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## **Protest (against) policing: “territories of exception” vs. “counter-territories”?**

**Geographies of police work and contentious movements  
in France and Germany**

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**Abstract:**

Today in Europe and also in France and Germany, experiences of discrimination in everyday policing as well as experiences of police violence by demonstrations contributed to a long-lasting mobilisation against police work and also “protest policing”. Despite the evolution of methods, strategies and tactics of police and social movement activists since the 1960s, conflicts still occur and the critics are repeated – last examples being the “Stuttgart 21” conflict 2011 in Germany and the “Notre-Dame-des-Landes” conflict today in France. While most of the actors seem to look for ways to minimize violence, it seems that an underlying conflict cannot disappear. A long-lasting antagonism opposes thus “police” on one side and “contentious movement” on the other side – in France and Germany and beyond, in improved democracies characterised by political freedom and control of police institutions and practices. Building on this paradox, one hypothesis of my work is the existence of “protest against policing” as a common identification, as a subject position constituted by antagonism, shared by numerous actors from social movements. With the help of a geographical research about protest (against) policing, my aim is to highlight the dynamics of these contentious territories.

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With this paper, my aim is to present the design of my new research project, at the junction of political geography, urban studies, police research and social movement research<sup>1</sup>. The theoretical inspiration comes from French, German and English-speaking social sciences. I will mainly sum up the conceptual frame of this project, while opening some questions rising after the first experiences of field research.

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<sup>1</sup> I apologize for my clumsy written English in this text and ask for the indulgence of the reader.

## 1. Observations

### **Police vs. social movement: still a structural antagonism in postfordist democracies?**

Today, in France and Germany too, social movements and human right organizations criticize security policies and police work, and thus question the “State violence”. Experiences of discrimination in everyday policing as well as experiences of police violence by demonstrations contributed to a long-lasting mobilization against police work and also “protest policing”. Since the 1960s and the events such Charonne in France or the death of Benno Ohnesorg in Germany, several movements (anti-colonialist movements, anti-nuclear or environmental movements as well as urban movement reclaiming a ‘right to the city’) were confronted with State violence in Europe or/and in postfordist democracies. Despite the evolution of methods, strategies and tactics of police and social movement activists since the 1960s, conflicts still occur and the critics are repeated – last examples being the “Stuttgart 21” conflict 2011 in Germany and the “Notre-Dame-des-Landes” conflict today in France. While the actors seem to look for ways to minimize violence, it seems that an underlying conflict cannot disappear. A long-lasting antagonism opposes thus “police” on one side and “contentious movement” on the other side – in France and Germany and beyond, in improved democracies characterized by political freedom and control of police institutions and practices.

The theme of police focuses on two particular aspects of Chantal Mouffe’s theory of the Political:

- **Police as a coercive actor of the conflict** between Government and dissents. Its use of force and constraint – the acceptance or the repression of the expression of “other voices” by policing – takes part to the definition of what is agonism and antagonism. Police is the one institution able to physically border the “place for dissent”, in each case.
- **Police itself as the matter of the conflict.**

My way to engage with this complex problem is to highlight the dynamics of contentious territorializations with the help of a geographical research about protest policing / protest against policing, and to understand the way urban spaces can be “conflictualised”.

## **2. Sketching two “subject positions” around an agonistic conflict**

One premise of my research is the existence of two “subject positions” – of course these subjects are kinds of abstractions elaborated for the research. But they do also “exist” in the social world: in so far as the figure of the “police” as well as the figure of the “protesters” are both very present in the political debate; and not at least police institutions and workers do repeatedly construct the figure of the “protesters”; as well as social movement do construct the figure of the “police”. In fact, they are both complex actor constellations without clear unity, without univocity. (Fillieule/Della Porta 2010, Fillieule/Jobard 1998)

### **2.1 “Policing protest” – pragmatics of the “public order”**

Maintaining order in the public space<sup>2</sup> is one of the role of the State and purpose of police institutions. This project deals with protest policing in democratic contexts, Germany and France. Protest policing involves intelligence police work for information about events and people; this involves decisions of the executive power; this involves a strategy to engage resources, as well as tactical deployments and reactions. The identification of a subject position “police” is structured by a mission – I sum it up as “serving the order” – which realization is complex: this subject position mobilizes beyond police work, and creates many types of police work and workers. “Policing protest” is presented as a pragmatic policing of avoiding damages and allowing freedom of expression – nevertheless “policing protest” is directed against particularly “trouble makers”: it is about definition, identification, research and targeting of “adversaries”. The apolitical self-definition of “protest policing” is contested by the very political interpretation of police as power/violence from the State. (see also Fernandez 2008)

### **2.2 “Protesting against policing” – symbolics of the “public rights”**

Thus, “protest against policing”<sup>3</sup> is a correlative subject position. “Protest against policing” is a common identification, a subject position constituted by a protest against police practices and methods, which is shared by numerous actors from different social movements. Beyond the first political aims and different goals followed by these movements (such as

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<sup>2</sup> This is not about crime but about disturbance and riots (with risks of material degradation and fighting).

