

BOOK REVIEW

David Correia and Tyler Wall,
Policing: A Field Guide (Verso, 2018)

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IN LATE 2014, NEW YORK CITY POLICE AND THEIR SUPPORTERS RALLIED outside City Hall at the height of the antipolicing movement commonly known as Black Lives Matter. A week prior, numerous NBA players donned t-shirts bearing Eric Garner's last words as he was choked by a gang of New York cops: "I can't breathe." No doubt emboldened by the nonindictment of Garner's murderer, Daniel Pantaleo, the assembled cops sported hoodies reading, in identical font: "I *CAN* BREATHE" (Ng et al. 2014, emphasis added). Their mostly white ranks menaced the largely nonwhite Black Lives Matter demonstrators by chanting the ominous imperative: "Don't resist arrest!" Invoking the perfunctory command to "stop resisting" which accompanies escalations of police violence unto death, the message was simple: do what we say, or else we are free to murder you.

Such an honest embrace of the racialized violence at the heart of US law and order calls to mind Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi's (1975) conception of "point zero": the point at which illusion becomes impossible to sustain. As of writing, the United States is rocked by a sustained rebellion far outpacing the movement of 2014 in scope, militancy, and the emphatic rejection of US policing and the white supremacist social order it upholds. The spark was yet another murder by chokehold, that of George Floyd in Minneapolis. COVID-19 has underscored the consequences of declining living standards, vanishing public services, and the outright abandonment of many working-class communities, disproportionately those of color. Floyd's murder and the ensuing rebellion have called attention to the counterpart of this divestment—a dramatically expanded regime of policing and prisons which guzzles public spending while managing social problems with guns, clubs, and cages. Thus, in a moment of great waste and suffering, the spectacle of a man slowly choked to death by state violence has provoked

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the militant rejection of the entire social order, beginning with the armed agents who work daily to keep it in place (Shanahan & Kurti 2020). The very site of the 2014 “I CAN BREATHE” demonstration is at present home to a sustained antipolice occupation which has been met with police violence and intimidation that proves the points of the brutalized better than any argument they could muster (Offenhartz & Hogan 2020). Violence against protesters in New York is part of a national pattern of police rebellion in which the cops are asserting their right to act independent of any civilians, including big city mayors (Garvey & Shanahan 2020). Thus, six years after NYPD cops mocked the dying words of a man their comrade had murdered in the street, the terrain of struggle remains contested, with its contradictions unsettled and laid bare. *Police: A Field Guide* by David Correia and Tyler Wall is at once an apt product of this interregnum period and a toolbox for fighting our way out of it.

Police presents itself, somewhat mischievously, as a straightforward glossary of policing terminology. It is “like any other field guide,” the authors insist coyly, in that it “exposes and demystifies a world that is hidden in plain view” (9). The mystification in question, however, is not due to ignorance of the topic as much as the obfuscatory operation of what the authors dub “copspeak.” Copspeak is “a language that limits our ability to understand police as anything other than essential, anything other than the guarantors of civilization and the last line of defense against what police call savagery” (2). *Police* provides an accessible and theoretically sophisticated handbook to denaturalizing the social existence of “violence workers,” their copspeak vernacular, and the modes of thinking their existence imposes on us (12). Ordered as a glossary and beautifully designed by Verso, the authors intend the book as a choose your own adventure of sorts, enabling readers to hop from one concept of interest to another or to enjoy an engaging and enraging read from start to finish. Although many of the key concepts are not original to *Police*, the volume represents a useful compendium of critical approaches which would be especially effective in an undergraduate course, or in trying to deprogram a friend or loved one from the modes of thinking copspeak imposes.

A large part of *Police* consists of a critical interrogation of the Orwellian lexicon by which police murders become so-called “officer-involved shootings” and chokeholds “vascular restraints,” violence of all sorts is rendered a “distraction technique,” “Excited Delirium Syndrome” functions as a faux medical diagnosis for virtually anything a person does that results in their assault by a cop, and a “furtive movement is whatever a cop says it is” (18,

93, 248, 259). On a deeper level, Correia and Wall explore how the political contours of police reform itself are prefigured in such a way that “blunts any criticism, and makes alternatives to business as usual all but impossible” (274). Thus, we find police reform itself to be an entire genre of copspeak.

