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Storytelling and Magic: Meaning Making in Immigration Policing

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Abstract

This article explores the place of storytelling and magic in immigration policing in the United Kingdom. 'Immigration stories' are important for grasping the role of narratives in migration policing. While aimed at rendering a complex social world legible, this form of knowledge reveals its limitations. Rather than producing a cognitive template to make sense of a boundless world, immigration enforcement practices show illegibility as a hallmark of the state. The work of immigration officers is dominated by hazardous and arbitrary practices and rules—which I call 'immigration magic'—which often leave them devoid of power and control. As an exercise in southernising border criminology, I interrogate the received division of labour in theorising the state in the south and north, on the one hand, and state and society on the other. In doing so, I seek to lay this northern policing bureaucracy open to underexplored dimensions and angles, as frontline staff are tasked with re-spatialising state power.

Keywords: Immigration enforcement; policing; globalisation; Southern theory; magic; storytelling.

Introduction

This article explores the place of storytelling and magic in immigration policing in the United Kingdom (UK). 'Immigration stories' are important for grasping the role of immigration officers as cultural agents for producing meaning and acting upon a globalised world perceived as chaotic and undomesticated. While aimed at rendering a complex social world legible, this form of knowledge reveals its limitations. Rather than producing a cognitive template to make sense of a boundless world, immigration enforcement practices show illegibility as a hallmark of the state. Their work is dominated by hazardous and arbitrary practices and rules—which I call 'immigration magic'—which often leave them devoid of power and control.

In exploring storytelling and magic, I draw on the literature on policing and culture while connecting it to the anthropological literature of the state, which elaborates on the relationship between state power and magic. By bringing these two aspects of immigration work to centrestage, I seek to, first, shed light on the distinctive challenges of policing under contemporary conditions (and the peculiar responses to them by frontline officers), and second, interrogate the conceptual framework through which much of northern policing bureaucracies have been theorised. The focus on storytelling and magic foregrounds the instability and sociocultural foundations of northern policing knowledge and questions some of the conceptual premises through which the northern police—and by extension, immigration enforcement—has been predominantly analysed (see Mehta, this volume). As a rational bureaucracy governed by rules, the northern police is imagined as both distinct from their southern counterparts and radically separated from society. Yet, magical beliefs and thinking are part of the cultural scaffold of immigration work.

As an exercise in southernising or decolonising knowledge (Aliverti et al. 2021; Carrington Hogg and Sozzo 2016; Connell 2007) by bringing magic to the cultural study of the British immigration enforcement bureaucracy, I interrogate the received division of labour in theorising the state in the south and north, on the one hand, and state and society on the other. Thus, one way of southernising this field of knowledge entails uncovering imperial modes of knowing and understanding, slackening corseted frameworks pertaining to specific geopolitical locations, upsetting a one-way direction in the circulation of knowledge, and ultimately opening the criminological imagination to alternative forms of critique. It seeds the epistemological sow for a 'subaltern critique of Occidentalism' (Coronil 1997).

In the next section, I turn to the analysis of the concepts of storytelling in policing sociology and magic in anthropology. I then briefly explain the methodology used in the research from which the data I draw on was obtained. The analysis of this data follows. In this analysis, I detail the peculiar place of immigration enforcement in the contemporary British policing landscape. Faced with limitations in deciphering identities and making sense of a complex social world, the police have increasingly resorted to immigration officers to produce knowledge about subjects and places and to solve policing problems. I explore the stories through which immigration officers produce such knowledge and the unorthodox tools and skills to make 'problem people' disappear. Paradoxically, instead of producing legibility and certainty, their work creates confusion and illegibility. The article concludes with a reflection on these two sides of state power—illusion and confusion—foregrounding illegibility as a form of state governance.

Southernising Immigration Policing: Storytelling and Magic

For some time, policing literature documented the role of the police as a cultural institution, emphasising their unique authority to convey meaning about the social world (Ericson and Haggerty 1997; Harkin 2015; Loader 1997). While the capacity of the police to exercise legitimate state coercion has long been their defining feature, policing scholars have argued that the role of the police in society cannot be reduced to its coercive powers. Instead, we need to understand them as 'an especially rich site for the production and dissemination of meaning … that offers an interpretive lens through which people make sense of, and give order to, their world' (Loader and Mulcahy 2003: 45).

