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Materialities of the Performative: A Sociology of the Police Uniform

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Abstract

Police equipment (uniforms and armament) is rarely analyzed for its symbolic means. This text focuses on a cultural-sociological analysis of police materialities, bringing together material semiotics with theories of performativity. The last 180 years of German history serve as a case study, which, due to its changes in political regimes, is particularly revealing. It shows that while the materiality of state power was largely oriented toward the policing of subjects through the direct use of force, since the 1970s, there has been an increasing tendency toward making uniforms and equipment more civilized and defensive as a way to create distance between the police and the public. In a longitudinal view, therefore, the police's materialities can be seen as an indicator of respective political and social conditions that correspond with changes in the police's self-image.

Keywords: Cultural Sociology, Police Studies, Criminology, Police Uniform, Materialities, German Police History, Material Semiotics, Performativity

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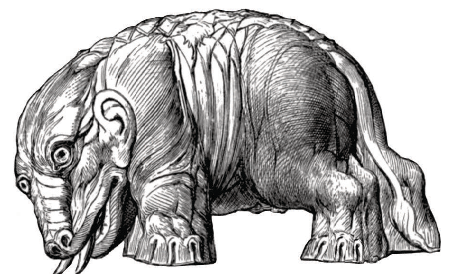

The police have long justified the exercise of violence through actual enforcement. However, that justification also draws—sometimes latently, sometimes concretely—on the representation of a potential for violence. In addition to practices and discourses—the latter being primarily significant to the police as a legitimizing superstructure of practice—this is primarily seen in their materialities, such as uniforms and equipment worn on the body (on materialities generally, see Hicks/Beaudry 2010). In the following analysis, we explore the material-performative sociology of the police uniform, which incorporates symbolic-theoretical elements of the social constitution of reality in a cultural-sociological manner. In doing so, we account for the fact that materialities can themselves be *semiotic practices* in that they represent as performance, they can be interpreted as such, and, in the process, they *performatively produce what they perform*.

In this essay, therefore, we undertake a more concrete discussion of police uniforms in terms of "material semiotics" (Law 2010, 176). Following Law, "material semiotics" suggests that meanings condensed into material signs are conveyed. In this present case, this condensation appears through the materialities of the police. This literally means that the materialities 'communicate'—as thus also interpret—as a discursive signifying practice.**[1]** In analyzing uniforms and equipment, we can reveal those cultural codes that structure the socio-historically specific relationship between police forces and violence. In these cultural codes, the way in which police forces determine this relationship becomes visible. Moreover, because the materialities of the police visibly represent the police's monopoly of violence, they simultaneously produce what they materially perform—that is, "performative acts bring about the sedimentation and production of a material effect" (Reuter 2011, 90; transl. by authors). In this sense, we bring together material semiotics with theories of performativity (on performativity more generally, see Austin 1972; Butler 1990). This analysis of police materialities and their significance for the state's symbolization of its monopoly of violence goes beyond Weber's definition of the monopoly on violence (1976, chapter 1, § 17) and should be thought of entirely in a Bourdieusian sense, one which traces "[t]he real source of the magic of performative utterances" back to a delegating entity (in the case of the police, the state), which operates "by equipping him with the signs and the insignia aimed at underlining the fact that he is not acting in his own name and under his own authority. There is no symbolic power without the symbolism of power" (Bourdieu 1991, 75; see also Loader 1997).

Accordingly, such materialities do not constitute speech acts in the same way they are construed in common theories of performativity. Instead, they are a semiotically and specifically charged pointing act. As bearers of meaning, they demonstrate to the public the state's monopoly on the use of force. This happens either through the execution of violent police practices, where materialities support or enable them, or in those cases where materialities make police violence nonverbally visible both as a carrier of meaning and as a potential. Thus, police equipment, in a symbolically understandable pointing act, already conveys a clear, concrete view of this monopoly of violence and its handling through the uniform's appearance, type, and accessories. Police uniforms serve as "images of power," a quality that is only enhanced further when they utilize a more military design (Paul/Birzer 2004). They act

[1] The work of Erving Goffman has been extremely important in this context in terms of police sociology (see, for example, Manning and Van Maanen 1978). Contrasting these approaches, with Goffman, we do not start from the presentation of the police as materialities solely in terms of performance theory. Rather, following Butler, we radicalize this insight in terms of performativity theory by emphasizing the police's social representation, which is produced through ongoing repetition and is inherent in all police materialities.

as a performative announcement and can be read both as indicators of respective political conditions and their discrepancies.

