

# Thinking about state violence

**Joe Sim explores how idealised constructions of the normal and the pathological legitimate state violence.**

In the UK, political and popular attitudes towards, and explanations for, state violence operate within categories 'produced and guaranteed by the state' (Bourdieu, 1994). While the ideological power of these categories, like any social phenomena, is not absolute, nonetheless they are critical for setting the parameters within which state violence in general, and police and prison officer violence in particular, can be understood. Within these categories, the discourse of the abnormal is central and operates at three mutually reinforcing levels.

First, this discourse is mobilised to socially construct those at the sharp end of state violence as morally stained, psychologically fractured individuals whose abnormally dangerous, anti social tendencies justify violent interventions in their lives. Deaths in custody provide the paradigmatic example of this state-defined narrative where the endless profusion of 'state talk' legitimates the coercive control of the deviant in order to nullify the threat he/she is alleged to pose to the broader equanimity of state institutions or the social order more generally (Pemberton, 2008). The cosy, coy relationship between the state and the mass media reinforces this positivist, reductive interpretation of state violence. Media images draw 'subtly ... upon iconic images of police professionals and vigilantes, cast victims of police killings as physical and social threats and situate police actions within legitimate institutional roles' (Hirschfield and Simon, 2010).

Additionally, the discourse of the dangerous, unpredictable, abnormal deviant is a key foundation stone on which is built the culture of impunity

and immunity surrounding state servants. It allows police and prison officers to affirm their capacity to use violence and in doing so claim, as an absolute right, their freedom not to be controlled by external bodies who themselves are constructed as liberal, do-gooders incapable of imagining the daily dangers confronting state servants. And even when there appears to be overwhelming evidence for their prosecution, which is often ignored, then Pierre Bourdieu's point about 'pious hypocrisy' (Bourdieu, 1994) becomes relevant. Senior state servants are mobilised to offer their ritualistic condolences to the family and friends of the deceased. This allows the state to appear empathic without conceding their domination with respect to controlling the direction of popular and political debate while simultaneously closing down, *as far as they can*, alternative accounts that contest the policy outcomes determined by the state's allegedly unbiased, forensic sifting of case evidence. Ian Tomlinson's death at the G20 demonstration in April 2009 provides a chilling illustration of these processes.

At the time of writing, while the state's definition of events has not achieved hegemonic closure and remains open to challenge across a broad range of fronts, his case does nonetheless represent the latest in a long line of cases stretching back over the last two centuries which illustrate the insidious culture of immunity and impunity covering

state servants, and the lack of democratic accountability governing their activities, violent and otherwise.

Second, the atavistic attitudes and violent behaviour of individual police or prison officers are constructed as deviations from the normal, benevolent behaviour of his/her colleagues. He/she is an abnormal monstrosity who operates within a formal and informal culture where violence or the threat of violence is both minimal but occasionally necessary. Focusing on the abnormal individual means that a number of fundamental issues remain on the margins: the deeply embedded nature of state violence explicitly engaged in, or implicitly condoned by, the majority of state servants; the everyday fear and terror that victims of state violence feel, and are encouraged to feel; the long history of violence often symbolised by particularly notorious prisons and police stations – places which can be understood as 'unified field[s] of fear' where 'state terror [is] sunk into the lived body' (Feldman, cited in Linke, 2006) – and the fact that violence and the fear of violence always underpin the apparent consent of the confined (Cover, cited in Sim, 2008) are neglected in favour of a focus on the behaviour of the ubiquitous 'bad apple' and his/her allegedly corrosive actions.

Finally, there is the question of the representation of violence *towards*

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state servants. This involves exaggerating and over-dramatising the risks they allegedly face every day. The harm done to them, again categorised and definitively guaranteed by the moral

entrepreneurial interventions of the Police Federation and the Prison Officers Association, is ideologically crucial in distracting attention away from the violence inflicted by these same servants, abnormal or otherwise. This, in turn, is cemented to a process of circumspection where the nature and extent of violence

utilised by the police on the streets or against those detained in institutions, is sanitised. This allows police and prison officers to claim the moral, political, and ideological high ground so that when one of their number is killed or assaulted then the discourses of danger and threat are already in place to be mobilised hegemonically to reinforce and legitimate their claims that *they* are the last bastions of authority and control against the criminal tsunami that will sweep across the society from whom they need protection and against whom they can use force with impunity (Sim, 2004).