Policing literature on storytelling has further explored this cultural role as a particular aspect of police culture, examining how, through stories, they tell themselves and the public the police create and reproduce a particular view of social order and their place within society. Much policing work is, they have argued, about making sense of the social world, building meaning around experiences and events through stories, and managing narratives (Beek 2016; Fletcher 1991, Sur 2019, van Hulst 2013, 2017,). Police stories not only offer a rich insight into the values and beliefs police officers hold and the moral economy of the police (Fassin 2013, 2015) but are important for understanding how these shape the knowledge produced in, and the meaning making nature of, policing (van Hulst 2013). Shearing and Ericson (1991: 489) argued that police stories are a 'key to understanding the practical knowledge police officers use to produce action'. Arguing for the centrality of stories in policing unsettles the view of it as a 'rule-oriented' activity structured around discretionary decision-making and emphasises the informal and the intuitive in policing work (van Hulst 2017). They produce a particular form of experiential sensibility, or intuitive wisdom, that provides 'police officers with ways of seeing and being that allows them to do what jazz musicians do, improvise' (Shearing and Ericson 1991: 495). They form the craft of policing. In turn, they are hegemonic devices in that they invite the construction of a particular world view where the story fits.

As authoritative storytellers, police officers wield symbolic power, which is often articulated in terms of their unique access to occult worlds that civilians are barred from and their ability to 'read' crime scenes (Fletcher 1991). Such privileged access to 'see' things and their almost supranatural ability to decipher the 'truth about crime' contribute to the myth of the police (Comaroff and Comaroff 2017: 101). While as an institution the British immigration police (the Immigration Compliance and Enforcement [ICE] teams) do not command the same symbolic power as its territorial police counterpart, immigration officers often boast their power to see 'the whole picture' and work their magic (Aliverti 2020b, 2021b). They are privy to the underground and the backstage of society and endowed with a 'sixth sense' to tell who is who in the context where the faux (fictive identities, homes and workplaces) are widespread as a subaltern strategy of sorts to evade the state gaze (Aliverti 2022; Ghosh 2019; Reeves 2013). Immigration stories, as Irene Vega (2018) argued, are a key legitimation strategy because they provide moral justification for immigration enforcement work. Amid heated public controversy about their mandate, immigration officers tell themselves and others stories of immigration abuses and criminality that function as self-legitimation narratives. They help them to ease the moral pains of border work (see, by way of comparison, Aliverti 2020a), but also serve as 'institution-wide cultural scripts'.

Based on empirical data collected for a study on immigration police cooperation in immigration enforcement in the UK, this article draws on the policing literature on storytelling but advocates for an understanding of such 'immigration stories' as

sedimented knowledge produced through histories of colonial encounters with the 'other'. These are not stories constructed in a vacuum and are not random, but are deeply embedded in asymmetric relations of power, built through memories and imageries that collate the debris of history, are ignited to tame uncertainty and wildness, and form the background of actions. They create a particular view of the 'primitive' by the 'civilised' as both mysterious and demonic and 'constitute a prism through which people orientate themselves in a globalized world' (Beek 2016: 308; see also Said 2003). Further, it shows their fragility and instability, challenging the ability of the state to advance a single version of the story.

Ultimately, the article seeks to bring to the fore, and reflect on, different forms of knowledge and of knowing deployed by these state agents, which mix the scientific, formal and technical with the intuitive, informal and magical (Aliverti 2021b; Comaroff and Comaroff 2017). As anthropologist Susan Greenwood (2009: 9) argued, scientific knowledge and methods provide valuable yet limited insights on 'unknown regions of experience' and 'ultimate reality'. Such dimensions are accessible through a shift in consciousness—a magical consciousness—that privileges associations, sensory connections and affective dispositions. Magic is a human process of the mind that works through stories, tales and myths. It is a form of knowledge that allows us to access different planes of reality that are not apprehensible through traditional sciences. Many practical and experimental aspects of magic have been adopted in science (see, by way of comparison, Mauss 2001).

Magic and science have been born out of a human desire to settle uncertainties and control the natural world. Both are oriented at harnessing and manipulating occult forces with the aim of bringing about empirical outcomes. Magic is a particularly salient and powerful resource amid periods of change and fluidity to give meaning, explain (mis)fortune and orient actions; hence, the contemporary re-enchantment with magic under global conditions (Buyandelgeriyn 2007; Meyer and Pels 2003). The appeal of neo-pagan practices amid largely secularised societies undergoing significant social changes might be a sign of the deep limitations of traditional institutions to fulfil the human yearning for understanding and faith in supranatural forces (Collins 2015; Rountree 2011). Thus, magic is a critical resource to 'address complex moral, relational, and emotional problems alongside technical ones, [which] are at play in all human societies' (Benussi 2019).

