

## *Path of reception. Responses to an ethnography about the police force*

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1. Last November I finished a PhD dissertation about police patrol activities, the work practices of their everyday life and city encounters involving the police force in Lisbon. I'm going to speak a little about the options I've made and the path of reception of the text among some readers in these last months. I am aware that this is only one particular angle to see a larger problem. Here I deliberately assume the final text "Patrulha e Proximidade, uma etnografia da polícia em Lisboa" as a public sphere feast.<sup>1</sup>

Since the beginning of fieldwork I have considered police officers life, police work and their urban interventions too important to be a problem confined to the academic sphere. Although I was doing a PhD research I looked for a way to explore, challenge and question some limits of academic writing conventions. I took some literary liberties in order to make myself clear to a non-specialist audience, without losing focus on scientific grounded theory. I was hoping to reach different publics that would include even elements of the police force.

If I have to assume a political position of writing I would say this is not a co-operative text, with pre-established protocols – like Foot-Whyte (1984), Hopkins (1993), Horwitz (1993), Ginsburg (1993), McBeth (1993), Lawless (1992), and others have done. This was an attempt to do something like an "engaged ethnography". My aim was not to write "for them" – the policemen and policewomen, who are a plural group within diverse and complex organisations – but involving them in the public debate the dissertation could somehow emancipate.

This debate could surely raise epistemological questions, ethics concerns, reflections on style and the limits of participant-observation practices. But my main goal was a political one: to question the limits and advantages of ethnographic writings in a public and national debate about the Portuguese police force. I was hoping to create some sort of open wide symmetry, in a Latourian way of thinking (Latour, 1994), between the knowledge we produce and the public sphere.

This kind of project is certainly not new. What is perhaps new is to use a PhD dissertation (not a published book or text) and to do it in a context where the police force was out of the Portuguese scientific agenda. If we look at the current lines of research in Portuguese social sciences will see there are not much concern about police force, security and urban order control narratives, rhetoric and practices. Though in the last decade there has been an increasing interest in the judicial system, themes about the police force tend to be

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<sup>1</sup> If you want to take a look to the ethnography the reference of free registration and download is <https://repositorio.iscte.pt/handle/10071/274>.

outside of the research programs. And what is perhaps more difficult is the systematic search for this dialogue in an apparent infertile soil. Since the beginning my point was to produce a clear but dense discourse, to be shared by the social sciences as well as by the general and undefined public.

2. I spent the year of 2004 in a Lisbon's patrol station, and I am in contact with several Portuguese police units and experts since 2000, when I first started researching police related issues. As I finished the research I stuck to some major arguments.

Portuguese public police work (armed and uniformed) is about order as much as security. No more than 20% of their work involve crime activities. So, we have to look at the police mandate in a different angle criminologists, political scientists or even sociologists do. When they are maintaining city life's order police officers are powerful creators of formal and informal categories and stereotypes that identify city encounters and city dwellers. I was specially interested in how this came to be produced in police routines, the particular social vocabularies of differentiation the police force produces, particularly in urban police stations, where more police/ citizens interactions occur and where the most part of police information is produced. In this sense *emic* categories are cultural expressions of Portuguese political and economic context. Police culture is in process, never finished or accomplished; it is a organisation organising itself politically and institutionally all the time.

Police officers help to separate territories and neighbourhoods and have different sets of expectations and responses to poor and middle class city dwellers. So I did an intense research about the formal street writings of police force as well as I covered the main aspects and itineraries of direct street work of patrol and community centred work. I have made geographical maps of routine itineraries that illustrate this social and cultural differentiation and the differential distribution of policing attention and services to the population. Police force institution lives with the structural dilemma of having more discretionary power at low level ranks and, because of it, it is so difficult to control and account; and this beside being a well organised and planned hierarchical structure.

There is a saturation of conflicts in police force atmospheres. The urban tensions and conflicts are main aspects of their work in the streets and, at some extent, these are problems they have to deal with within the police station and police bureaucracy all the time. Police officers face what does not work in the cities, what does not flows, and have to produce situational responses and find social and bureaucratic solutions to it, frequently without being properly trained or socialised.

When we are doing an ethnography about this policing daily routines we are also doing an urban ethnography. At some point I discovered (and later measured with an extended questionnaire) that most police officers do not belong to the city they have to

“protect” or “order”. They are people dislocated from their homes. Most of them come from the country side or provincial little villages. They have spent the first 15 to 20 years of their careers in Lisbon, a city they barely know, a city they don’t like, perceived as predatory. Most of them have two residencies, spend time and money travelling between them, and have difficulty in co-ordinating private and work life in a demanding organisation with 24 hour shifts and little time to recreation.

Most of police officers are people who dislike and resist to cosmopolitan lifestyles but, at the same time and at different levels, take advantages of it. Then, when they return home they are not the same, they are strangers in many ways, with identities in tension, “fractured lives”, as they say. These social and private live settings have a direct effect in police work, specially in the ways the professional mandate comes to be embraced. And it shows the difficulties police officers have to face in being objective and unbiased as the law, constitution and internal normative demands them to be, what at some extend tends to blur even more the police mandate.

So my thesis tries to show these combined aspects of power/ work/ life that express the complexities of the contemporary professional mandate of police work in Lisbon contexts.

3. As I said I was determined to involve police officers in this debate, as well as other actors of the public sphere. To test the ethnography, I’ve sent a missive to an extended network of colleagues in anthropology, sociology, political science, history and others; to friends, friend of friends, anthropological associations, and some persons I have known in the field: police officers in all ranks, high state officials, judges, politicians, unionists.

