The geopolitics of the police: Foucault, disciplinary power and the tactics of the Los Angeles Police Department

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ABSTRACT. This paper uses the insights of Foucault to analyze the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) as an agency of discipline. It takes Foucault's injunction to study the 'how' of power seriously, using insights from ethnographic fieldwork with the Los Angeles Police Department to assess Foucault's general formulations concerning disciplinary power. The fieldwork reveals that the LAPD does indeed engage in a series of technologically and organizationally sophisticated practices to monitor and control the populace. However, it also reveals the need to remember Foucault's more cautionary programatics in analyzing an agency such as the LAPD; dynamics both internal and external to the police organization limit the reach of its surveillance capacities. The disciplinary network of the LAPD is much more restricted, complex and contradictory than a simplistic Foucauldian reading would suggest.

Introduction: a vignette

It is drizzling on this Saturday night, but Air 18 hovers beneath the clouds, affording a panoramic perspective of the seemingly infinite street grid of Los Angeles. Major streets are obvious—the lights are brighter, the expanse is broader—but side arteries are visible as well. And if the street lights are not illumination enough, the observer in front of me can draw upon a 30 million candlepower 'nightsun', or, if a suspect seeks cover, upon the craft's FLIR (forward looking infrared device), which registers heat-bearing substances in a glowing white.

The observer is using both devices to try and locate a robbery suspect from a South Central check-cashing facility when a call comes over the headphones requesting the helicopter in Hollywood. An officer has a 'code 36'—a stolen car—and wants the helicopter overhead before he attempts to detain the driver. The car, the officer explains, is at Highland and Hollywood. The pilot, sitting to the observer's right, hears the call, banks the craft sharply to the north and heads towards the Capitol Records building, a prominent landmark for pilots trying to find Hollywood. As they speed north, the observer pages through his thick book of street maps to find the precise location. Meanwhile, the patrol officer tailing the stolen car regularly broadcasts its movements—eastbound Hollywood, northbound Las Palmas, eastbound Franklin. At the corner of
Wilcox and Franklin, the helicopter is now overhead and, from the back seat, it is easy to
spot the stolen car—it is the one with three patrol cars behind it.

The officer knew the car was stolen because he had entered the car's license plate into
his MDT (mobile display terminal), an in-car device that, among other things, allows
access to Department of Motor Vehicles files on stolen cars. Within seconds of typing in
the license plate number, an officer can learn the registration status of any car, as well as
whether there are any outstanding violations, or any reports of theft. Armed with this
information, and with the assistance of a helicopter overhead and two patrol cars behind,
he is ready to pull the car over.

The appearance of the helicopter seems to confirm what the driver of the car had
undoubtedly begun to fear—that the police want to detain him. Upon the helicopter's
arrival, the suspect turns suddenly and speeds down Wilcox, runs a red light at Yucca and
continues southward. The chase is on.

Air 18's role is straightforward. Its pilot circles the ship continuously, so that it
perpetually stays above the car. The observer does two things—keeps the stolen car
permanently illuminated by the nightsun, and informs the lead pursuing vehicle whether
there is cross-traffic at each intersection the car approaches. On the ground, the task is
more difficult. By speeding strategically through cross traffic, and by causing a traffic
accident on Sunset Boulevard which slows the pursuing police car, the suspect gains a
significant advantage. The helicopter, though, never loses the suspect from its 30 million
candlepower sight, so when he jumps out of the car and tries to blend into pedestrian
traffic, he is easily picked out when the patrol cars catch up. The chase over, the suspect
is taken into custody.

An interpretation

It is an impressive performance, a vivid demonstration of the extensive and intensive
reach of the police. Plugged into a sophisticated and far-ranging information network,
able to communicate easily and directly with one another, organized to assume different
and complementary responsibilities such that land and air are effectively patrolled, the
police are able to focus unwavering attention on a single suspect and monitor his
movements so well that his eventual capture is an inevitability. One sees here, perhaps,
vivid evidence for a disciplinary network of the sort described by Foucault (1977), one
based on 'permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance' (p. 214), on an 'infinite
examination' (p. 189) in a 'panoptic machine' (p. 217). This elaborate political technology
surveys and interlinks, it monitors and controls, it creates and maintains a cartography of
power (Deleuze, 1998; see also Foucault, 1980, 1990). It is a view of the police,
specifically the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), adopted by Mike Davis (1990),
who emphasizes the development of helicopter surveillance and the increased
interlinking of the police with other security mechanisms to achieve wider and deeper
control. This is the police as developers of a 'space program', a significant cog in a
confusing but ultimately seamless web of social control, which seeks relentlessly for more
control, for a more sophisticated political technology, for a more intensive and
thoroughgoing penetration into daily life. Joining power and knowledge in a tactical
geopolitics, this network, according to Foucault, operates on its own logic, satisfying its
own appetite for control largely autonomous from the discourses of laws, rights and
central powers.