Magic has long been considered the 'bastard sister of science' (cf Frazer 1920: ch4) and demonised by institutionalised religions in the fierce battles historically waged to police the boundaries of legitimate knowledge. The orientalisation of magic as inherently inferior to science and religion was in part the product of European colonialism, as it required 'the foil of native magic as a pretext for domination' (Benussi 2019; see also Crais 2002: 63). The politics of magic, and the attendant cultural boundary making between the three domains, endure in northern academia. Yet, as anthropologists of magic claim, far from being the terrain of uncivilised, backwards societies, magical thinking is universal and permeates everyday practical knowledge (Tambiah 1990). It is important for understanding state authority and power (Frazer 2018; Taussig 1997). As Clifton Crais (2002: 66) observed, the relationship between magic and state power has been a constant feature across societies: 'magic has been a crucially important way of understanding the world, particularly the problems of power and evil'. State power relies on fantasies and myths for its effectiveness. As Fernando Coronil (1997: 3) argued, official national history as an ideological construct works through the 'selective presentation of the elements that create [the] illusion of its existence through invisible tricks', which plays between truth and fiction. Coronil's fascinating discussion of state magic situated the nineteenth-century formation of the modern Venezuela state within the global economic order as an oil-exporting periphery, a petrostate, demonstrating the close intertwining of the local and global, the social and natural, and the material and cultural in state power (Coronil 1997). Although Coronil focused on the manufacture of Venezuela as a 'modern oil nation', his observation can well be applied to neo-colonial Britain's nostalgia as a unified, white and ordered nation and its imperial amnesia (Gilroy 2004; Loader and Mulcahy 2003: 312).

Recent theorisations of the 'idea' of the state and its 'effects' in terms of illusory qualities (Abrams 1988; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Mitchell 1990) point to the importance of magic for the making of the modern state (Coronil 1997; Das 2004; Taussig 1997). In exploring the relationship between magic and modernity, Peter Pels (2003: 5) argued that rather than being a counterpoint to modernity, magic is one of its products. Modernity creates its own forms of magic, which is most evident in the 'enchantments that are produced by practices culturally specific to modern states, economies and societies'. As Margaret Wiener (2003: 156) argued, theories and discourse about magic are important less for understanding the phenomenon itself but for its function in 'conjur[ing] modernity' and the modern state. Rather than thinking about magic in positivist and orientalising terms as a practice and quality found among uncivilised, backward people, we can understand it as a product of colonisation shaped by the politics of colonialism.

I revisit the literature on storytelling and magic to shed light on the idiosyncratic nature of UK immigration enforcement. By examining the everyday work practices of its officers, I explore two aspects of state power: illusion and confusion. Amid late modern colonial encounters, the discourse about magic is produced routinely by state officers as they attempt to make sense of fluid and seemingly inscrutable identities. As I show, the focus on magic helps us understand it as an important aspect of the alchemy of domination—that is, the ways in which immigration officers evoke magical beliefs and stories to wield power while

simultaneously dismissing those told by the people they police as devious and perfidious. Through immigration magic, these officers create the illusion of readability. Yet, as I also show, they uncover its limits because state power in this sphere remains hazardous and unpredictable. In the next section, I provide more details on this relatively novel, peculiar and controversial agency, nicknamed the 'foreigners' police', and the study I conducted with its officers.

Researching the British 'Foreigners' Police'

In this article, I draw from empirical data obtained during a project investigating police and immigration cooperation in everyday policing in two major UK police forces and the respective ICE teams. The ICE teams are local immigration teams formed by immigration officers who are trained in various policing powers (including forced entry, search, arrest and seizure of documents) and are authorised to wield physical force under specific conditions (Aliverti 2021a). These teams are part of the Home Office's Immigration Enforcement, which is tasked with enforcing immigration laws and regulations inland.

