



*La Police*

*Bill Lavender*



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Policy

Politics

Photography

Language

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Can we imagine a world without Police?

The degree to which we consider Police indispensable is the degree to which Police can be said to be effective.

Language: not an outpouring but a gobbling up.

Police crosses all ideological, economic, and political boundaries, being an essential feature of contemporary capitalist, communist and socialist states, of democracies, republics, dictatorships and monarchies. If a North Korean dictator sees his effigy being slandered and wants the perpetrators executed, he calls the police. If an American activist wants to report a landlord showing racial preference in rental practice, she calls the police. Whether one wishes to assert his civil rights or to suppress someone else's, one asserts or suppresses via Police. In fact, the whole notion of "right," in both the term's ethical and political dimensions, now denotes a relationship to Police.

If, as some argue, the human animal has a natural propensity for language, it would seem it also has a natural propensity for Police.

As scrupulously as you take care of your Self, all those hours of luxurious absorption, meditating, breathing, stretching... do not imagine it will be a shelter for you in the end.

The earliest written record of the term πόλις (*polis*) is in Hesiod, c. 750 BCE. For the Greeks it referred to the city-state, or sometimes more specifically to the city's core, the citadel, around which the city developed. The Romans latinized the cognate πολιτεία (*politeia*), "citizenship, administration, civil polity" into *politia*, which was adopted into Middle French as *police*, which in the early 15th century came into English as a direct borrowing, *la police*, a fashionable, gourmet version of "policy" or "public order."



What you are so terrified of losing isn't really you at all but a virus that lives in you. A very smart virus that knows yoga.

The word did not take on its current meaning as a collective noun until 1797 when a group of London merchants pooled funds to hire a band of hooligans to prevent theft of their inventory from the docks, mostly by their own employees. They armed the group with clubs and called them The Police. This metonymy would have sounded a lot like “The Policy” would sound to us now, perhaps even with the same tinge of dark humor. This initial band of 50 men saved the merchants hundreds of thousands in theft prevention, and in 1800 the City of London transformed them from a private to a public organization. The Thames River Police is now the oldest public police organization in the world.

Benefits of the new policy spread rapidly along the trade routes of the British empire. Police traveled everywhere the English language did, and soon became the *lingua franca* of the docks in New York, Dublin, Sydney, Glasgow, etc. Despite a few incidences of trepidation and even revolt, Police came to be the gold standard of governance, world-wide, in only about 50 years. The spread mirrored the rise of English as the language of international trade.

In the 18th century, Swift et al worried incessantly about the mutability of language, calling for all sorts of programs to “fix” the language, to make it hold still. This paranoia created the dictionary. Today, we should have an opposite concern: now that almost all language is recorded and set instantly into text, the language is too fixed, too immobile to allow for evolutionary shifts that let language adapt to changes in the world. This is the Global Warming of Language.

Between the *jus imperium* of ancient Rome and the Thames River Police there were knights and church orders, volunteer constables and mercenary bounty hunters, hastily organized posses and stately royal guards, vigilante groups and elected citizenry. There were railroad guards, bridge tenders, tax collectors, ship captains, landlords, field bosses, priests, chiefs, fire brigades and, when things really got out of hand, the cavalry.

Where there had been hundreds of methods there was suddenly only one, and all the others became instantly antique. Henceforth constables would monitor street lamps. Posses and bounty hunters became nostalgic figures of romance. Royal guards became skeuomorphs, architectural decoration. Vigilante and citizen groups began to be considered as rebels themselves, and the host of lower-level monitors and bosses became bureaucrats and record-keepers.

The adoption of French words into English to suggest refinement or class distinction probably dates to the Norman Conquest, that brief period, 1066-1150, when French was the language of the English court. This era of clear linguistic distinction between conquerors and conquered, between the ruling and indentured classes, is apparent in English even today in pairings like cook/chef or fashion/couture. Just as, today, restaurants up their star ratings by giving their cooks clean uniforms, cool hats and a French job description, so, in 1800, London stripped the dock roughnecks of their overalls and gave them elegant blue uniforms with matching spiked helmets. Tree limbs and broken oar handles were replaced with fine hardwood clubs produced on lathes to a standard size and polished to a high and uniform gloss. Beards were trimmed and faces washed. The men were arranged in rows, tallest in back, and their elegance recorded for posterity in the brand new medium of photography.