Foucault's interest in linking power and knowledge via an analysis of geopolitics is by
now well known, and his spatially sensitive analytics have been usefully employed by
several geographers. Hannah (1993), for example, demonstrates how attempts to control Native Americans in the 19th century were made difficult before the establishment of an effective grid of power; the subject population resisted control by resisting locatedness. Similarly, Robinson (1990) shows how apartheid worked as a quite specifically spatialized mode of social control. It is clear from these accounts (see also Lowman, 1986, 1989) that modern systems of disciplinary control rest quite fundamentally upon the establishment of a system that exhaustively maps and monitors those that it disciplines; surveillance in the modern era links knowledge, power and space (Dandeker, 1990; Ogborn, 1993a).

Centralized police forces did not receive much of Foucault's analytic attention and were mentioned only sporadically in his more general discussions of discipline. However, it is clear that he saw the police in terms of disciplinary power:

But, although the police as an institution were certainly organized in the form of a state apparatus, and although this was certainly linked directly to the centre of political sovereignty, the type of power that it exercises, the mechanisms it operates and the elements to which it applies them are specific. It is an apparatus that must be coextensive with the entire social body and not only by the extreme limits that it embraces, but by the minuteness of the details it is concerned with. (Foucault, 1977: 213)

Police power, clearly, is understood here as an instance of the type of decentralized, capillary power characteristic of the disciplines, extensively enwrapping society while it intensively concerns itself with minute details. Further, policing rests fundamentally upon a political geography (Fyfe, 1991); the effort to attend to minute details involves the diagramming and controlling of space.

Any history of the development of police forces, or any contemporary account of their practices, must recognize the cogency of Foucault's insights. While policing was largely haphazard and reactive in the 1800s (Fogelson, 1977; Richardson, 1974), it has become increasingly 'professionalized' throughout this century, such that contemporary forces are extensively regulated bureaucracies with increasingly sophisticated technologies at their disposal (Manning, 1992; Walker, 1977, 1989). Telephones, radios and automobiles, for example, came to be united in a system that was designed to provide rapid police response to citizen requests. This communications system, more recently, was augmented by in-car computer terminals which allow officers not only to communicate with supervisors, dispatchers and other officers, but also to access information concerning vehicles and suspects. Such information is quite extensive; current databases in Los Angeles, for example, enable officers to access information on motor vehicles, stolen property, firearms and criminal records. Indeed, the LAPD has emerged during the contemporary era as the leading US example of a professionalized, technologically sophisticated department (Gazell, 1976; Schiesl, 1990). It was, for example, a pioneer in the use of helicopters as part of patrol operations. Helicopters literally provide another dimension to police oversight, enabling a capacity to monitor suspects' movements far in excess of on-ground efforts. Also, in more recent times, the LAPD and other police organizations have become increasingly specialized. Distinct units concern themselves with narrowly defined crimes to exploit particularized knowledge about those crimes. Thus, specialized divisions focus exclusively on gangs, narcotics, forgery, and so on.

Together, these advances in technology and these shifts in organizational structure represent significant transformations in the techniques of the police, heralding a larger capacity to monitor and intrude (see Gordon, 1991). It is clear, in other words, that an elaborate and sophisticated technology of discipline undergirds contemporary policing.
This no more obvious than in the structure practices, and capabilities of the Los Angeles Police Department.

Because of its high level of technological and organizational sophistication, the LAPD is an unusually appropriate object of attention for an examination of the geopolitics of contemporary discipline. To undertake such an examination is to take seriously Foucault's insistence on studying the 'how' of power and its instantiation in the further and finer reaches of the disciplinary network. Further, such an examination provides the best means of assessing the utility of Foucault's analytics for comprehending the practices of such agencies of modern discipline as the police.