The project charted different forms of cooperation to understand the drivers, nature and implications of inter-agency work. It was based on data collected during a period of ethnographic research within these institutions between 2017 and 2019. The data were derived from approximately 1,000 hours of non-participant observations of enforcement operations, custody processes, training sessions, case management work and police immigration officials' interactions at a distance from control rooms (equivalent to three days per week during an 18-month period). The project was divided into two stages: the first stage was devoted to observing custody processes (including police and immigration interviews and custody bookings) in custody suites with embedded immigration officers and shadowing these officers throughout their daily shifts for 16 weeks. In the second stage, observations focused on operational joint work between immigration and police officers. I accompanied immigration and police staff during prearranged intelligence-led visits. On average, I attended operational visits once a fortnight during a period of 12 months. Observations were collated through extensive, reflexive field notes after each shift. They captured some of these interactions and informal conversations I had with staff as faithfully as possible (when possible, I reproduce them verbatim) and my reflections on them.

Additionally, I conducted more than 100 in-depth semi-structured interviews with police and immigration employees at different ranks and with various responsibilities. Interviews lasted for approximately 45 minutes on average and explored officers' backgrounds and perceptions of their role, as well as their experience of multi-agency work. Interview recordings and fieldwork notes were subsequently transcribed and coded together, through NVivo 12, to identify common themes and connections. When reproducing interviews and field notes, participants are identified by their institutional affiliation, rank and pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. Likewise, the sites where I conducted observations are not identified to protect the anonymity of participants.

The project was initially aimed at exploring patterns of decision-making and the exercise of discretion by immigration and police officers in dealing with crime suspects. Yet, as the project unfolded, it was evident that such focus on legal rules and operational discretion (one that has been dominant in the analysis of northern police bureaucracies) was reductive of the much messier and complex framework where the everyday work of these officers take place, and did not convey the informal, hazardous and arbitrary nature of decision-making, where the identity of both suspects and officers take central stage. Often, in seeking concepts and frameworks that allowed me to make sense of this data, I widened the theoretical palette to anthropological and sociological research on the police and the state outside the 'West'. Such search for a theoretical framework to understand the British immigration police provides an illustration of the conceptual and methodological promises of 'doing theory from the South' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012).

Given the socially embedded nature of storytelling, I pay attention to how participants' identities feature or not, in 'immigration stories', and how the identity of the audiences of these stories shapes them. As a researcher and, therefore, one of their 'audiences', I often partook in these stories in different ways because, as a white, middle-class, professional woman from Latin America, I embody different social, political and moral universes. I was often asked about my views on the plausibility and credibility of the accounts the people they encountered and questioned offered. As it turns out, I was tested too. For some officers, I was perceived as a 'good migrant' who 'played by the rules'; people like me, they suggested, were not the target of their work. Yet, my outsider identity cast me aside as untrustworthy, suspect and gullible. Although I strived to keep a neutral and detached position, 'immigration stories' are powerful narratives based on cultural tropes that, through repetition, consolidate and solidify as unquestionable truths. As such, they demanded constant interrogation and unpacking. In the remainder of the article, I delve deeper into the social structure of immigration stories and the politics of magic in immigration enforcement, foregrounding the sociocultural foundations of policing knowledge and its instability.

‘You’re Looking for Odd Things’: Managing Uncertainty, Taming Mystery and Working the Magic of Immigration

Operational work, immigration officers repeatedly assert, bestows them with a distinctive skill, a ‘sixth sense’ and a sort of magic to see beyond the obvious, to discern the fake from the authentic, and to decipher the truth. In the context of ‘simultaneous hyperdocumentation, forgery, and lack of certainty’ about people’s identities (Ghosh 2019, 872) and state bolshie efforts to fixate on them, these officers’ intuitive wisdom is in high demand. ‘These are not your average John Job’, Detective Becky lectured an audience of police officers on identifying ‘foreign national offenders’, hinting at their elusive and unfathomable identities as a mark of distinction from the vernacular police clientele. They change their names, camouflage, drift and move, evading attempts to pin them down. In this section, I argue that while magic suffuses immigration work, it operates unevenly (and politically) to affirm and legitimate the cultural scripts told by immigration and police officers and to dismiss and orientalise those conveyed by the people they encountered as ‘fairy tales’.