The following is an attempt at a cultural-sociological analysis of police materialities, the main features of which can be inferred from the interdependent relationship between uniforms and equipment, the police's mentality structure, and their political constitution. It is important to remember that the material that undergirds and contextualizes the social has only come increasingly into scholarly view again over the last decade (see, for example, Henkel 2010; Miller 2008) after it was addressed by some early sociologists (see, for example, Simmel 1908; 1923). Against this backdrop, the uniforms' materialities and political meanings form a rather understudied topic in social science. This is also true of police uniforms themselves.

Consequently, our analysis relies on a narrow data base, which only cursorily includes the sociological aspects of police performance and performativity (for more on the influence of materialities on professional police identity, however, see Rowe et al. 2023). We focus here on the German context, which provides us with an informative case, though it is somewhat skeletal due to the little data that has been gathered from it and the paucity of theorizing that has been done about it. So far, it has been completely understudied in this regard, but with its sequence of highly different political regimes, it is particularly suitable for answering the question at the core of this analysis and for tracing the changing relationship between police action and materialities, and between action and symbolic performance (see Hackspiel-Mikosch/Haas 2006; Hackspiel-Mikosch 2011).**[2]** Our focus is on the effects these changes have on the public, and the historical variability and political meaning of such communications. We conclude that although police forces in Germany do not exhibit a straightforward development, they do show a clear tendency away from the emphatically offensive strategies that prevailed for a very long time, moving instead toward more defensive strategies, an evolution that is evident in the types of uniforms German police wear and the types of equipment they use.

This finding should not be taken in isolation from the general change in the significance and status of violence in broader society. While police violence was a matter of course until recently—a fact of life that simply had to be accepted—as Joas (2011) argues using the example of torture, the legitimacy of violence in society has been increasingly on the wane since the nineteenth century. Torture ceased to be considered legitimate in Europe around the 1830s, which leads Joas to his thesis on the "sacrality of the person". In the course of this process of sacralization, general human rights, according to Joas, emerged. Integral components of these rights, however, are human dignity and the person's inviolability; both of these values emphasize the importance of physical integrity and see the use of physical violence as taboo (ibid.). The police materiality of the performative, of course, has been impacted by these historical developments. It took more than 100 years before this sacralization was reflected in everyday police life, but in the context of late modernity, police violence is, on the one hand, more strongly regulated and, on the other, increasingly questioned in public. At the same time, police officers are becoming more sensitive to violence perpetrated against them. This has led to the development of equipment for self-protection and the drive for less physically immediate contact with what the German police call

[2] The most significant exceptions are the publications cited here, and in the following analysis, we primarily refer to the extraordinarily detailed descriptions of police materialities given there.

its “counterpart” (the citizen). All of these developments are reflected in police materialities.

The current style of policing, according to our thesis, fits into a style of governance that Garland (1996) described as “governing-at-a-distance”. In terms of criminal policy, this governing mode relies on personal ‘freedom’, self-responsibility, and the self-organization of individuals, and it tends to withdraw state intervention—that is, it demonstrates state power rather than exercising it.**[3]** A line of development thus runs from the immediacy of policing to mediocrity, and the current style attempts to create space between the police and the policed and to establish distance to avoid mutual endangerment.

Over the last few decades, styles of policing have also changed situationally, becoming more covert. With regard to protests specifically, this includes tactics like prospective and retrospective data storage, aggregation, and analysis, as well as the displacement of marginalized people from certain neighborhoods by ‘soft’ or nonviolent means. These developments do not imply a decrease in police regulation; it just takes place more subtly. The police retain their monopoly on violence, but the violence they represent and exercise is expressed differently than it used to be, increasingly taking the form of mere potential. This means that police violence still exists under such conditions, but, according to our central thesis, there is a shift in the balance between the potential for violence and its actual utilization. Nowadays, it is more important to utilize representations of violence through materialities that make the actual use of violence unnecessary.**[4]**

In this article, we first describe uniforms as functional costumes that symbolically and performatively display and produce authority. Subsequently, in a brief survey covering almost 180 years, we detail the primarily offensive phase of German police history, in which the materiality of state power was largely oriented toward policing subjects through the direct use of force. Since the 1970s, there has been an increasing tendency toward making uniforms and equipment more civilized and defensive as a way to create distance between the police and the public, which is now accepted as sovereign. With such a longitudinal view, the significance of the police’s performative materialities can be seen as an indicator of respective political and social conditions.