The authors’ emphasis on police reform, defined as “the science of police legitimation accomplished through the act of euphemism” (7), befits the present conjuncture with special urgency, as many carceral and police institutions have been forced to perform concessions to social justice while striving to maintain the status quo. The authors warn of the allure of such nebulous panaceas as community policing—which means more or less anything involving police exiting their cars, and by Correia and Wall’s telling, is “not about making police friendlier, but rather about making police violence more acceptable” (130). Similarly, responding to critiques of militarized police, the authors emphasize that ordinary, nonmilitarized police have carried out the murders which spurred the movement in the first place, and that the history of police militarization is largely the history of “professionalization” and the growth of centralized structures of command and accountability which today’s reformers demand (148–51).

Police thusly depicts the venture of police reform as a tragic, if not outright malign, exercise in legitimizing continued police existence—synonymous, the authors argue, with police violence—with appeals to a mythic ideal which police can be reformed to meet. To this, the authors respond that police equals the violence of a capitalist state, and nothing else. Police are inextricable from a social order buttressed on private ownership of the land and the means of production, and police are nothing more or less than the violent enforcement of that order. “The bad apple cop,” they write, “is the cop who engages in unjustified police brutality. The good apple cop uses good discretion to engage in justified police violence” (236).

Correia and Wall also provide a useful antidote to the Hollywood picaresque’s brooding, cerebral detectives locked in citywide matches of master chess with criminal geniuses, or sophisticated scientific investigations heaping piles of money onto solving the murders of anonymous proletarians using cutting-edge technology. Virtually no crimes are solved by complex investigations, they argue; most arrestees are either apprehended at the scene or identified by a witness or the victim themselves. Heroic depictions of crime-fighting police serve an important function, however, as they reinforce the mistaken belief that police solve most of the crimes that are reported to them, instead of the crimes they simply stumble across or else are handed the keys to solving by no real effort of their own (180–81).

Simultaneously, *Police* offers a necessary inoculation, for even the critical criminal justice researcher or activist, against the creep of copspeak. In my own research, I am often forced to rely far more than I would like to on institutional documents. Sometimes I return to a draft I have written and find myself horrified of its internalization of institutional logics—especially the logic of austerity—which accept human caging as a necessary social practice and confront its problems as matters for technocratic problem-solving. Correia and Wall caution vigilance in such matters through illustrative analyses of common terms like the use of “disproportionate” as a qualifier for violence. “Like excessive and unjustified,” they write, “the word disproportionate questions or condemns individual decisions by police to use violence at the same time that it accepts without question, the right, even the need, of police to use violence in general” (243). Similarly, they argue, to debate whether police shootings are “justified” is to proceed from the a priori principle “that there is a who and a how that police *ought* to kill” (267)—a decision the speaker ought to make for themselves, but one which the mischief of copspeak assiduously obviates.

It is a sad truth that the NYPD cops who marched on New York’s City Hall ridiculing Eric Garner’s dying words and chanting “don’t resist arrest” represented policing more honestly than the euphemistic tracts of the police reformers ever could. Policing is the violent maintenance of a capitalist social order that works for fewer and fewer people each year, and the present crisis of policing’s legitimacy constitutes a great opportunity for those who hope to see this social order undone. That said, the present is simultaneously a moment of great risk, as well-intentioned efforts to reform institutions like policing and prisons can function to derail necessary attacks on the social order which they uphold, as well-meaning activists are conscripted into fixing the problems of a system which should be allowed—nay, encouraged—to perish of its own contradictions.

“Policing is not broken,” Correia and Wall conclude; “it works exactly as designed” (3). As the legacy of policing and the disastrous social order it upholds are contested in the streets, and debates swirl about whether to reform, defund, or outright abolish the nightmare of US policing, *Police: A Field Guide* provides an accessible handbook to thinking and fighting through the present conjuncture with sober senses and clear-eyed striving toward a world with no need for prisons or police.

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