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Workshop: Geographies of Law: Power, Space, Border

Hunting with Hellhounds: The Pacification of Space by Police K-9

This paper explores the logics animating a particular geo-legal technology of state power – the police “K-9” unit – as it historically emerged in the United States primarily throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. A critique of the modern K-9 unit as discussed here provides an interesting site by which to excavate the spatial logics underpinning police power as it works to administer capitalist order. First and foremost, it is argued that the history of the modern K-9 unit in the United States starkly reveals police power as directed at the *annihilation* and *production of space*, or what we could also refer to as the *pacification of space* for interests of security and accumulation. Secondly, it is argued that one of the most potent and pervasive ways police power works to pacify space and secure accumulation is through the routine “manhunt”, and this point is vividly demonstrated when “state dogs” are unleashed in the pursuit and capture (apprehension through biting) of “disorderly” mobile subjects. A genealogical consideration of the police K-9 unit, then, usefully illuminates police power as fundamentally a hunting power and quite literally the “teeth of the law.” In this sense, the history of the K-9 unit exemplifies what anthropologist Michael Taussig, drawing from Walter Benjamin’s “Thesis on the Philosophy of History”, refers to as “terror as usual.”

The critique unfolds by considering four historical moments where the canine is officially deployed as a geo-legal technology of predatory terror: 1) the unleashing of “Cuban Bloodhounds” by slave catchers and slave patrols, as well as the US Army, to hunt down the indigenous and runaway chattel slaves, 2) the use of Bloodhounds to track “criminals”, “fugitives”, and “escaped prisoners” in post-slavery United States, 3) the dawn of the 20th century (1900s-1920s), where police departments experimented with using dogs in the policing of urban and suburban space through their hunts for the idle poor, “tramps”, “vagrants” and “criminals” (most notably in New York, Boston, and Chicago), and finally, 4) the reemergence of police K-9 units in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s (in St. Louis and Birmingham and countless other locations) as a technology of policing Black surplus populations rhetorically linked to crime and drugs as well as civil unrest and protest. By considering these different historical moments, the paper works to unpack the various continuities and discontinuities in the spatial and legal violence circumscribing the police deployment of dogs. That is, each historical moment is animated by its own attending discourses and practices, peculiar interests, and theories of both hunter and prey, while still being guided by an unremitting logic of the pacification of space through the technology of the hunt.