Their expertise on different nationalities is amassed less through formal training than through a mix of operational experience, ‘racial common sense’, and organisational folklore. It aids them in navigating ambiguity and uncertainty at the operational level and offers a source of professional pride and institutional legitimation. Possessing this unique expertise for ‘deciphering’ identities makes them an indispensable actor in contemporary policing. ‘You know in the back of your mind that something is wrong’, Immigration Officer (IO) Tabita once told me. Laying down their arithmetic of suspicion and their craft in unravelling the mystery of individual identities, Chief IO Bruce explained: ‘police encounter a lot of people when they’re out and about, and they automatically assume they have the right to be in the UK, and of course, I know differently, I know that, you know, five Greek guys working at a car wash is not normal’. IO Sam agreed: ‘Greek people don’t work on car washes; they are legal, and they are educated people’. The man he was fingerprinting in custody had shown a Greek identification card and said he had a legal right to work because he was Greek. Sam was suspicious because the man was unable to speak Greek and his Facebook profile suggested he was Albanian. He was later taken to a detention centre.

This is a distinctive professional trait, IO Anika claimed, which sets them apart from the police. She can identify suspects who the police would not be able to spot. Such a trait, she explained, feeds from operational experience and ‘immigration offending’ trends. For instance, at that particular point, she came across many Deliveroo[1] workers suspected of working illegally. She asserted:

> they are Brazilian nationals, many of whom claim to have Italian or Portuguese passports. If the police encounter one of them doing deliveries, they say that they have their passports at home … So, what I do is to contact Border Force to request [information on] the passport with which they entered the country. If it’s Brazilian, then I question why they didn’t use the European one … I’m not being discriminatory, but I know because I see cases every day.

The immigration ‘sixth sense’ draws on these trends that are crafted as coherent stories. Immigration stories have their own internal plot and timing. A moral panic of sorts suddenly emerges and succumbs; they involve particular ‘nationalities’ and their ingenious attempts to flout immigration controls. They are built around repetition and recurrent trends. ‘At the moment, Albanians are saying they have scabies’ to avoid being placed in detention, I heard once. Sudanese are saying they had been pressured by the government to spy on the opposition and, hence, they had to escape, IO Roger relayed to me, predicting what the man he was about to interview would tell him: ‘it’s all the same scripts … I’d be surprised if he says something else’. Immigration stories are replete with myths about national traits. ‘Albanians’ featured prominently in them. They are described as dangerous and canny, as police detective John noted:

> Albanians are particularly nasty, I have to say; I have not enjoyed dealing with them at all. They are hard-core nasty fellas … well we know that they are here operating drugs lines, trafficking people. We know that they are doing it; they are foreign nationals, they are illegal immigrants, and they are here, hundreds of them organising crime …
>
> It is enormously important that you know the travel patterns, you know, and again I have seen it with other things, like the Albanians. You can generally tell when someone is going to travel for crime because they will travel on aeroplanes, but then, all of a sudden, they will get the Euro tunnel, and the Euro tunnel is pretty much an indicator of they are up to no good.

In contemporary British policing, the construction of these social groups resonates with what Michael Taussig (1987: 172) called a ‘neocolonial reworking of primitivism’. Taussig pointed to the conqueror’s attribution of magical powers to the Indian-cum-shaman, a figure that at once epitomises ‘the monstrous duality of the diabolical and the goldy’ and synthesises fear and desire that the mysterious and demonic animate. He placed this peculiar contemporary figure in the historical context of the brutal exploitation of the Putumayo’s rubber plantations in the nineteenth century. The cruelty inflicted by the colonial masters

on the Indians haunted them ever since, in turn endowing their subject with dual qualities of savagery and innocence and magical powers to heal and to curse. Through this figure, Taussig (1987: 215) pointed to the classed structure of magic:

> This imputation of mystery and the demonic by the more powerful class to the lower—by men to women, by the civilized to the primitive, by Christian to pagan, is breathtaking—such an old notion, so persistent, so paradoxical and ubiquitous. In our day it exists not only as racism but also as a vigorous cult of the primitive, and it is as primitivism that it provides the vitality of modernism.

The figure of the Albanian criminal condenses fascination and fear, partaking in a 'play of mirror images' where the state and its threatening others are continuously constructed as powerful fictional realities (Aretxaga 2003: 403).