Uniforms as the Certification of Legitimate Authority

From the perspective of the police, uniforms are functional articles of clothing that must meet a wide variety of requirements:

> Uniform must provide protection, resist injury, accommodate body armour, offer unfettered access to safety equipment (communications, self-defence) and adapt to the elements. It must provide carriage facilities for up to 21 items. [...] Other issues included: recognizability, smartness, public perceptions and ease of care. (Hooper 2000, 125)

This exclusively functional view ignores the symbolic meanings police draw from their professional practice. Likewise, the police’s perspective neu-

[3] Starting with Michel Foucault’s late lectures, this is the subject of the now unmanageable governmentality studies, which have also been widely discussed for the development of criminal policy and policing. See, for example, Burchell/Gordon/Miller (1991) and Mitchell (1999). For a German-language introduction that is still valid, see Bröckling/Krasmann/Lemke (2000).

[4] See Kretschmann/Legnaro (2023) for a history of this development with multiple references.

tralizes these meanings in accordance with the police's own self-image as a neutral institution. Conversely, from a sociological perspective, uniforms function as signs that certify both legitimacy and recognizability, but this goes hand in hand with the de-individuation that occurs among the individuals who wear them.

Regardless of whether a uniform is civilian-, military-, government-, or corporate-issued, it constitutes a unique type of costume. Costumes, however, are commonly associated with the theater or carnival; there, they serve as a method of changing one's actual identity and, through the use of externally displayed attributes, of presenting a certain role and image to others that is different from one's own everyday performance. The costume thus combines real disguise, which contains the characteristics, stylistic devices, and accessories of the assumed role, with the symbolic representation of that role. Both are in a circular relationship with one another: costumes are adapted to the role they are supposed to present, and the role in turn determines the costume.

Police uniforms similarly effect the production of symbolic meaning. In this context, uniforms are not theatrical representations of a role nor a means of carnivalesque fun, but they use a similar mechanism of transformation and performative communication. In a process of materially produced meaning, they transform private individuals into functionaries. On the one hand, this places them all on the same level, but on the other hand, it distinguishes them through rank insignia, which endows them with the authority corresponding to their role and thus de-individuates them: "Uniforms do not communicate a message of individuality, but one of group identity" (Šterman 2011, 12). In this way, uniforms both confine and exclude: "The uniform is a symbolic statement that an individual will adhere to group norms and standardized roles and has mastered the essential group skills and values" (Joseph/Alex 1972, 723). Uniforms can therefore be seen in a limited sense as a wearable total institution since they subject individuals to a status transformation, identify them as a creature of that institution, provide them with an "externally effective habitus" (Hüttermann 2004; transl. by authors), and give them an institutional identity with corresponding rights and duties that do not allow them to question legal and hierarchical specifications.**[5]** At the same time, however, the uniform's wearability implies a merely temporary character; they can be put on and taken off, which denotes the transformation between being an official or being a private person. It is precisely this quality that cancels out the coercive character inherent in total institutions and, to a certain extent, enables a reversal to a ceremonial of degradation, as it is described by Garfinkel (1956). The person is elevated by the uniform and empowered at the price of their own disempowerment. In uniform, the person now continues to act as an individual, but they do so on behalf of an order, a condition that can considerably minimize their own responsibility or even make it obsolete.

Looking at uniforms as police costumes, in particular, shows this double functionality of de-individuation and justified authorizations. The uniform transforms private individuals into bearers of the state's monopoly on the use of force, who, after appropriate training, are now entitled to powers (up to and including the lethal use of firearms) that they would otherwise not be allowed to exercise. Uniforms do not work as a disguise, and they do not, as

[5] This is already true during training at the police academy, where a uniform is often compulsory. These conditions bring other constraints as well: "In a uniform, you are not allowed to kiss, lie on the grass, lounge around, fall asleep, fool around, or even dream inconspicuously with your hands in your pockets or even appear 'spiritualized', e.g., by demonstrative pondering" (Behr 2013, 186).

in theater, present anything. In the sense of Weber's ideal-type, they represent a role and a professional identity and are thus a means of "impression management". They are among the "attributes that are required of a performer for the work of successfully staging a character" (Goffman 1959, 208). Internally and externally, they communicate membership in a hierarchically structured institution that, in its entirety, literally embodies state power. The police uniform is "only in a secondary sense an element of the policewoman's body. As such, however, it has a high display effect in various respects" (Staack/Erhard 2022, 319; transl. by authors). This effect is primarily caused by the fact that people recognize the uniform as an agent in the state's monopoly on violence. Beyond that, though, these effects are brought about by the uniform's various accessories that revolve around violence, whether that be its symbolic threat, its lethal or nonlethal application, or its avoidance. This means the uniform has significance reaching far beyond its visual appearance and stylistic form.

