The Bloody Teeth of the Law:
The Police K-9 Unit as Terror as Usual?

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Prepared by Tyler Wall, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, School of Justice Studies.

Introduction

The police K-9 unit is a common feature of most modern police departments. Yet despite the important roles the police dog plays in the routine operation of state power there has been little critical discussion of this beastly form of police power. For the 2013-2014 school year, I received a SJRP grant called the “The Bloody Teeth of the Law: The Police K-9 Unit as Terror as Usual?” This project was envisioned as an exploratory project that would engage the police K-9 through historical, political, and theoretical investigations. The goal is to unpack what the police dog might tell us about the cultural and political dynamics of state power in the administering of capitalist order. My specific focus was to be on the politics of the police K-9 bite. Interestingly, the contemporary police dog is most often associated with the sniffer dog, or the “drug dog” that sniffs out drugs from a personal vehicle. Yet the police dog also is tasked with the violent function of pursuing and apprehending suspects through sinking its teeth in human flesh.

My exploratory research, then, sought to investigate the politics of what we might call the animalization of police power. Thankfully, the research proved interesting and fruitful, so I have continued more research and writing on this topic now that the grant period has come and gone. To explore this issue I collected and analyzed a wide variety of materials that speak directly to the politics of the police dog. Specifically, with the assistance of a graduate student, Maria Bordt, I collected media coverage of police dog attacks as well as some contemporary police records and reports on police dog bites. I combed through a variety of sources to better
understand and to think through the police dog attack and what it might say about police power and social order. Secondly, I also delved into the history of the police K-9 by locating a plethora of archival materials. On this issue of history, I looked to old newspapers and any other document or book I could find that would help me understand the development of the police K-9 unit. Particularly useful here was scholarly writing in the 1950s and 1960s from police administrators and academic criminologists. I also travelled to the St. Louis Police Library and perused the archives as St. Louis was one of the first departments to really institute a modern K-9 program. This trip to the St. Louis archives proved fruitful and insightful, as I located a variety of documents, newspapers, and photographs that demonstrates the importance of the K-9 unit not only in this metropolitan area, but really the United States in the 1950s and 1960s.

**Dissemination and “Findings”**

Due to the SJRP funding, I have been successful in disseminating my research to different audiences. I was invited to a workshop called “Geographies of Law: Power, Space, Border” in Hamburg, Germany. This workshop was sponsored by The Centre for Legal Theory of Altona Foundation for Philosophical Research (Altonaer Stiftung für philosophische Grundlagenforschung). Thankfully, the SJRP funds helped me attend this international workshop. I presented a paper called “Hunting with Hellhounds: The Pacification of Space by Police K-9”. Overall, this paper was well received and most importantly the experience and insight I gained from attending this workshop demonstrates the important role the SJRP grant program plays in the professional and academic development of SJS faculty. The paper presented in Hamburg is still a work in progress, and recently I presented an updated draft of it at the Critical Legal Conference at the University of Sussex in Brighton, United Kingdom.
Although this travel was not funded by the SJRP grant, the scholarship clearly grows out of the SJRP grant.

Currently, this paper is titled “‘For the very existence of civilization’: White Dogs, Black Threats, and Legal Terror in the 1950s/60s”. I plan to have this paper completed within the next few months and ready to be sent out to a peer-reviewed journal. This paper tracks the historical “reemergence” of the police K-9 unit in the late 1950s and early 1960s in the United States. My archival research demonstrates the ways that the police dog was conceived by police administrators and academics as a dynamic technology of police power, primarily for the ways the police dog can navigate the architectural contours of the nighttime city. More specifically, the history of the police dog demonstrates how this creature was ultimately conceived as a means of what I am calling legal terror. That is, from its first emergence as a police weapon in the late 1800s and early 1900s (in places like Germany, France, England, and New York), the police dog was first and foremost said to be a ordering technology due to its propensity to terrify and frighten “criminals” and other “disorderly” populations – primarily the “dangerous classes”. My article picks this thread up at the dawn of the “civil rights era” in the 1950s, as the police dog was rediscovered as a counter-insurgency weapon to be used against growing black insurgency movements that were shaking to its core a social order built on white supremacy and white property relations. Although the police dog of this era is usually thought of as a crowd control technology (think Birmingham 1963), my research also demonstrates the ways the police dog was a legal terror that patrolled “ghetto” areas as well as business districts as a means of protecting private property.

Perhaps most importantly, the funding I received from the SJRP grant has garnered an upcoming publication in the academic journal, Radical Philosophy. This single-authored article
of mine is titled “The Teeth of Power: Legal Terror and the Police Dog.” Here I engage the police dog as a technology of legal terror in the contemporary moment, focusing specifically on the political economy of the police dog attack. I also situate the figure of the snarling police dog as gaining its cultural and political force through the imagery of its sharp teeth as well as the ways in which this animalization of police power is a nothing less than a particular animation of class war in capitalist order. That is, I discuss the ways that the police dog has long enacted relations of domination, namely, the hunting of the dispossessed surplus populations in US cities. Indeed, the police K-9 bite happens quite frequently, even if these cases are rarely reported on by the media or when they are the reports are brief, limited, and hence specific cases of police dog bites are rarely turned in to public spectacle or produce significant public debate. In addition, it appears that when the police dog bite garners significant media attention it is when it appears that the “wrong person” or innocent bystander was brutally bitten or mauled by the state-trained dog or if the bite is deemed “excessive” and hence a case of “police brutality”. By and large though, the police dog bite is a routine form of “legal terror” often legitimated by the “business as usual” of police power. As a concrete manifestation of the “teeth of the law”, this article initiates my argument that the modern K-9 unit exemplifies what Mick Taussig has famously called “terror as usual” – a state of normalized, routine, and taken-for-granted violence. This article is forthcoming, and I am happy it is appearing in such a well-respected critical journal with a readership that is international and theoretically and politically engaged.

Conclusion

As the above demonstrates, the SJRP funding has proved highly beneficial to my scholarly and professional development. I am currently contemplating a book-length project on the politics of the “security dog”, and I am thankful the SJRP grant helped get this project off the
ground. There are many more avenues to explore that I became aware of while conducting the initial research, and I plan on pursuing these other avenues in the near future.