The Boys were dressed in Blue explicitly to distinguish them from the red-coated British army, to signal that they were not here to protect, defend and expand borders, but solely to fight the enemy within.

Police comes into being to answer a single question: who owns what. The docks are an unruly place where goods belonging to people and entities increasingly removed from the actual location of these goods are being transferred to other owners equally distant. Goods belonging to one factory or farm are commingled with goods from others that are destined for the same port, and this commingling and reordering is done by impoverished dock workers whose interest in the goods they handle is not always abstract. A tear in a bag of flour can become a family's bread that night. A bit off the end of a bolt of cloth might yield a child something to wear to her job at the factory the next day.

The question of who is stealing what from whom can sometimes be answered by visual clues, as when one actually witnesses a worker pocketing a bit of grain or opening a box he is supposed to be merely transporting. But the workers are clever. Sometimes they transfer the goods with stealth rather than clumsy force. A frugal worker might actually accumulate enough wealth to acquire by legal means a watch or a new pair of breeches. So increasingly Police must rely on less concrete evidence of ownership. They must be literate and mathematically proficient. They must be able to check inventories and read bills of lading. They must be able, at least to a limited degree, to write similar documents themselves. The night officer must make a record of the evening's movements of people and goods to hand to the day officer in the morning, and these records must be formalized and consistent, so that if one officer misses a shift due to illness or drunkenness or some other necessity, another can



assume that position with no loss of continuity.

Likewise, the Police must know who they are policing. They must know the workers from the bosses and the bosses from the owners. They must know who is actually a worker and who is a thief merely posing as a worker. Hundreds of people come and go on the busy docks; no officer can determine their roles from memory or appearance alone. The way to solve this problem is to assume illegitimacy, to pass this aspect of policing on to the worker himself. Each worker must prove that he is indeed a worker. A boss must vouch for him, and since the bosses cannot be everywhere at once, each worker must carry a token or sign of the boss's approval.

Police created the modern concept of Identity through this assumption of universal guilt among the working class. One is a thief unless one can prove otherwise. Thievery is not merely punished; it is prevented by this pragmatic measure. Have your identity card or go to gaol.

Simultaneously with Police is born the notion of Crime. Like the obverse face of the same coin, negative linguistic pole required to reify the original term, Crime rises into Western consciousness as an urgent necessity, the *raison d'être* of Police.

Crime is the reason for Police, but Police is also the reason for Crime. Just as Police introduces into the diverse and disorderly practices of the protection of the gentry's property a single unified force of suppression, so Crime comes to organize and define the various unseemly activities of the working class rabble. Each is the *not* of the Other, and together they create a social and political knot, a "bootstrap" structure of continually escalating friction, a tangle that widens and gradually ensnares the entire culture.

The tautology itself is perhaps not remarkable, as it merely exemplifies the normal linguistic function of definition by opposition that Saussure and every linguist who came after him observed. But this particular tautology rises with stunning historical rapidity to the status of a central if not universal structure. The moment Police and its obverse are created, they have always existed. Every trace of the historical time before is erased.

Ethical binaries fascinated the Greeks, the writers of the Old Testament and early language scholars like Augustine, but after 1800 these binaries will come to dominate the study of language.

Crime: mid-13c., “sinfulness,” from Old French *crimne* (12c., Modern French *crime*), from Latin *crimen* (genitive *criminis*) “charge, indictment, accusation; crime, fault, offense,” perhaps from *cernere* “to decide, to sift” (see *crisis*). But Klein (citing Brugmann) rejects this and suggests *cri-men*, which originally would have been “cry of distress” (Tucker also suggests a root in “cry” words and refers to English *plaint*, *plaintiff*, etc.). Meaning “offense punishable by law” is from late 14c. The Latin word is glossed in Old English by *facen*, also “deceit, fraud, treachery.” *Crime wave* first attested 1893, American English.

The TV Police is tired, haggard, an emotional and physical wreck. His or her spouse or partner or child has left or been killed by a criminal or abducted or abused or is in imminent danger of being so. The TV Police is in London or New York or Paris or Toronto or Sydney or Amsterdam. The skyscrapers or slums or brownstones or docks of the City are the backdrop of his or her anguished search for the source of the Crime. His or her desk is awash in file folders or, later, secret databases on a computer screen.