In general, police uniforms significantly influence perceptions of police and people's behavior in their presence. The uniforms' very presence exerts "a subconscious psychological influence on people, based on the person's preconceived feelings about police officers" (Johnson 2001, 31). Even minor changes in style, color, or headgear can influence this perception (ibid.). An experiment supports this idea: When people dressed as ordinary citizens, milkmen, or security guards approached subjects on the street and asked them to pick up a paper bag, to give change to a stranger, or to move away from a bus stop, subjects were more inclined to follow the instructions given by the security guard because his uniform attributed him with the legitimacy to give such instructions (Bickman 1974).**[6]** Although positive attributions, such as police credibility and trustworthiness, do not appear to depend on a uniform's particular style (Mauro 1984; Gundersen 1987), attributions of potential violence are likely to be influenced by it.

To tentatively summarize, police uniforms operate as a costume of authority that symbolically demonstrates a monopoly on violence and simultaneously performatively establishes it through such a symbolism, eliciting servile, confident, trusting, or aggressive responses from audiences as a "uniform effect" (Thielgen et al. 2022; transl. by authors). In a passive way, this costume of authority already communicates a reassuring, pacifying, threatening, or aggressive impression even before police have taken action in a particular situation.

Materialities of Offensive-Threatening Policing

The costume of the uniform communicates to the public the rights and powers it confers, but at the same time, it is a medium of performance of potential violence. It is a materiality that is adapted to the body, preforming posture, possibilities of movement, and repertoires of action (by hindering, facilitating, and pretending) and promotes a corresponding self-image (see Rowe et al. 2023). Since the advent of professional police forces in the first half of the nineteenth century, governments have therefore had a strong sense of how significant uniforms and equipment—as the costumes of state power—are to its public perception, and the ways that materialities and self-

[6] The hope that today's society would be less obedient to authority is probably illusory. In any case, replications of the well-known Milgram experiment, in which subjects unapologetically delivered increasing electric shocks on the instruction of a scientific authority, have not produced any different findings (Doliński et al. 2017).

image correspond to the state's self-representation and its monopoly on the use of force.**[7]** This becomes particularly clear in retrospect.

Until the second half of the eighteenth century, *Polizey* was synonymous with a peaceful and prosperous constitution of society, and, as a type of state regulatory legislation, it had jurisdiction over almost all areas of the economy and society. With the Prussian General Land Law of 1794 the "Amt der Polizey" was then restricted to the "preservation of public peace, security and order" (§ 10 II 17; transl. by authors); the focus on welfare became a secondary priority to the state's protection of rule. At this time, the army could intervene at any time if necessary, so the police played a relatively minor role in combating unrest. During the German Reich of the 1920s, the police took over this task, but due to their military orientation and training, they did not initially develop an independent style of policing. Consequently, an offensive style that was based on military tactics and training remained the norm, and the police's material accessories corresponded with this approach. This remained true till the 1980s.

There was one exception to this, and it exemplifies both the connection between the constellations of political power and the police as well as the political calculation that attaches itself to the symbolism of uniforms. In a brief revolutionary moment in the mid nineteenth century, fear of the state's power over the people was so great that after the bloody clashes on Berlin's Schlossplatz on March 18, 1848, which left more than 300 dead, the *Bürgerwehr* was founded as a new law-and-order force. Its officers dressed in civilian clothes, wore white armbands bearing the imprint "Schutzbeamter", and equipped themselves with simple white sticks (Hackspiel-Mikosch 2011, 101; transl. by authors). During this brief period, then, a police force existed that was only symbolically equipped with insignia, though they did not possess the actual means of coercion that would allow them to act on their monopoly of the force of its power.

Such downright civility—radical both during that time and even today—did not last very long. As early as June 1848, the *Schutzmannschaft* was founded with 21,000 members (Knöbl 1998, 228p.). Following the example of the London Metropolitan Police, its officers wore blue uniforms, a marked contrast from the green of the Prussian military. However, they were not equipped with truncheons but with sabers and firearms (Vera 2019, 94). Their civilian appearance was thus coupled with military armament: "The police wore a dark blue uniform coat, but the Schutzmannschaft on foot was equipped with a civilian top hat and the mounted Schutzmannschaft with a black round felt hat" (Hackspiel-Mikosch 2011, 101; transl. by authors). A black, red, and gold cockade was attached to the hats, and the skirt buttons were covered in dark thread rather than designed in a flashier military style (ibid., 102). This created a performative dichotomy, a thorough ambivalence between threat and protection. In these few months of 1848, the materialities of policing ran the gamut from flaunting civility at a moment of crisis to showcasing nascent militarization at a moment of restoration. The top hat, a sign of civility, served merely to camouflage the group's capacity for violence, for these early days of policing were characterized by a saber, a cutting and stabbing tool that could be wielded with one's own physical strength, and a rifle, a potentially lethal weapon.