As the following reveals, an ethnographic analysis of the LAPD provides some important cautions against an unnuanced Foucauldian interpretation of modern discipline. Foucault's sweeping and powerful rhetoric can seduce one into such a simplistic reading; his bold formulations make it easy to overlook his own admonitions to find the ruptures and inconsistencies within the network. Several authors (e.g. Callinicos, 1982; Dew, 1984; Garland, 1990; Ignatieff, 1983; Poulantzas, 1978) have argued that Foucault pays rather less attention to the limits of and resistances to disciplinary power than he might, and thereby perhaps encourages a confusion between the ideal of the Panopticon and the reality of modern discipline. As Driver (1985) has noted, this line of critique may itself be an overstatement, because it downplays the cautionary notes Foucault interspersed within his commentary on modern discipline. The goal here is to give more prominent play to these cautionary notes, to work against a view of at least one agency of discipline, the LAPD, as capable of seamless surveillance and control of the spaces it patrols. A closer look at the LAPD reveals the ruptures and contradictions that blur and limit the Panopticon's vision.

A closer look inside the Los Angeles Police Department

A second vignette

A call comes over the radio regarding a shooting on St Andrews Place. When the officer I am with arrives, two patrol cars are there already, as is an ambulance. Two more patrol cars will arrive shortly, so that ultimately seven officers are at the scene. Although there is clearly a victim—who is being loaded into the ambulance as we arrive—little else is certain. The officers spend about 45 minutes talking with residents of the neighborhood and examining the street and sidewalk for such evidence as spent bullet casings. It is not clear whether the victim was also carrying a gun, and if so where he hid it, whether there were one or two episodes of shooting, and whether the shooters were on foot or in a car. It is also unclear whether this is gang related, and if so, which gangs are involved and why. Judging from the graffiti, this is apparently BSA territory, but the officers cannot agree on what the acronym means. Further, they wonder whether BSA is a tagger group or a full-blown gang, and just who its enemies might be. Some officers have noticed rival graffiti in the neighborhood, but what these acronyms—MOT and TIK—stand for is unclear.

As for this particular crime, it is unlikely to be investigated, much less solved. If it is gang related, it will undoubtedly be responded to, although in a fashion that will again only involve the police tangentially. After the next retaliatory shooting, the police will again have little role but to put up crime-scene tape, collect bullet casings, interview a few neighbors, and then turn over their meager evidence to overworked detectives who are likely to ignore it.
On this night, what is striking is not police power, but police impotence. The relentless, lethal struggle between rival gangs in Los Angeles is something the police, particularly those on regular patrol, cannot even understand, much less stanch. In this case, the exclusion of the police is desired by those participating in the carnage. More than just wanting to prevent the police from getting too close a look at their membership and activities, gang members do not participate with police investigations of their shootings because they want to preserve the right of retaliation for themselves.

Here, then, the police run up against very real limits to their power. For many reasons, street gang members refuse to cooperate with police investigations and engage in a number of successful informal tactics to elude capture. For example, they frequently use stolen cars for drive-by shootings or for robberies, they utilize obscure hiding places to conceal drugs or other contraband, and they exploit their local geographical knowledge to speed their escapes. Also, gang members frequently intimidate neighborhood residents into not cooperating with the police (Grinc, 1994). And these are just some of the informal techniques potential suspects can use to elude the police net.

However, limits to police investigative efforts are not just external to the police; the disciplinary net itself is not as well knit as casual observation might suggest. In fact, the very information network that provides seeming evidence of extensive police power may also serve to limit the police. For instance, the mobile display terminal that allows the police to locate stolen cars and gather information about potential suspects may also be deskilling officers to the point where their capacity to read space is deteriorating. That is because the MDT is used for more than just finding stolen cars. Each incident that the officers are assigned gets an incident number, which the officers can use to bring up all available information about the call onto their screen. Thus, the officers are able to learn everything that the 911 operator learned from the person who telephoned her, which typically includes information about the alleged crime and a description of the suspect. Increasingly, according to veteran officers and veterans in the LAPD's communications division, police officers are relying entirely on the MDT for all the relevant information on a call, and relying less and less on their own observational skills. As a result, the art of what is called 'observational policing'—the capacity to witness evidence of criminal actions amidst the swirl of urban life—may be dying, and with it, one aspect of the police capacity to intervene in social life. Veteran officers report a decline in arrests initiated by officers who, on routine patrol, sniff out evidence of criminality, engaging in what the officers refer to as 'pooping and snooping'.