S/he has a drug or alcohol problem, is a recovering addict, sees visions or ghosts, hears haunting echoes of the Crime in memory or in hallucination, carries problematic personal interests into the investigation, is in constant danger of suspension or death or extortion or some other compromise, must constantly vie with unethical forces within the Police or the Polis as well as the citizenry.

S/he walks through rooms of the police station or the house or apartment, laden with secret desires and anxieties, but then his or her gaze is suddenly drawn to a photograph on the wall. The photo is on the corkboard in the station or on the wall of a suspect's house or, in the event that s/he has been suspended or fired or is otherwise alienated from the normal comradery of the force, on the wall or coffee table of his or her own apartment or house or condo. The photo reveals to the Police something not at first apparent to the viewer or to the other characters in the drama, some small hint, a facial expression or previously unnoticed contiguity of space and time, revealing an alibi to be questionable or an

outright lie, turning a friendly witness into a suspect or vice versa. S/he stares at the photo, suddenly entranced, leaning in to study it in minute detail. The depth of field shortens, and the image of the office or apartment in the background blurs. The sounds of the culture begin to fade and an ominous music rises. S/he takes out the tack and looks at it even more closely.

Photography has held, from its beginnings in the early 19th century, a special place in the arsenal of Police weaponry. As a kind of public relations tool, the Police and the military were among the first to use it to put forth their public face, archival representation of order and symmetry. Carefully posed, uniforms immaculate, not a hair out of place, arrayed in order of rank and seniority, the Police placed itself at the beginning of history by placing itself at the beginning of the new technology that will, henceforth, record it.

But public relations was not the only utility Police found in the new medium. Just as Crime is the obverse of the Police itself, the mugshot is the flip side of the PR photo. Unposed and unadorned, fresh from interrogation or clubbing, filth of the street still apparent and without benefit of tonsorial detailing, the Criminal, too, is recorded into the archive. The mugshot is placed in the file, stapled to the record of the life: name or names, place of residence, date and place of birth, employment history, spouse(s), children, parents, siblings, and of course the record of criminal activities and arrests.

The mugshot itself—with its backdrop of chipped plaster and peeling paint, with its messy hair, its small chalkboard with an identification number and a list of crimes—is proof of the subject's criminality. If, in the past, a citizen's infractions against property owners or the state were treated as activities requiring this or that mode of redress, after the institution of the Police, Crime becomes a matter of Identity, a genetic code that belongs to the person as opposed to the act, and remains in the front of the file no matter the further

course of the Subject's life. "Crime" is no longer an action but a proclivity, a "personality trait," a disease. The mother doesn't resort to theft or prostitution because her children are starving but because of the Crime she carries within herself, within her body.

Increasingly, the new science of Psychology and the ancient arts of Medicine will be called upon to address Crime. The new surgical technique of lobotomy is created as an attempt to excise Crime from the worker's body surgically. Criminals are sterilized to prevent them from passing Crime on to future generations. The new and epistemologically rigorous "science" of Criminology is created to study and classify the various forms of the disease.

Originally invented to address the very specific problem of theft by workers, Police quickly expands its domain along this axis of Identity. The police file grows to contain more and more information. It can include, along with actual criminal acts, all sorts of anecdotal “evidence”: work records, testimony, denunciations by neighbors, rumors of bad behavior, sexual transgressions, etc. And these elements of criminal identity quickly become associated, themselves, with the realm of Crime. Thus the role of the Police comes to include the monitoring of almost every realm of activity of its Subjects, including everything from sexual practice to the payment of taxes.

It even becomes possible to envision crimes which consist in nothing more than the manipulation of Identity itself: stealing or forging files, giving false information to trick the Police, etc. Crime attains an intellectual mystique, and the Police, far from the ax-handle-wielding brute on the dock, becomes in popular conception the professorial Detective, a master of deduction, genius in the study of texts, images and logic. The Detective can hear the lie in a Subject’s tone of voice, can ferret out a contradiction between two files or statements, or pick the Criminal out of room full of innocent civilians by means of the subtlest clues.

Thus the Police steps off the docks and onto the stage of 19th-century media. Like the knights of yore, Police becomes the privileged protagonist of literature. As knights gave birth to the Romance, Police becomes the indomitable hero-class of the novel, the *nouveau roman*. Though sometimes they



are portrayed as victors by means of brute force alone, the depiction of the Police that will capture the imagination of the reading public is that of the brilliant detective.