[7] The Metropolitan Police, founded in London in 1829 by Robert Peel as Minister of the Interior, were unarmed and uniformed in blue rather than military red, a deliberately civilian appearance that corresponded to Peel's principles of police officers as "citizens in uniform." They were dressed accordingly: "The 'Peelers' were issued with a wooden truncheon carried in a long pocket in the tail of their coat, a pair of handcuffs and a wooden rattle to raise the alarm. By the 1880s this rattle had been replaced by a whistle" (https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Sir-Robert-Peel/).

Subsequently, however, police were quickly militarized as a result of newly emerging domestic enmity. Honoré Antoine Frégier gave this enmity a name in his two-volume work, *Des classes dangereuses de la population dans les grandes villes, et des moyens de les rendre meilleures*, which was published in 1840 and soon translated into German. Although the army was always prepared for draconian intervention if it was necessary, police were equipped with a military command structure, and they recruited primarily from military veterans and the infantry armament (Knöbl 1998, 230). Soon, the bourgeois top hat was abolished, and police uniforms more closely resembled those used in the military, complete with metallic buttons and helmets for headgear (Hackspiel-Mikosch 2011, 102). The *Pickelhaube* (spiked helmet) symbolically turned the police into a spin-off of the army, closely aligning it with this symbol of Prussian militarism, which was known throughout Europe (Vogel 2001).

With the founding of the German Empire in 1871, a prototype of policing within the framework of authoritarian *Obrigkeitsstaatlichkeit* took shape, and it would remain dominant for a long time and across several forms of government. This framework was confrontational; it focused on maintaining state order, and was capable of stifling any revolutionary stirrings. The police's emancipation from the military, however, remained largely ambivalent. In contemporary satire, for example, the police were primarily associated with violence, as twelve drawings in *Simplicissimus* titled "Preußischer Polizei-Kalender" ("Prussian Police Calendar") pointedly illustrate.**[8]** Moreover, in other drawings, the facial features of the police officers are modeled on those bodily features that were considered to be characteristic signs of criminality (Lüdtke/Erwig-Drüppel 1994, 159pp.).

The hallmark of this police force was its ability to exercise violence in a close, immediate and undistanced manner. For this purpose, they were equipped with a highly dangerous bare saber: "The saber for *Schutzmänner* (Sergeants) is the New Prussian infantry saber o./St.**[9]** M 1818 with a slightly curved, wedge-shaped blade. [...] The saber for mounted *Schutzmänner* is the curved cavalry saber M 1852 or M1852/79 with a basket of steel stirrups and white steel scabbard" (Löhken 1986, 10p.; transl. by authors).**[10]** However, police could also use the saber's flat side for striking or, if it were in its scabbard, for pushing away a crowd. The police were also issued a bayonet, an infantry-like rifle, and later, a pistol. With the sabers, action was meant to be executed as hand-to-hand combat without having lethal consequences, though it could entail serious injuries—cutting off a hand was not a routine occurrence, but it did happen (Lindenberger 2011, 208). With firearms, whose use was further accompanied by mounted police and police dogs, the approach was geared toward combat with possible lethal consequences. An observer from the U.S. at the time stated, "a German policeman on patrol is armed as if for war" (Fosnick 1915, 34). One can only speculate about the effects of such a police performance, which combined a certain notion of state power and a potentiality of state violence on the urban proletariat. From a civilians' point of view, it was probably a visualization of class struggle that performatively communicated a permanent threat of violence. In its material symbolism and its genuine possibilities of violence, this dynamic characterizes the permanent fear of proletarian revolt that dominated the empire's elites at the time. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a

[8] *Simplicissimus*, which was headquartered in Munich and began publishing in 1896, was the most important satirical magazine of the German Empire. The drawings are by Thomas Theodor Heine (1867–1948), a German-Swedish painter and writer. They appeared in volume 15 (42) on January 16, 1911, p. 718. Each month in the calendar features a drawing of policemen beating people, along with a mnemonic. For example: "The harvest month is called August. Threshing is the Schutzmann's delight." See http://www.simplicissimus.info/index.php?id=6&tx_lombkswjournaldb_pi1%5Bvolume%5D=15&tx_lombkswjournaldb_pi1%5Baction%5D=showVolume&tx_lombkswjournaldb_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=YearRegister&cHash=8b0d0edce11aadc42b3a26720acd2a01.

[9] Without a stabbing blade, (i.e., without a disc-shaped hand guard between the handle and the blade).