The MDT, therefore, may well be a mechanism by which the officers can locate and control, but it may also work to disable equally effective means of surveillance. The pride and care that officers formerly took in developing their observational skills is displaced by frustration when the MDT does not provide them with all the information they need. This is an illustrative example of how the impersonal technological surveillance described by Foucault can work to undermine the reach and intensity of the disciplinary network, and reveals a paradox endemic to the increasingly technologized nature of police practice. On the one hand, the database is larger and the capacity to access it easier. On the other hand, by putting officers in patrol cars and linking them more organically to the information network, current patrol practice isolates the police from the community, thus often making it difficult for them to gather the information necessary to solve crimes.

It is important to remember that the elaborate communications network established by modern police departments was implemented to map and monitor not just suspects, but also the officers themselves. Without such a sophisticated communications system, early police forces were unable to prevent the laziness and corruption that flourished.
amongst officers (Fogelson, 1977; Rubinstein, 1973). Currently, officers are regularly
sent messages from dispatchers and supervisors via the radio and the MDT, and their
reported movements are inscribed by the dispatchers into an ongoing record of their
activity. Nonetheless, the network is not entirely effective in disciplining the dis-
ciplinaries: officers possess a raft of techniques to elude capture by the system. For
example, they can delay reporting that they have ‘cleared’ a call, and thus buy time
until they are given their next assignment. Or if they fail to clear a number of calls, and
thus develop an apparent backlog of responsibilities, they know the dispatcher will not
give them any more assignments. Conversely, they can exaggerate their effectiveness
to supervisors by reporting they are ‘at the scene’ before they actually arrive, thus
giving a false sense of their ability to respond quickly to calls. In these ways, police
officers themselves resist the monitoring mechanisms of the communications network
in which they are enmeshed.

It is the case in Los Angeles, and other major cities, that more technologized police
operations are part and parcel of what Lea and Young (1984) term ‘military policing’.
Drawn away from a close connection to the community and plugged instead into a
sophisticated surveillance network, police officers develop a less-nuanced capacity to
read and understand what is occurring outside the car window. It becomes easier for
officers to bluntly categorize people as either good or bad, and to move aggressively
against the latter group. Such aggressive maneuvers are buttressed by a culture of
militarism. This is most obviously displayed by the LAPD’s reliance upon helicopters
(tumed, in militaristic lingo, ‘Air Support’), which are used to provide literal oversight to
patrol operations and assist in such displays of aggressive derring-do as vehicle
pursuits.

Such a militaristic approach, however, often works to alienate the police from the
community. In Los Angeles and elsewhere, the police have often adopted an aggressive
stance vis-a-vis crime-prone communities, engaging in such pro-active measures as
random searches and seizures to convey a strong sense of presence in those communities.
The LAPD, in the words of one of its sergeants, was an ‘ass-kicking department’, at least
in the era before the beating of motorist Rodney King in 1991 (see Acuna, 1984; Escobar,
1993; Fogelson, 1971; Raine, 1967). Such aggressive policing, however, breeds
tremendous distrust between the police and the citizenry. This has the effect of limiting
the effectiveness of the police, because the judicial resolution of the vast majority of
criminal actions requires information and eye-witness accounts that only the community
can provide (Eck, 1982; Skogan and Antunes, 1979). The seeming strength of the
militaristic, aggressive pose, in other words, actually weakens the control and capture
capacities of the police.

Further, the introduction of sophisticated information technologies appears to have
little effect on the bureaucratic workings of police forces (Manning, 1992), which means
that the various subdivisions within these forces continue long-standing practices that
limit the sharing of information. The increased specialization of departments has led to
efforts on the parts of various divisions to demonstrate their worth by solving crimes with
little assistance (Ericson, 1982; Rubinstein, 1973). Organizational standing and prestige, in
other words, run counter to organizational efficiency. Thus, a specialized gang unit in the
LAPD, organized at the more centralized bureau level, rarely attends roll calls in the more
decentralized divisions from which patrol officers are dispatched. The gang unit positions
itself as a bastion of expertise and removes itself from the less prestigious world of patrol.
In so doing, however, it renders itself and the organization less able to curtail gang activity
by limiting the flow of information across bureaucratic lines.
A too simplistic look at the technological and organizational sophistication of the LAPD can easily overestimate the department's control and capture capabilities. The depersonalized technology of its communication network does increase the capacity to monitor the movements of suspects and to provide up-to-date information about the legality of their activities. It also helps police supervisors maintain oversight of those on patrol. However, it leads to a decline in observational skills and it spawns a new range of tactics for officers themselves to avoid detection. Organizational sophistication similarly does not necessarily translate into seamless disciplinary control, because it creates internal political tensions that discourage inter-organizational cooperation. And to the extent that these technological and organizational developments encourage a confrontational style of policing, they discourage the police–community interaction needed to capture and convict most criminals.

