

They Were Doing Their G-D Jobs

On Policing

Jeff Shantz

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In the days following the mass police assaults on organizers, demonstrators, and bystanders during the G8/G20 events, even as comrades linger in squalid detention centres and jails, a troubling notion is taking shape, seemingly gaining traction, among activist circles as well as some sectors of the general public more broadly. This notion suggests that the police in Toronto acted in a way that was somehow atypical or out of the ordinary. Even more there is a sense that the police could have “kept order.” Some public discussion suggests that policing during the G8/G20 reflects a breakdown, a failure to carry out their duties “properly.” Incredibly, during a rally in support of people in detention, Naomi Klein suggested that the police “Do your goddamned job!” In response many in the crowd chanted “Do your job! Do your job!” Elsewhere, and even more incredibly, Judy Rebick has suggested that the were police failed to do their jobs properly in not arresting perceived black block participants: “What they could have done is arrest the Black Bloc at the beginning before they had a chance to be part of the bigger crowd and that’s what they didn’t do.” Some seem to believe that the police were supposed to be there to protect them or that the police provide the means for “protest” to take place.

The concern here is that the discussion is being framed in a rather liberal framework that presents a proper, even desirable, form of state policing, a good way of policing against a bad, that police in Toronto presumably strayed from.

While it is certain that the police job is a goddamned one, should activists really be calling on the police to do it? Think about what that would actually mean. More than this, though, the police during the G8/G20 (as during APEC in 1997 and Quebec City in 2001) WERE doing their job. They were doing what they were and are instituted and structured to do. This is not a case of the system going awry, breaking down, going off the rails or being over the top. This is a case of the system doing precisely what it is organized to do (and in a rather limited way).

The related argument is that the task ahead is then to get the police back to doing it right, to doing their job, to act properly as police. Thus calls for public inquiries that will supposedly shame the police or find them to have acted inappropriately or hold them accountable (to whom?/to themselves?/to Harper?). Historically the more brutal the police, the less the allegiance of the citizenry. They know this.

In earlier ages the ruling classes were rather more direct about what the job of the police involved (they wrote it down without concern since most non-elites were not taught to read

anyway). The term “police” itself comes from the Greek “polis”—the city. The institution was created to regulate the working classes and poor (the so-called dangerous classes) who were moving to cities after having been violently displaced from their communal lands (and who were rightly pissed about it and did not want jobs in the deadly factories). Look at the legislation that founded the first modern police forces in France and Germany. The royal edict of 1667 that founded the first modern police under Louis XIV in France stated clearly that the job of police was: “purging the city of what may cause disturbances, procuring abundance, and having each and every one live according to their station and duties.” Procuring abundance simply means ensuring the condition for economic exploitation. Having people live according to their station and duties is as clear an expression of maintaining class inequality as you can get. In Germany the language was similar and included urban planning and surveillance of prices among police functions.

Canadian state history, despite popular perceptions and mythologies, is replete with examples of the police—municipal, provincial and federal—“doing their jobs” in mass arrests, detentions, beatings, even killings of non-elites from various backgrounds (but particularly against indigenous communities and worker’s strikes). Only a short sample would include: the Red River Rebellion, the Northwest Rebellion, the Winnipeg General Strike, the On to Ottawa Trek, the FLQ “crisis,” the Quebec General Strike, Solidarity BC, Oka, Gustafsen Lake, Ipperwash, the OPSEU strike of 1995, June 15, Sun Peaks, Six Nations. And on and on so it has gone up to the present. Did the police not do their jobs in these cases?

In all of these instances, people were being restored to their station as the ruling classes saw it. Techniques, dress, language, and certainly public relations have changed. But, at root, the job of the police remains. And that is a job that we should be looking to abolish rather than restore.

More privileged audiences can tend to forget or overlook these foundation of policing while their effects are typically imposed on the poor, and indigenous people on an ongoing basis. When more privileged sectors are subjected to police violence, as during protests like APEC 1997 or the G8/G20, calls are raised for returning the police to their supposed “proper” place, and discussions of appropriate or inappropriate behaviour emerge, rather than calls for, say, abolition of the police as an institution.

The real issue is the existence of a standing private property army tasked with ensuring that non-elites are maintained in their station. The rising wave of direct actions is not about defiance of law and order—rather it is a challenge that the regime of rule itself is illegitimate. Their order is not ours and the order they are tasked with keeping is not one we want kept (at demonstrations or otherwise). For those who think police let the crowds get out of control, that does a disservice to us and our capacities. And why would organizers *not* want to get out from under police control anyway?

That the police are not forced to reveal their role more openly regularly, is, perhaps, a testament to our own incapacity in threatening to break out of our roles and station (partly what the black bloc is all about). We do not want to suggest that current policing has simply “gone off track” or “become corrupted.” Appeals to propriety suggest that there is a proper and legitimate role for the police institution—the job of policing.

Were the police at the G8/G20 (or APEC or Quebec City or June 15, 2001 or Vancouver 2010) doing their jobs? The answer is resolutely: “Yes.” Do we want them to do their job “more properly,” “more appropriately,” “more effectively?” “Hell, no.”

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