[10] Based on the clothing and service regulations of the Prussian police, this book offers a detailed, descriptive study of uniforms from the period between 1866 and 1945.

forerunner of the water cannons police use today established an initial approach to more civil policing, with the fire department arriving with its extinguishers at the police's request. While these more civilized uses of force may have laid the initial groundwork for a more distanced approach to policing, it was not necessarily less dangerous than the prevailing, more immediate police tactics of the time.

The enormous symbolic significance of the costuming of state power was demonstrated particularly stringently by changes to a new constitutional order that began with the proclamation of the Republic in 1918. These were necessarily accompanied by a change in police materialities of the so called *Sicherheitspolizei*:

> Instead of a tunic with flashing metal buttons and a high embroidered stand-up collar, ordinary policemen wore a plain gray-green skirt blouse with a stand-up or stand-up turn-down collar without lugs, with a concealed button placket and patch pockets. High lace-up shoes with leather gaiters had to partially replace the high shaft boots. Instead of the pickelhaube with rich helmet decoration, policemen now used a small black lacquered *Tschako*. (Hackspiel-Mikosch 2011, 102, transl. by authors)

From 1920 onward, the successor to these associations was the *Schutzpolizei*, which was uniformed in blue, though it otherwise retained much from the previous uniforms. The Pickelhaube's abolition is particularly revealing as a sign of demilitarization. It was complemented by changes in equipment: the saber was only used ceremonially during parades, while the baton was introduced for everyday use (Sturm 2011). The Prussian police also acquired their first water cannons. Efforts to create a democratically legitimized police force are clearly evident in these changes in materiality, but overall, they remain thoroughly contradictory, a sign of a civilization that had broken in on itself.

This contradiction is also evident in the contemporary police force's weaponry, which includes an arsenal of lethal military weapons: armored wheeled vehicles equipped with machine guns, carbines, submachine guns, and hand grenades, along with a sidearm (bayonet) that became standardized in 1930: "The police deerstalker is 59 cm long. The black leather scabbard has a gland plate and mouth plate with nickel silver carrying hooks" (Löhken 1986, 29; transl. by authors). This equipment sends an ambiguous message, one that contains the hallmarks of a civilian police force and its military capability in equal measure. In 1926, in an attempt to strengthen the police's civilian components, the Social Democratic Prussian Minister of the Interior Grzesinski coined the formula that is still familiar today: "Die Polizei, Dein Freund und Helfer" ("The police, your friend and helper"). This civilizing move by speech act could not decisively alter the police's largely military character, however. Rather, in many cases, the police served as an army for the state's internal use. For example, despite many civilian and police deaths, the suppression of the so-called Central German Uprising in March 1921 was considered a success because it was accomplished by the po-

lice's own forces and without the help of the *Reichswehr* (Leßmann 1989, 114).

At the time of Nazi rule, the German police militarized without restriction. Heinrich Himmler, the *SS Reichsführer* who acted as "Chief of the German Police" from 1936 until 1945, adopted Grzesinski's formula for a police force that participated with cynical callousness in the persecution of individuals ("asocials," "racial abusers," "political suspects"). It also aided and abetted Gestapo murders and, during the war, participated in mass executions and deportations. The symbolic design of the police's materialities also reflected its internal militarization. For example, the saber or rapier replaced the baton (Vera 2019, 494), a tool traditionally associated with a more democratic approach to policing and the uniform—in military green-gray and "consisting of tunics with patch pockets, collar tabs with chapel laces, leather belt with shoulder straps, breeches, and boots,"—could hardly be distinguished from the uniform of the *Wehrmacht* (Hackspiel-Mikosch 2011, 104; transl. by authors). Through this assimilation, even an approximation of civilian performance and performativity on the part of the police, which occasionally had been aspired to in the Weimar Republic, was finally eliminated.

When the Federal Republic was founded in 1949, the police continued the Weimar tradition in many respects. They wore "green tunics with flap pockets on the chest and hips, over them a leather belt with shoulder straps, riding pants with stock boots, and a high peaked cap or chako", which did not differ fundamentally from the uniforms of the Nazi era (ibid., 107; transl. by authors). The police now operated without sabers, but they got back their batons, continued to carry firearms, and had water cannons at their disposal. They made extensive use of these weapons, largely because demonstrations—in sharp contrast to the provisions of the Basic Law that emphasized fundamental rights, and to the clear stipulation of Article 8 ("All Germans have the right to assemble peacefully and without weapons without registration or permission")—were seen more as a potential initial spark for an attempt to overthrow the government and less as the exercise of a fundamental right. Thus, for many years, approaches to policing did not differ significantly from the robust and militarized procedures that had previously determined policing in the Weimar Republic.

