Political Geography 55 (2016) 72–81

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Political Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo

Policing mobilities through bio-spatial profiling in New York City

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 17 May 2015
Received in revised form
23 July 2016
Accepted 24 July 2016

Keywords:
Biometrics
Hot-spots
Military urbanism
Mobility
New York aolice department
Security
Racial profiling

ABSTRACT

In 2003, the Bloomberg administration launched Operation Impact, a hot-spots policing program which identified high-crime areas in New York City and flooded them with high concentrations of new police officers. These hot-spots, labeled Impact Zones, are sites of mobility constrained and structured by biometric and spatial technologies borrowed from the military. This article analyzes the city's advanced police profiling technologies as they play out within Impact Zones. The profiling is racial, social, biometric, bio-political, and spatial, and works to demarcate dangerous people and places. Because this profiling technology is enacted spatially and governs residents' mobility, I argue for a new conceptual apparatus, which I call bio-spatial profiling. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in police hot-spots, policy analysis, and textual analysis of media articles, I argue that the lived experience of biospatial profiling is one of pervasive fear which governs mobilities in Impact Zones. Next, I trace the experiences of Northeast Brooklyn residents back to their sources, and find three bio-spatial practices: both biometric and spatial data collection, and police street-stops. These symbiotic practices inform and strengthen each other, congealing to produce fear and immobility for those they target. The article concludes with a discussion of the conflicting understandings of (in)security in Impact Zones that connects the practices with the experiences of bio-spatial profiling, to illuminate the human costs of militarized securitization of domestic urban life.

"It's all about where you're at."

-Impact Zone resident on police profiling

Introduction

New York has long been a city of contradictions. Despite its recent ranking as the tenth safest city in the world, New York contains zones with high crime rates designated as hot-spots and subject to intense surveillance and militarized policing. Militarization refers not only the number of officers flooding hot-spots (Rivera, Baker, & Roberts, 2010), but to the "extension of military ideas of tracking, identification and targeting into the quotidian spaces and circulations of everyday life" (Graham, 2010: xi). These police hot-spots—labeled Impact Zones—were introduced by the Bloomberg administration in 2003 as part of the targeted crime-fighting program Operation Impact. Although the administration commissioned a study on the program's efficacy (Smith & Purtell, 2007), there has been little research on the lived experiences of residents of Impact Zones. I argue that these zones, described by residents as "war zones", as "militarized", and as "occupied territory" (CCR., 2012 19–20), induce a constant fear that disciplines residents' mobility.

Although the 9/11 attacks have been frequently invoked as a justification for new modes of policing, long before 2001 the US had been waging "de-territorialized wars of public safety" in the form of the war on drugs, campaigns to exclude asylum seekers and immigrants, and zero-tolerance policing targeting Black and Latino inner-city residents (Feldman, 2004: 331). Michel Foucault (2003: 62) calls this racialized government repression "state racism: a racism that society will direct against itself." This pervasive racism is not confined to ideology, but is a technique of power (Foucault, 2003: 258). For Ruth Wilson Gilmore, the meaning of racism is bound up with "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (2007: 28). Gilmore's powerful definition highlights state racism's everyday violence; she reminds us of its fatal consequences. As this article will address, *vulnerability* to premature death has pervasive effects.

The discourse of state racism has evolved to obscure its racist nature. Race has ceased to be a socially or legally accepted

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2016.07.006
0962-6298/

justification for discrimination (Alexander, 2012: 2). Instead, writes Michelle Alexander, "we use our criminal justice system to label people of color 'criminals'" against whom "it is perfectly legal to discriminate…in nearly all the ways it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans" (2012: 2). This systematic state discrimination achieves an internal coherence and domination in the US through an interweaving of fear of the enemy within, and calculated aggression directed at 'the other' (Feldman, 2004: 331). Cities, as sites of unscripted interactions with 'the other,' are the stage on which this symbiosis plays out.

New York in particular, as a global city, is marked both by cosmopolitanism and great diversity as well as racialized tropes of the 'other' and a Janus-faced city government that has "vacillated between celebrating and enhancing such diversity, on the one hand, and repressing it, on the other" (Fincher & Jacobs, 1998: 1). While New York was hardly new to contact with 'the other,' the 9/11 attacks mobilized the construction of a vulnerable nation embarking on uncharted ground. Pre-existing conditions of hypermobility and connectivity were depicted as new threats and long-standing processes of 'othering' were drawn upon, embodied in statement by former US Secretary of Homeland Security, Tom Ridge: "as the world community has become more connected through the globalization of technology, transportation, commerce and communication, the benefits of globalization available to peace loving, freedom loving people are available to terrorists as well" (in Amoore, 2006: 339). This perceived risk arising from proximity has been hugely influential in securitizing policy in the city. The attacks led not only to violent retaliation in the form of war, but to the justification of heightened policies of containment and control at home.