While the form is sometimes said to have originated in the impossibly brilliant deductions of Voltaire's *Zadig* (1748), the detective story is launched to the realm of a genre by the publication of Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" a century later. As in the host of imitators that would follow on Poe's lead, the Detective here is not, himself, a Policeman. Dupin is an enigmatic character, aloof, anti-social, literate as a professor of philosophy and beyond that possessed of superhuman powers of logic and deduction. The Policemen in the story, like their progenitors on the London Docks, are simian brutes by comparison. They come to Dupin because the crime is an intellectual labyrinth beyond their powers to map. Dupin leads them, by means of careful analysis of texts and speech, through a maze of identities to the one point they had never considered, that the perpetrator might have no Identity. That is, that it might not be human.

To be human is to have an Identity on file with the Police. I have a mugshot, therefore I am.

The meta-work of the 19th century is Poe's third story featuring the intrepid Dupin, "The Purloined Letter." Like *Hamlet* "The Purloined Letter" is a tale of a compromised queen and cuckolded king, but their differences reveal historical changes that have occurred in the interim, changes in the roles of monarchs and citizens.

In "The Purloined Letter" Hamlet's part is taken by the Police. In place of Hamlet's anguished, dream-haunted search for the true Crime that has killed his father and seduced his mother, Poe posits a meticulous search by the Police, not for the truth of the Crime and its instigator, but rather for the text that bears that truth. Neither we nor the Police will know the content of that text, the eponymous letter; we do not know what it says, only that what it says is the truth, and that it is a truth which is not for us to know. The role of the Police, in fact, is to keep this truth a secret.

Left to deduce the content of the letter from our own fecund imaginations, we conclude it represents the Queen's infidelity, though it could just as well be, say, evidence of embezzlement, a land-swap for influence, or an agreement trading a nephew's corporate appointment for a building permit.

Hamlet's investigation is to uncover the facts of the Crime, to know who did what, and how and when. For the Police of "The Purloined Letter" the goal is exactly the opposite. It is to not-know the truth; to know that the truth exists and control its circulation, yet without knowing what that truth is. To find the letter and hand it, still sealed, back to the

Queen.

Inside the “locked box” of the Queen’s boudoir there is another, smaller, locked box, which is the text that describes the box; this text. Inside the cordon that la Police makes around the Queen, there is a second cordon, this one around the letter, the truth itself. The uniformed bodies of Police stand in front of it, facing out.

The Police system, originally formulated as a protection for factory owners and merchants, spread with the Industrial Revolution. As the bosses' muscle, it became an essential part of the mass production scenario and an emblem of British efficiency and colonial domination. Patrick Colquhoun, who founded the Thames River Police, used arguments from Jeremy Bentham to convince the merchant's association to give the new system a try, and Bentham's utopian vision of a working class under total and constant surveillance underlies the workings of Police to this day.

But because of their ground-breaking work in Identity creation, the role of the Police—and the realm of Crime—quickly expands beyond the docks and factories into every facet of human life. Everything that might be logged on a worker's Identity Card—employment and marital status, sexual practice, alcohol and drug use, skin tone, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, place and time of birth, family organization—becomes relevant to the subject's relationship to Crime and the Police.

In the end, everyone will have a mugshot. Everyone will have a file, a number, an Identity. Everyone will be, to one degree or another, a criminal. And no worries about the exorbitant cost of imprisonment; Identity structures the whole Earth as a locked box, a prison.

The mugshot begat the passport photo which begat the selfie. It is the basis of Gay Pride, of Black Power and White Supremacy, of every racial, ethnic or gendered grouping. It is the awakening of Freud's Ego and the reflector of Lacan's "Mirror Phase." It is the beginning of nostalgia, the creator of *The Tragic Sense of Life*.

This badge we carry on our lapels from cradle to grave is the source of all embarrassment and arrogance, every disgrace and every honor. We long to add to it our accomplishments, books and degrees and years of service to employers, and we pray to have our sins, our petty thefts and sexual wanderings, erased. We view with envy the Identity Cards of our superiors and with derision or condescending pity those of our underlings.

But the one thought that never occurs to anyone, the notion that remains as unthinkable as a world without Police, is that we might live naked, unclassified, unphotographed and unlabelled. The thought is horrible, source of existential despair, the sickness unto death. Without Identity we would drift like ephemeral butterflies, briefly alive and disappearing without a trace. Oh... I almost forgot... we do that anyway.

No need to mourn its mortality; it passes to your neighbor in your dying breath. And lives happily ever after.



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