I’ve sent a message in a bottle trough the internet ocean. The bottle was the thesis, the message was something like: please help me know better what I did; help me in this process of criticising the text and to find the way of a public debate. The idea was to create a wide dialogue where the thesis and its contents, previous to publication, could be discussed.

Since January I’m still receiving reactions to my proposition from all over the world, but mostly from home. Twenty persons have already sent me systematic contributions. I never expected a massive adhesion, since the original dissertation has 455 pages. I have divided the responses in two sets of comments: First) An evaluation of the text itself, the narrative options I’ve made in this “tale of the field” (Van Maanen, 1988). Second) Some opinions about the question: can this particular ethnography help to design or improve public policies?<sup>2</sup>

About the first point I have received some interesting remarks. The most recurrent topics were:

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<sup>2</sup> I decide not to describe who says what because at this point I prefer to underline what for me came like a surprise: a certain consensus and the manifest interest that the participation of different groups of persons and professionals reveals.

1. The importance of analysing police street work and its visibility; the shifts and strains of the police professional mandate;
2. The possibility of reading reflexive descriptions of policing situations that everybody recognises;
3. But also the shift from empirical evidences to scientific knowledge (and the uses of a theoretical and comparative data based literature, unknown in Portugal);
4. The clearness of the writing and the pleasure of reading it (apparently understandable by professionals and non-professionals);
5. Mapping the material and symbolic police discretionary powers, not only the confirmation of its existence;
6. The ethnography as a challenge to professional myths;
7. The possibility of reading a sustained critical account and not only ideological denunciation;
8. The creation of an heterodox and original approach to these matters, this is, an ethnography.

I must say that the absence of explicit negative criticisms to the text and its contents may result from a presumably and understandable inhibition people might feel when addressing their comments to me, the author. But it may also come from the fact that this was the first PhD thesis dedicated to the theme and, apparently, long expected and desired by many, even inside the police or, I would say, most of all inside the police.

This is the coming out of the police. This dissertation may well be used as a prove that the police “exist” as an important institution and can probably be a new way of negotiating power with the government and at some instances inside the police organisation. I confess I am curious to know to whom a theory about the ambivalence of the police mandate interests most.

About the second point, responses to the question if this particular ethnography could help to improve public policies were also rather enthusiastic.

Some of them I would have never dared to enunciate.

People argument that the conclusions of this work:

1. Can help in the area of human resources policies;
2. Points out the necessity of changes within the organisation and the political sphere;
3. Can help to rationalise police work and routines;
4. Can help to create a better sense of police accountability and help to improve hierarchical police communication;

5. And can help to improve democratic transparency in police work.
6. A less optimistic account reminded me that this is not a consensual thesis and that in the future it will probably face some resistance. This reminded me what Caroline Brettell once said: “One should always keep in mind that there will never be a single community view or monolithic “insider” reaction to an ethnographic text” (1993: 21).

There have been some other results of this dialogue. I was one of the few civilians invited to the annual dinner of policewomen at the Women’s International Day. I met policewomen from the field and made some new contacts, I distributed my thesis in *cd* records, and had lots of fun. Since then I have met many police officers in various informal situations. I was invited to present my work to an audience of police officers and policymakers in a regional police command. I was invited by a high rank police officer who co-ordinates a collection in a publishing house to publish the thesis; and I was invited to write a paper for a police technical journal edited by the police academy. A couple of police officers with responsibilities in the police academy is using some of this ethnographic based knowledge in their teachings. I don’t know in what ways... And, finally, I have intensified contacts in an international network of social scientists who study these matters.

#### **4. Final considerations**

Most of the people that sent me opinions have routines of writing and reading and some, even inside the police force, have interest or knowledge in social sciences. They are persons who think about the police institution, its organisation and its work. Some have strong responsibilities and power of decision. At this point I didn’t feel we were competing for knowledge. I felt an extended wave of common interest and co-operation. I am aware that all this process can change, and that two major actors were out of this phase of the dialogue: politicians and the press, or the media.

We all have read anthropological reflections on public and private uses of ethnographic texts, but less on the dialogue and silences in the public sphere they can or cannot generate. The traditional focus of those texts (specially since the 80’s) is more based on problems like: misunderstandings, (mis)appropriations (Leimer, 2007), the negotiations and challenges of insider/outsider status; or how to deal with the questioned author/authority of ethnography writings (cf. Brettell, 1993).

Some interesting texts have discussed the ways of “popularising anthropology” (MacClancy & McDonough, 1996). Others claim “la sagesse de l’ethnologue” (Agier, 2004). Most of the time these are accounts for others anthropologists or social scientists read.

In fact I believe we are still trained to think that there is a “serious work” and a “less serious” one. The serious one is between us, the less serious we let go and share.

It is this psychological and heuristic barrier I desire for now to abandon. What I propose here is something of another kind: a step out towards public debate. This is not only about the means of producing knowledge and reaction to “our” ethnographic texts. It is also about provocation, about making our texts, problematic and its contents part of a public concern.

What the results of my humble inquiry and modest aspiration shows is that theoretical-and-empirical-ethnography is required for public debate and when we study political matters it is almost impossible to step aside from the public domain and *fora*. If we claim for the participation of ethnographic knowledge in the public sphere it is better to start practising them with the efficient means we have at our disposal – internet, blogs, mailing lists, expanding our intricate academic networks.

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