An appreciation for a nuanced look at the disciplinary power of the LAPD is further deepened by examining not only how the department is internally at odds with itself, but also by investigating the variety of determinants of its practices. It is useful, in other words, as Driver (1994) suggests, to locate disciplinary networks within their appropriate political and social contexts. This is an important antidote to Foucault's tendency to see the rise of disciplinary power not in terms of institutions nor interests (Driver, 1985; Jessop, 1990), but as a manifestation of a general expansiveness of a more amorphous network of power. This relentless focus on power, and the development of the allegedly far-reaching disciplinary network as an outgrowth of power, makes less obvious the complicated construction of that network, the panoply of often-contradicting discourses that constitute the operations of an agency such as the LAPD. Many of these discourses emerge from the internal subculture of the LAPD, while others intrude into the disciplinary network from without.

A closer look around the Los Angeles Police Department

It is difficult to detail exhaustively all of the discourses shaping police practice. However, an elaboration of some of them demonstrates the necessity of resisting the impulse to understand the structuring of the tactics of the LAPD largely in terms of a mostly autonomous reign of power. It also underscores the importance of grounding an analysis of disciplinary networks in a wide-ranging social analysis.

One important discourse that shapes police practice is the law, the logic of which Foucault was at pains to distinguish from that of the disciplines (see, especially, Foucault, 1980: ch. 5). However, it is impossible to understand most disciplinary agencies, especially the police, without examining the law. It is the law that defines the police's function and power, as well as the various crimes the police are responsible for detecting (Grimshaw and Jefferson, 1987). One of the effects of the law, however, is to restrict police access to certain spaces (Fyfe, 1992; Stinchombe, 1963). Again, an incident provides a vivid illustration.

A woman calls the police and complains that her neighbor to the rear is throwing bottles over the fence and onto her driveway. This is not only a nuisance, but a violation of a restraining order. When the police knock on the door of the alleged offender’s house, a friend answers. As she responds to the police’s questions, she reaches for a folding chair, opens it, sets it squarely in front of the door, sits down, and continues to talk. Her action is unambiguous, a clear statement that she knows the police are not allowed to enter without her permission. Unable to enter and question the offender, the officers have little choice but to leave. Their next potential step, to
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secure a search warrant, is not likely to be pursued, given the comparatively unserious nature of the case.

The woman, by asserting her legally defined rights to thwart a police search, has quite easily and effectively brought the investigation to a halt. What is of interest is not just the evidence of another limit to police intrusiveness, but the very real presence of the law, and of rights explicated by law, in the interworkings of a disciplinary agency. Despite Foucault's effort, in Alan Hunt's terms, to accomplish an 'expulsion of law' (1993) from his analysis of the rise of the disciplinary network, any thoroughgoing understanding of the geopolitics of the police cannot ignore it.

What this incident further illustrates is not only that law and discipline are complexly intertwined (Herbert, 1995; Ogborn, 1993b), but that the law itself occasionally runs at cross-purposes. Although the officers arrive at the woman's door legally empowered to arrest the violator of the restraining order, restrictions on access to private property prevent them from enacting their legally defined authority. The barrier the woman erects with her folding chair serves, for the moment, to check one legally empowered move with another.

It is worth noting that the boundary between private and public space can be a resource for police officers as well as a barrier. For example, an LAPD officer concerned to stop drug trafficking in and around an apartment building used the private–public distinction to her advantage. She secured a key to the building from the owner, along with his permission to arrest any non-residents she found on the premises for trespassing. She was thus able to put pressure on the drug dealers, most of whom did not in fact live in the building. The arrests for trespassing, made legally salient by the definition of private space, were used as a means toward the end of eliminating the drug sales.