<sup>3</sup> Every “trouble maker” is not a protester against techniques, methods and practices of policing – which implies a specific articulation, not only a battle.

environment, economics, world politics, urban politics, migration...), and often because of past experiences of confrontation, the contestation of police appears as a kind of structural necessity (see Hayes 2006). Themes of the contestation are diverse – such as events of police violence; but also police surveillance or discrimination. The political arguments of the articulated critics reach from an pure “human-right” approach, through opposition against governmental politic, or legalist critic of the whole penal system, up to an anarchist State critic. Often structured as network of organisations, the “police-critical movements” (so my purpose to name them) are sometimes locally based or reach some times transnationality.

### **2.3 An agonistic conflict?**

In contemporary France and Germany, there is indeed a conflict about policing, what I would call an agonistic conflict – because of the broad reception and acceptance for the contestation, because it is not properly heard whether solved by the police institutions or executive power, and because new events repeatedly show that it is not about to disappear. This conflict is institutionalized through the activity of what I call “police-critical movements”.

## **3. Political geographies of protest**

I will now explain the geographical dimension of this conflict: According to my hypothesis, it is about territory-making, about the production and control of material and symbolic places for protest.

### **3.1 Concepts of Territory and Territorialization**

This research relies on an original concept of territory – and territorialization - defined as space of State sovereignty (according to the English-speaking Political Geography) **and** as an appropriated space through everyday practices (according to the French-speaking Social Geography):

- According to the English-speaking Political Geography, “territory” is mainly conceived as an historical phenomenon, the spatial organization of modern State. The area of the territory should defines the spatial extend of the State control. Thus is territory essentially linked with the notion of border. Territory could be interpreted as the materiality of the State. The invention of territory as a

governing technique and the contemporary evolutions of the territorialization of the State are the main focus of research. Today, territory is not dead but deeply changing because the challenge of controlling State's space becomes more complex. (see Elden 2010, Herbert 1999, Kuus/Agnew 2008)

- The French-speaking Social Geography developed another meaning for the concept *territoire* – which is less linked to the State. *Territoire* is constructed, produced, as a result of multiple and complex appropriations. *Territoire* is not a thing but a process, observable in every kind of society, at almost any scale (Aldhuy, 2008; Di Meo 1998, 1999). Subjects of the appropriation are in focus: individual practices and individual representations are the core of the research.

It seems to me that these two current discussions about territory are about to find each other – the political geography being more and more interested in understanding the everyday practices and the common people making the State; the social geography being more and more oriented with political questions (Painter 2006, 2010; Ripoll/Veschambre 2006). My aim with this project is to deal with these both meanings and to bring the two current discussions together, in order to understand at the same time the historical phenomenon State and the part of individual (re-)production of State.

**The notion of territory** refers to a constructed, appropriated, institutionalized space. It refers to a diversity of practices, to a conflictuality of appropriations: it allows conceiving antagonism as well as agonism spatially. For my research project: the State territories are not only abstracts constructions of dispositives, knowledge, technics; they are also produced by everyday practices. Practice are not naïve doing: At the junction between individuality and institutions (such as police or activists groups), actors of territory engage their professional skills and political engagements.

**The notion of territorialization** emphasize the fact that there is not “the one” thing territory produced in one place – but a diversity of territorializations, sometime conflictual, which are complex and never ending processes, engaging a huge diversity of voices.

### 3.2 Contentious territories?

Both subject positions I will research on – the police and contentious movements – produce urban space and thus are about to engage in territorializations:

- While policing protest, the police produce “territories of exception”, mainly with control strategies – from the very place of demonstration, back to the digital world of blogs. The practices of the police emphasize ‘politics’ and apparently pragmatic rules of maintaining order.
- While protesting against policing, contentious movements produce “counter-territories”, mainly with counter-strategies: counter-surveillance (such as cop watching), counter-mapping practices, etc. These practices play on the symbolic stage of Order, Justice, Power and Violence, and try to interpellate political consciousness.

A question may arise in context of this conference session about urban policies: Do have this (possible) territorialization anything to do with urban development policies? My answer would be: meanwhile this research is not particularly interested in urban projects about destroying and buildings housings or infrastructures, it deals with a conflict about urban space. Police and contentious practices contribute to the production of space. This space has a special frame, limited in place and time; fleeting place bounded events. Nevertheless are urban policies (of police employment) and urban dissent (about police *spatial* employment) at the core of the conflicts.