The Civilization of Police Materiality

For police forces in the German territories, police materiality, and its function of intimidation and authoritative charisma, was central, and it remained nearly unchanged into the 1970s, a monolithic form that could be applied invariantly in any and every situation. The police's self-image was "strongly etatist; the traditionalists, that were in a sense policemen of the old style, dominate the discussion. In the identification of the police with the state, the authority of the state is equated with the authority of the police" (Winter 1998, 194; transl. by authors). In the early Federal Republic, this approach was considered normal. Changes began to emerge only in the 1970s, and in the new social climate after 1968, the legitimacy of the police's actions in situations of public protest became a central concern. This applied similarly to the question of their effectiveness in combating crime, as crime was now increasingly seen as ubiquitous and, therefore, as a threat to security.

Nevertheless, the police of this period put most of their efforts into the maintenance of public order and public services (Weinhauer 2003, 250pp.). However, with student protests and the death of Benno Ohnesorg in 1967, the public discussion around police brutality came to the fore. This led politicians and the police to consider how de-escalation, proportionality, and affect control could be placed at the center of police action. Aware of the psychological impact of materiality, the police concentrated their efforts on creating a more civil impression. New rules of engagement were just as much a part of this as a change in equipment and a fashionable civilizing of the uniform which now clearly and symbolically expressed peacefulness and a closeness with the citizen. In the 1970s, a fashion designer was even called in to combine "a close-fitting jacket with trousers that fit tightly at the hips and ended with a fashionable flare", which gave the uniforms an emphatically "fashionable silhouette" (Hackspiel-Mikosch 2011, 111; transl. by authors).

By the 2000s, this new approach had outlived its usefulness, however. The uniforms became blue, and they included new styles. The Hamburg government was the driving force behind these changes; its right-wing populist interior senator felt inspired by the uniforms of the New York police, whose tough approach he also hoped to emulate. Fittingly, Harley-Davidson provided twenty motorcycles to the police for one year. The other federal states in Germany followed the new color scheme, but unlike Hamburg, they prioritized creating a uniform that looked as similar to civilian clothes as possible: "For standard field service clothing, cargo pants, functional parkas or blousons or anoraks for different seasons were chosen. Shirts are white, light or dark blue, depending on the state, and they are combined with a dark tie. Furthermore, there are polo shirts and sweaters, as well as cardigans." When the new uniforms were introduced, some people boasted that they heightened police officers' self-confidence (Hackspiel-Mikosch 2011, 110pp., transl. by authors). This is another instance where the connection between the uniform and the self-image it conveys is clear. In this case, a civilian, self-confident appearance suggests civilian behavior, which then does not inherently evoke aggressive defensiveness and thus sets the stage for nonviolent communication.

Moreover, after these reform efforts to create a more fashionable appearance, the previously characteristic monolithic form of police materiality has been abandoned, and the German police forces have adopted multiple uniforms that instead embody a dichotomy. The everyday uniform is becoming more and more bourgeois, increasingly exhibiting the hallmarks of civilian professional clothing (see the polo shirts, cardigans, etc. that are described above). This materiality enables a soft policing, an approach where violence is not indispensably and demonstratively inscribed as a primary form of action, although it remains possible and can be exercised at any time (albeit primarily in a structural and not physically mediated manner). The control of the homeless and marginalized, forms of racial profiling, and the preservation of a consumer-friendly urban order generally take place without violence, but these police actions establish a specific spatial dominance that is as civil as it is authoritarian, as democratic as it is repressive.

For different kinds of police operations, however, battle dress is used. The policing of demonstrations whose participants are assessed by the police to be ready for violence, for example, continues to bear the signs of potential

violence through deliberate symbolic communication. Such symbolism is all the more significant because the use of violence does not necessarily occur and is not intended to happen. Rather, what is represented is the actual ability to do so. Legislators are very aware of the charisma of such performative pointing acts. The new North Rhine-Westphalian Assembly Act (§ 18 VersG NRW), for example, which came into force in 2021, states that "the wearing of uniforms, parts of uniforms or uniform-like items of clothing" or "a paramilitary appearance conveys a willingness to use violence and thereby has an intimidating effect" (transl. by authors). This statement, however, refers to demonstrators, not to police; by contrast, the latter group's material-performative acts are not problematized but normalized.