Besides the law, there are other discourses, developed largely within the police subculture, that are similarly crucial in constituting the practices of the police, including those of safety, morality and bureaucratic efficiency. The discourse of safety emphasizes the establishment of practices to preserve officers' lives by ensuring that they possess optimal information about a given scene and can respond forcefully and pro-actively if necessary. The discourse of morality constitutes the police as the 'good guys' protecting society from the predatory tendencies of the 'bad guys', thereby infusing police practice with a deep sense of moral rightness. And bureaucratic efficiency tries to ensure a smooth flow of command and control within the organization, such that the overall capacity to map and control space is maximized.

My intent here is less to explain the significance of each of these, but rather to draw attention to their importance, and to their sometimes contradictory tendencies. The imperative to be safe may conflict with the imperative to abide by the law, when, for instance, officers search a suspect they consider suspicious without clear legal ground for doing so. Or, the imperative to be safe may conflict with the desire to clear a 'bad guy' off the street when an officer chooses to pursue a fleeing felon at high speeds along surface streets. The complex interactions between these various discourses is usefully illustrated by the following incident from the fieldwork.

The sergeant is surprised that he is being requested by two of his better officers; confident in their decisions, this pair rarely call for supervisory assistance. When he arrives at the six-floor apartment building, the two officers and a citizen are standing in front. The citizen lives on the fifth floor and is the person who summoned the police. This, it turns out, is his fourth such call in the past six months. His concern is a mother and child who live in the apartment above him. He claims that the child can be regularly heard jumping up and down and claiming that he is hungry. The man further claims that the
woman and the child have recently visited a child service agency because of alleged abuse.

The officers have summoned the sergeant because of the sensitive nature of the situation. For his part, the sergeant takes little time making his decision: the officers will do nothing. There is, he says, no solid evidence of a crime, certainly nothing serious enough to warrant knocking the door down. For that, he says, he would need loud screaming and/or the sounds of a body being struck. He instructs the officers to file a report and make sure that it reaches the appropriate detective the next morning.

On the one hand, it is clear that the sergeant uses the law to define this situation as one where action is not warranted. The available evidence does not fit the legal definition of a potential crime, and thus does not warrant the strong action of forcefully entering private space. On the other hand, it is notable that the sergeant does not at least knock on the door to see if the woman will voluntarily answer questions and/or allow the officers to examine her child, an action he might feel morally compelled to take. It is thus probable that it is more than the law that inhibits the sergeant, because he is not legally prevented from knocking on the door. It is likely that the sergeant is simply not interested in confronting the woman, because tense family situations are notoriously difficult to handle, often becoming inflamed when the police arrive. The sergeant is undoubtedly afraid that the situation may get out of hand, and that he may then be forced to take an action that could, down the line, be questioned by a supervisor. It is better, as a result, to file a report and make the situation someone else's problem. While morality may push the sergeant toward the woman's door, considerations of law, safety and his bureaucratic standing convince him to retreat. The variety of discourses that structure police practice, in this and other instances, push and pull officers in different directions, posing significant dilemmas for them on a regular basis.

By drawing attention to the variety of discourses that undergird the geopolitics of the police, the intent is not just to challenge the apparently seamless nature of the disciplinary network that emerges from an unnuanced reading of Foucault, but also to challenge the overweening emphasis on power for power's sake that seems to drive the network, according to Foucault. Much of what motivates these discourses is not just power, nor does the working out of these discourses necessarily expand the overall power of the network.

Getting beyond Foucault's sometimes excessive emphasis on power also enables us to recognize the important constitutive presence of other discourses whose primary dynamic lies largely external to the disciplinary network, but whose logics become entwined in disciplinary actions. I want to focus here on two such discourses, those associated with capitalism and machismo. If we return to the shooting on St Andrews Place, and look more closely at the reasons why the gangs rebuff police investigations, we can witness the salience of both of these.

What is emerging from several recent analyses of urban street gangs (Hagedorn, 1988; Jankowski, 1991; Padilla, 1992) is that many are prototypical capitalist enterprises. There exists a strict hierarchy of responsibilities and powers, such that the 'chiefs' at the top, who control the disbursement of drugs and revenues, wield an ultimately exploitative power over the street-level sellers. Relatedly, membership in gangs quite actively promotes the quintessential capitalist consciousness of competition, wherein various 'firms' engage in often literally cut-throat challenges to markets. This is most obviously evident by the continual battles over turf, which are very much battles over markets.