As noticed below, this is a draft of my future research project – the two following parts of the paper will present no results of fieldwork but the main hypothesis, first observations and open questions.

#### **4. First focus - Police and territories of exception**

Many researches already showed the spatiality of police work and institutions (Belina 2007a 2007b, Jobard 2008, Eick et al. 2007, Glasze et al. 2005) – and some showed how space in police work (re)produces power relations or inequalities, something we could call “territorial coercion”.

The hypothesis of territories of exception builds upon the idea that police work makes territory (Herbert 1996) and on the exceptionality of protests. As Wahlström (2010, 2011) notices, protesters and police’s demonstration practices can be interpreted as

(de)territorializations, controlling order and borders. Supplementing this approach, my aim is to question the appropriation of space and the many voices within the police dispositive.

Beyond the pragmatical goals of protest policing – allowing freedom of expression and public order – recurrent experiences of police violence by protest policing reminds us the long lasting paradoxes of State violence. In the fleeting configuration of demonstrations, police should tightly control space in a context of lack of experience of the place. Short-term appropriation for riot police units need particularly techniques – such as place mapping – in order to draw the landscape, the present actors and their likely behavior, police behavior commands; as well as the possible disorders and the reactions to them. This short-term appropriation for riots units relays on mid-term strategic analysis (and force deployment) by the command hierarchy and executive power. It also relays on long-term intelligence work about protesting movements. (Police force deployment and intelligence police work produce other controlled spaces, other space representations and territorializations).

The territories of exception are thus more than an event – they rely on a multi-institutional work (because of the many units/missions engaged and their very different abilities), which attempts to recognize, normalize and describe an “adversary” – i.e. defines what/who is agonist pluralism or antagonist extremism. Intelligence, surveillance and protest policing are the very material moments where such distinctions are powerfully made: when the attempt to define antagonism and leads to the use of force and to perform antagonism in police work as State’s *Gewalt*. Furthermore, territories of exception are made by police workers who represent a diversity of voices – reaching up to what I call dissent insiders. Even the territorialization of police is no clear and powerful space appropriation: it is ambivalent, it may be contested from inside, it is thus fragile.

## **5. Second focus - Contentious movements and counter-territorializations**

Contentious movements are defined by a common position – protesting against policing (cf. 2.2). Police practices and territorializations are contested by critical movements. Critical movements mobilize several resources in order to express their protest – space is one of these resources. Then, space is as well a reason as a resource for the mobilization (Marston 2003, Ripoll 2005, 2008, Sewel 2001, Tilly 2000, Zajko/Béland 2008).

The hypothesis of counter-territorializations leads the research for spatial constructions and mobilizations of space in order to challenge police territories. Territorialization belongs to the repertoire of contention. The methods of space control and appropriation are in focus of the research: in the place and the moment of the demonstration, but far before the moment and beyond the place, protesters mobilize information, networking and further techniques. On the one hand, counter-territorialization is one condition of realization for “performing” the protest. On the other hand, counter-territorialization replies with symbolic interventions to the supposed pragmatic approach of police forces. The contentious intervention does question the legitimacy of the police. Cartography is a very good example for it: maps help to organize and structure contention; counter-maps (often of police/State surveillance) produce other representations of police and its controlled territories (see Cobarrubias/Pickels 2009, Herb et al. 2009, Monahan 2006, Ullrich/Wollinger 2011, Wilson/Serisier 2010, Wilson 2012). Some other practices, as the bodily occupation of place, appeal to police reaction in order to gain visibility. The many voices and political frames within the contentious movements lead to diverse territorializations. Despite the volunteering engagement of protestors, the activity of contentious movements is no amateurism, mobilizing experience, knowledge and know-hows. It allows a growing complex organization.

## **6. Elements for a temporary conclusion on *contentious territories***

Literature often describes the powerful territorialities of police. My aim is to show that these territoriality are more various and ambivalent; that they does exist within a more complex and contentious social space; that they are even challenged by particular contentious movements. Thanks counter-territorializations, contentious movements succeed in opening a debate about police territories. I don't want to minimize or trivialize police control and repression power – but to reflect on the fact that police is actually an object contested by society; being also aware of the dissymmetry between police and contentious movements.

The research is going to focus on the urban tactics of two actor constellations within the “micro-level of social interactions and political performativity”. On the contrary of the supposed pragmatic practices of police, the practices of contentious movements emphasize ‘the political’: they shape symbolic places of action, reminding democracy, claiming for the right to civil disobedience or battling against the State. Interventions and

(material) practices of both police and social movement form complex/ambivalent but contentious territorializations, contemporary territorializations attempts of pluralism. Urban space -which is produced by dialectic contentious politics (more than urban policies)- becomes a plurivalent territory and an object of conflictual dialogue.

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