Emblematic of these internal mobility-controlling policies is Operation Impact, which identified high-crime neighborhoods and flooded these Impact Zones with what the *New York Times* called "a small army" of new graduates of the NYPD's training academy (Rivera et al., 2010). In its first year it deployed around 800 officers per day to 19 zones. New York's longest-serving Police Commissioner, Raymond Kelly, called the program "an all-out blitz on crime: by carefully analyzing where crimes are located, we are able to strategically target areas with the greatest propensity for crime" (Kelly in www.nyc.gov, 2003). Current Police Commissioner William Bratton (appointed by Mayor De Blasio in 2014) expressed hope to expand Operation Impact, calling it an "extraordinarily good program" (in Parascandola, 2014).

Besides the rare celebratory comment, Zones are invisibilized in various ways. Information on the number and location of zones is not publicly available, and NYPD officials have declined my inquiries, refusing to acknowledge the program's existence. Impact Zones are also hidden by Saskia Sassen's (2000: 82) "new geography of centers and margins," which allows zones *within* cities to "become increasingly peripheral, increasingly excluded from the major economic processes that are seen as fueling economic growth in the new global economy." Thus Impact Zones are hidden not only by topography (physical distance, rivers separating boroughs), but topology as well, in the sense that "class confrontation is diffused through urban fragmentation and segregation" (Secor, 2013: 432). Some topological boundaries, even while physically permeable—an industrial park, above-ground train tracks, highways, a busy avenue—enhance the perception of segregated urban fragments.

Impact Zones can hide even from those who find themselves within one. As Mat Coleman and Angela Stuesse (2016) observed researching mobile checkpoints, what is felt as a constant state for its targets may be experienced as a disappearing state for researchers in search of it. When militarized policing becomes part of everyday life, life goes on around it, which can mask its deep-seated effects from the casual observer. This masking can be temporal: because most officers arrive at night, it is possible to pass through an Impact Zone by day and not see many police officers. A visitor to the Zone might not notice the ubiquitous surveillance cameras affixed to apartment buildings, stores, and telephone poles, and may not recognize crane-carrying NYPD vans as mobile surveillance stations.

Militarized policing can also be obscured by its increasing banality. Katz (2007) builds upon Billig's 'banal nationalism' to highlight what she calls 'banal terrorism': "everyday, routinized, barely noticed reminders of terror or the threat of an always already presence of terrorism in our midst" (Katz, 2007: 350). Impact Zones display a melding of 'banal terrorism' and 'banal criminality'; a militarized post-9/11 police presence has become part of residents' everyday life. Yet banality is not synonymous with invisibility, even to those whose view is already obscured by various markers of privilege. As Nyers (2010: 250) points out, "Acts of security seek to provide protection from danger, freedom from doubt, and relief of anxiety," *for some,* while they simultaneously "encourage fear, foster apprehension, and feed off of nervousness in the population." This "double movement to security" (Nyers, 2010: 250) can at once reassure and worry an individual, but it can also work simultaneously to reassure one subset of the population, while encouraging fear in others. That is, privilege does not always obscure acts of security, but can bring them into view. Nonetheless, as a white researcher, I cannot see or experience militarized policing the same way as its targets.

Thus the militarized urbanism (Graham, 2010) of these zones is masked by space, time, and privilege—and additionally obscured by its banality. It is under-reported in the media, and largely ignored by the social sciences (Coleman, 2016). This paper analyzes the city's advanced police profiling technologies, which, despite their partial obscurity, are part of thousands of New Yorkers' everyday lives, particularly in Impact Zones. The profiling is racial, social, biometric, and spatial, and works to demarcate not only dangerous people but dangerous *places* as well. At the neighborhood scale, the practices also mark 'dangerous' mobilities, for the ways residents move through their neighborhood, from the transportation they take to the times and routes they travel, are marked as differentially suspect by police. In turn, this profiling of dangerous people, places, and mobilities shapes residents' mobility, policing it through fear. While profiling is often described using a single attribute, such as "racial profiling," the multiple intertwined layers of the NYPD's profiling can further obfuscate its practices, making them less visible, less clear, and more difficult to contest. This complexity calls for a new conceptual apparatus to challenge the NYPD's simultaneously violent and elusive tactics. Here, I introduce an analytic called bio-spatial profiling to refer to the police practices of biometric, biopolitical, and spatial profiling—and to help identify how these enhance or obscure each other. The analytic also calls attention to the lived experience of those profiled. While no single analytic could encapsulate a population's everyday lives, the term does highlight the interplay of forces shaping the lives of those targeted within Zones.

This paper documents the methods used to analyze experiences and practices of profiling, before reviewing the literature informing the analytic. Findings are organized into two sections: first, I argue that bio-spatial profiling results in lived experiences of pervasive fear which governs mobilities in Impact Zones. Second, I investigate the causes of this fear and find three bio-spatial practices: both biometric and spatial data collection, and police street-stops. These symbiotic practices inform and strengthen each other, congealing to produce fear and immobility for those they target. The paper concludes with a discussion of the wider implications of the analytic of bio-spatial profiling for academia and activism. Drawing out