But battles over turf spring from more than just economic motivations. It is here that the discourse of machismo plays its deadly hand. In order to establish themselves as 'players'
in the gang hierarchy, to demonstrate their loyalty and their unflinching courage, urban youths are compelled to respond to each shooting with a shooting of their own (Anderson, 1990; Shakur, 1993). As a result, a long and confused history of attacks and retaliations evolves, as shootings beget shootings in a continuous manner such that the underlying reasons for the dispute become hard to discern.

One is reminded of the myth of the Western frontier, where unflinching and sometimes violent responses to a range of unpredictable challenges was the means by which one's masculine selfhood was defined. Interestingly, this idea is implicitly accepted in the informal culture of the LAPD, where young officers anxious for action are referred to as 'ghetto gunfighters' who have fallen victim to the 'John Wayne Syndrome'. One can thus see how the culture of machismo helps constitute both the gangs and the police, structuring their interaction so that each side has something very vital to prove in their encounters.

My larger point here, however, is to suggest how the overarching dynamics of capitalism and machismo help to constitute both the urban reality the police confront, as well as help constitute active resistance to police intervention. Driven by enduring and systemic poverty to achieve whatever profits drug sales provide, by the constant competition of territorial rivals, by the impelling need to establish their masculinity, urban gangs engage in activities that attract the attention of the police and other agencies of discipline. The imperatives of economic desperation and masculine insecurity, however, override any police efforts to curtail gang activity; the police may arrest occasional suspects, but they can hardly arrest the process from its continuing lethality.

Conclusion: working with and on Foucault

Foucault's analyses of modern disciplinary power usefully draw attention to the outskirts of the networks of that power. His methodological injunction to study the 'how' of power in ascending analyses shifts focus from the center to the periphery, where the finer and wider play of discipline is most importantly evident. At its points of extension, the sophisticated political technology of discipline instantiates itself in a local geopolitics. And the police are key social agents in this local geopolitics. Empowered to monitor and patrol, and enabled by a sophisticated infrastructure of information and communication, police officers, in the modern era, increasingly intrude into more intimate spheres to regulate individual conduct (Walker, 1989). The expansive reach of the police and the sophisticated techniques of their surveillance was made evident by the opening vignette, a case where considerable control capacities mapped and detained an individual suspect determined to elude capture.

Nonetheless, the significance of such scenarios can easily be overstated, and can help obscure the more complex, limited and contradictory nature of the disciplinary network. While the metaphor of the Panopticon is seductive, and while it is tempting to see its eye materialized as the nightsun of an LAPD helicopter, it remains necessary to recognize how the reach of the police is hardly limitless. Not only are the police actively, and often successfully, resisted by such opponents as street gangs, but they are restricted by their own internal dynamics. Further, aggressive activities that seem to evince strong police power may actually limit the capacity to corral criminals by dissuading citizens from providing invaluable information. Thus, it is necessary to keep the cautionary Foucault in mind when analyzing the police, the Foucault who acknowledged the importance of resistance, incompleteness and contradiction.
It is also necessary to fully sociologize a disciplinary agency such as the LAPD. This means escaping Foucault's metaphysics of power, choosing instead to nest the practices of police officers within the variety of discourses that structure them, and to elaborate how these discourses pass through disciplinary action. An appreciation of these discourses not only underscores the complexity of the daily geopolitical practices of the LAPD, but also draws continued attention to the lack of seamlessness within its network. Different discourses pull officers in different directions, particularly when, as is the case in contemporary Los Angeles, the department is the object of open political struggle. The 'ass-kicking' machismo that has characterized the culture of the LAPD (Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department, 1991) is now under attack, and is explicitly challenged by a new reform movement, community-based policing. Just how this internal struggle will play itself out is uncertain, but the struggle is an ever-present reality within the ranks of LAPD.

The analysis here provides strong support for Foucault's methodological injunction to study the local geopolitics of power, to map the boundaries where discipline meets resistance. Such analyses provide the richest means of assessing how disciplinary power and the network it establishes do and do not work in the modern era, how the reach of discipline is both enhanced and curtailed by the swirl of impulses that structure it. As important as it is to acknowledge the means the LAPD employed to capture the car thief, it is equally important to remember how and why so many others get away.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Katherine Beckett, Joseph Nevins and three anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

Note

1. All of the vignettes described here were drawn from field observations of LAPD officers. The fieldwork occurred over an eight-month period and consisted of nearly 65 ride-alongs with different units.

References


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