The demonstration at the Kingsnorth power station in the summer of 2008 provided a vivid, and not uncommon, illustration of the state's capacity for exaggeration and over-dramatisation. Initially, government ministers justified the £5.9 million cost of policing a week-long protest by demonstrators at the power station by pointing out that 70 police officers had been injured. However, data, *which only became available following a Freedom of Information request*, revealed a different picture regarding the nature and extent of the injuries sustained by the 1,500 officers used to police the demonstration. In fact, only 12 injuries to officers were reported. Furthermore, *no* injuries were sustained dealing with the protestors. The injuries they *did* sustain included: 'stung on finger by possible wasp'; 'officer injured sitting in car'; while a third 'succumbed to sun and heat'. One officer cut his arm on a fence, one cut his finger while mending a car and another 'used leg to open door and next day had pain in lower back'. The police tactical medicine unit also reported that three officers had suffered heat exhaustion, three had toothaches, six were bitten by insects while 'others had diarrhoea, had cut their finger or had headaches' (*The Guardian*, 15 December 2008).

It is not being suggested here that state definitions of reality have achieved hegemony, or that state servants are guaranteed conspiratorial protection for every violent act they engage in. Alternative accounts articulated by those subjected to

police and prison violence, the work of pressure groups like INQUEST, the utilisation of new technology that captures what happens on the streets, the interventions of critical academics, and the alternative vision provided by the non-violent work of some police and prison staff have contested dominant discourses around state violence and have led to some prosecutions. In that sense, contradictions and contingencies remain central to the deployment of the state's material and ideological power. 'Indeed, the case of Pamela Somerville shows such contingencies in their full light. In September 2010, she was thrown onto a concrete, police station floor leaving her with a serious head wound. The officer involved, who was initially sentenced to six months in prison, was reported by a colleague. The judge expressed concern over the evidence of two other officers who mobilised the classic discourse of drunkenness to undermine the woman's case. The Assistant Chief Constable of the force involved expressed the view that the accused officer was a 'disgrace' who had 'no place in Wiltshire Police' (although he, nonetheless, returned to the discourse of dangerousness when making a point that had no relevance to the case. Custody suites, he said, were 'difficult places to work' (*The Guardian*, 8 September 2010)). In a further twist, the officer was cleared of assault by a judge on appeal prompting Ms. Somerville to express the view that 'I only hope to God this policeman is never put in charge of prisoners again' and that there was 'one rule for the police and another for members of the public' (Challand, 2010). At the time of writing he faces an internal disciplinary inquiry.

Taken together, these processes are ideologically deadly in that they distract attention away from the institutionalised nature of state violence, undermine any informed understanding about its use and impact and disqualify, though not always successfully, critical perspectives about what should be done about it. Furthermore, despite individual state servants being occasionally punished it remains likely that state violence, rather than

diminishing, will become more intense (and its proponents even less accountable) especially towards the 'social junk' and 'social dynamite' (Spitzer, cited in Box, 1983), trapped within, and squeezed by, the decimating pliers of capitalist neo-liberalism. The state's relentless focus on these groups – socially constructed as disruptive, disorderly, dangerous, and demoralised – will continue to be supported overwhelmingly by mass media institutions and their personnel who, in engendering a culture of fear and loathing towards them, legitimate coercive interventions by state servants into their lives. In contrast, the abject failure to respond to the rapacious behaviour and violence of the powerful, or to bring state servants to account, provides a graphic illustration of the undiminished, 'pious hypocrisy' of the governing class, and their media acolytes, in a social wasteland that is both savage and unforgiving. ■

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