At the same time, the police have developed a growing awareness of their own vulnerability; the sacralization of the person now refers to both the public and the police themselves (Kretschmann 2017). The police's use of "passive armament", which is a modern knight's armor, is the contemporary innovation that most clearly illustrates this: "protective helmet with transparent plastic visor, operational suit with protective elements and boots, transparent protective shield and baton" (Noethen 2006, 217; transl. by authors). The term "passive armament," however, also characterizes some demonstrators, who are forbidden under the Assembly Act to carry "objects suitable as protective weapons"—for example, in the form of protection against pepper spray. Nevertheless, the term reveals how masculinity is part of the local understanding of the police's role: Unlike London's Metropolitan Police, who are routinely equipped only with handcuffs, body armor, pepper spray, and a baton, German police may not imagine their appearance in public without weapons.

Such protective equipment does not increase mobility—the helmet alone weighs around two kilos—but instead acts primarily as a non-violent distancing technique**[11]** that helps avoid direct physical contact between police officers and demonstrators and makes verbal communication more difficult (Kretschmann 2023, 171). It also avoids any contamination that might occur by touching policed bodies, as policing is perceived as "dirty work" (De Camargo 2019).

Such equipment conveys an ambiguous double symbolic message: We are armed for war, but we will only intervene when necessary. This new body armor was accompanied by a change in armament. Although a firearm had been part of the police's equipment from the force's inception, it was now used less frequently. Means of distance enforcement have also been introduced; irritant gases (including tear gas) have been used since the mid-1970s, pepper spray since 1999, and the stun gun (taser) since 2010. Police can use such weapons—in stark contrast to their use of the baton—without physical effort and, above all, without physically touching the 'police counterpart'. This separation of action and result enables a combination of activity and passivity: by actively pulling a trigger, one can remain passive and thus also distanced. This is part of a larger development in which close-range weapons have replaced distance weapons**[12]** and lethal weapons have replaced non-lethal ones. Accordingly, this also increases the distance between police officers and their own actions, between their own physical use of force and a technically mediated non-contact defense. Because the effects of such actions can only be experienced indirectly, however, this separation

[11] However, distance weapons are not necessarily non-violent. The use of shock grenades and hard rubber bullets, which is common in France, allows (sometimes considerable) distance between police and those being policed, but not infrequently results in serious injuries. However, such weapons are not part of the police equipment in almost all German states.

[12] Finally, police achieve the greatest possible distance through video surveillance, which no longer even requires physical presence on-site but at the same time guarantees police omnipresence.

of action and result can also lead to brutal action and an indifference to the violence used.

Conclusion

This article's historical longitudinal perspective demonstrates that there has been a clear change in police performative material semiotics toward becoming more civilized. This dynamic is materially expressed through the police's uniforms and equipment. The overall social developments of late modernity—the diminished importance of discipline in favor of increased mechanisms of social control, and, and an increase in the importance of bodily integrity and the sense that violence is taboo—have resulted in "the progressive and dispersed installation of a new system of domination" (Deleuze 1992, 7). The police remain central as monopolists of violence, but the violence they represent and exercise is more often reduced to its mere potential. In this respect, its material-performative acts diversify. In its appearance, it distinguishes between an everyday performance mentioned above, in which it (merely) embodies state power, and a state violence that is as civilized as possible.

This essay was intended as a first attempt to analyze police materialities sociologically against their respective political backgrounds. Further differentiations must be reserved for follow-up studies. This applies not least to the significance of the commercialization and privatization of security under neoliberal conditions and the increasing selective use of materialities that might accompany it.

The semiotics of police materialities is thus clearly related to political constellations. Furthermore, and regardless of any civilizing revisions that might be made to them, it remains true that uniforms are inherently disciplinary—they form an enclosure that serves as a disciplinary corset internally and, in the case of the police, as a disciplinary instrument externally. Discipline can thus be seen as a mental corrolary of the uniforms' materiality: "Discipline concentrates, focuses, and encloses. The first action of discipline is in fact to circumscribe a space in which its power and the mechanisms of its power will function fully and without limit" (Foucault 2009, 44p.). Historically, this has tended to expand: significantly fewer deaths in demonstrations, no more severed hands, weapons that can only be used as a distancing means, police armor that helps avoid physical proximity, and a civilization of symbolic communications that occurs, not least, through the uniform's status as an authoritative costume. Today's police strive for an aura of police presence that demands respectful deference to state authority from a distance, but this is also enforced under circumstances that are largely determined by the police themselves. In this regard, the symbolic civilization of a police presence flanked by materiality is also a kind of camouflage: state power can always turn from pure symbolism to physical action. Police civility, therefore, symbolizes the democratic constitutional order, and a quasi-military appearance in situations determined by the police themselves symbolizes state power in the full sense of the word.

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