must still doggedly fight against the structures that enable the police to harass and target vulnerable populations. For example, a coalition of immigrant and racial justice organizations have been struggling to force Chicago to dismantle the gang database—a registry of people suspected to be gang members that, in reality, serves to criminalize Black and Latinx people who live in hyperpoliced, working-poor communities. Activist-scholars of the Policing in Chicago Research Group at the University of Illinois at Chicago have supported this campaign to “erase the database” by obtaining secret information through Freedom of Information Act requests and by interviewing a range of people affected by or participating in community surveillance. Their work has advanced multiple strategies, including a class action lawsuit and investigations into the gang database.

This work has been crucial in the multifaceted struggle against policing in Chicago. It exemplifies “non-reformist reform,” which Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes as “changes that, at the end of the day, unravel rather than widen the net of social control through criminalization.”⁸ As an instance of nonreformist reform, it furthers the work of altogether dismantling the police and its systems of racialized surveillance and violence; it thus stands apart from the “reformist reforms” that might mitigate the worst abuses but ultimately entrench those structures of state violence.

How have people dealt with harm when it has happened? The transhistorical and implicitly comparative array of cases presented in this issue of *Radical History Review* begin to answer this question. In some cases, communities have devised solutions born out of a distrust of the state, or a clash of interests between them. If, as the anthropologist Anton Blok insists, violence is a “cultural category” full of meaning that is deeply embedded in the context of a particular place and time, so,

too, are justice and the normative social order, which communities at different levels imagine, impose, and defy.⁹ In his contribution to this issue, Lambert shows how in early Medieval England local actors with no formal disciplinary role mitigated the harm that calls to impose order on the kingdom would have brought about; at the local level, order was an abstraction, whereas justice was a lived experience. As Daly's essay shows, historical analysis also sheds light on the mitigating forces that prevent communities from addressing the harm the police cause despite the institution's perennial failure to serve community interests. Understanding the political and cultural history of Nigeria over a period that stretches back to its colonial era, we can glimpse at the way police—as vestiges of a colonial state, and as themselves workers and members of communities—are embedded in society. The activists from Reaja ou Será Morto/Morta have a long view of both the genocidal violence that Black Brazilians suffer and the autonomous means by which Black communities have sheltered themselves from harm. In a way, they say, theirs is already a world without police.

The movement-based artists of the Chicago-based Project NIA, who created the Restorative Posters in this issue's Curated Spaces, point us to other possible beginnings of recreating social relations in order to dismantle punitive cultures that demand criminal law enforcement and carceral systems. They ask community youth to imagine different ways of addressing harm and adopting restorative justice together. Project NIA has made the posters available for download on its website, where the project participants say, “We must prefigure the world in which we want to live.” With the combination of their free circulation in everyday spaces and their stunning visual elements, these posters indeed mark beginnings to transform spaces materially and to transform relations imaginatively. They give communities questions to practice, to reflect on, and to challenge relations at every scale: “How have you been affected?” “Who else has been affected?” “What is needed to make things right?” And we can collectively ask, “How can we make sure this doesn't happen again?”

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Notes

1. Pengally, “Erica Garner, Black Lives Matter Activist, Dies Aged 27.”
2. Sanburn, “The Witness.”
3. See, for example, the platform of the Movement for Black Lives: policy.m4bl.org/end-war-on-black-people/ (accessed September 17, 2019). The US-based Marshall Project is an excellent resource on ideas about police abolitionism: www.themarshallproject.org/records/3382-police-abolition (accessed September 17, 2019).
4. Murakawa, *The First Civil Right*; Vitale, *The End of Policing*, 33.
5. Vitale, *The End of Policing*, 106.
6. *Histórico da Força Militar do Estado do Rio de Janeiro*.
7. Davis, *Abolition Democracy*, 73.
8. Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 242.
9. Blok, *Honor and Violence*, 103–4, 106.

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