More recently, in the context of the so-called small boats crisis, whereby the crossing by fragile, flimsy boats across the English Channel surged, immigration officers policing the UK shores reckoned on people's reasons for attempting to reach the UK through these dangerous journeys. Mixing hearsay, speculations and tales, many officers ventured on the enticing forces underpinning the swelling traffic. Chief IO Phil expanded on these: 'I have heard stories. So, for example, there was a spate last year where people who had claim[ed] asylum in Germany were coming over and saying: "in Germany, we only get flats, but here in England, you get a house with a garden" '. Articulated in the crude bureaucratic language as 'pull factors', these were framed by his colleague, IO Lara, as fairy tales:

> I think it is to do with maybe … have you heard of Dick Whittington? … Dick Whittington is a story about a child or a person who believes the streets of London are paved with gold, and he goes to London. So maybe the migrant thinks that the UK is Dick Whittington where you can get … I was recently asked by a girl, a young woman, 'when do I get my house?'.

These are not just stories that circulate in 'canteen talk'. They provide scripts to craft national identities, which in turn shape decision-making (Mountz 2003: 638). In fact, they are deeply consequential on laws and policies that have used deterrent tools—including the shipping of asylum claimants to Rwanda—as a main governance strategy.

Magical thinking pervades immigration enforcement practices. They help domesticate a highly volatile, fluid social world governed by unpredictable and capricious forces. Instead of utilising sophisticated predictive technologies, more often than not, these officers resort to associations and connections rehearsed through experience. IO Anika once confided an 'office tale' to forecast fluctuations in workloads. At the time, many people were crossing the English Channel concealed in lorries. People arriving thus were considered particularly burdensome for immigration staff because they generally carried no identification and were vulnerable, requiring specialised care. Sudden clandestine arrivals could lengthen their shifts and demanded liaising with multiple actors—translators, health workers and housing staff. Anika and her colleagues spotted a surge in arrivals on Thursdays, which they baptised as 'lorry drop Thursdays'. Mixed with a touch of humour, she implied the working of mysterious forces, which magical thinking helped to domesticate, hoping to make those arrivals more predictable.

These kinds of tales, built on observable patterns and speculations, provide some degree of predictability in a field perceived as capricious and hazardous. In exploring the politics of magic and the legitimacy of magical thinking, these stories give valence to state officers' cultural scripts while orientalising those told by the people they police or dismissing them as parts of the 'market in asylum narratives' (Ticktin 2011: 137). The cultural valence of immigration stories hinges on the social positionality of the teller and the moral judgements made upon them. It draws on sedimented colonial racial taxonomies about canny, mischievous and mysterious 'others' and is important to understand the alchemy of domination. As the cultural scaffold of policing, these stories remind us of its embodied and unstable character. Rather than understood as atemporal and impersonal interactions, policing encounters are shot through histories and relationships of domination and are profoundly gendered, raced and classed. How these officers 'see' scenes and people—their optics—is embedded in these social structures. Yet, as I show in the next section, this form of knowledge and power gives rise to a range of paradoxes.

'It All Depends on What Week You Go, as to What Result You Get': Immigration Magic and State Illegibility

While many of the stories immigration officers I observed tell themselves and others are oriented to make a chaotic and edgy social world readable and predictable, their work is dominated by hazardous and arbitrary practices and rules. In the eyes of their police counterparts, immigration enforcement is a sort of 'dark art', which they struggled to comprehend. Immigration magic, as they called it, is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it can solve policing problems by making 'problem people' disappear. As opposed to the feebleness of the criminal justice system, immigration enforcement is perceived as a quicker and more effective way of dealing with troubling people by ejecting them from the realm. Conversely, its unorthodox and unpredictable working practices leave police and immigration officers baffled.

In this peculiar, magical world, rules are malleable and pliable, and outcomes are dictated by hazardous factors. For immigration, IO Jane explained, nationality is crucial because they deal differently with a person from Romania versus one from South Africa. Within each group, she further articulated, the criteria to render someone deportable fluctuates, with different teams at different points in time operating on their own idiosyncratic rules. Different and constantly evolving nomenclatures about strands of deportation routes circulate within the close circle of the immigration bureaucracy, demanding constant review to understand the ebb and flow of immigration enforcement and puzzling even the most scrupulous officers.

In one instance, two police officers arrested a woman from Romania caught stealing 20 bars of chocolate in the city centre. IO Tabita explained that because she had only one recorded conviction, she could not be deported. The officers asked whether the woman could be returned to Romania, as she had not been working. Frustrated, Tabita explained that they were no longer able to return European Economic Area (EEA) nationals on that ground: 'if they don't exercise treaty rights, they don't matter anymore. But if they have three convictions, they are out'. The officers looked confused by the sudden changes to the rules, which, just recently, had allowed them to arrest Polish people sleeping on the streets for immigration purposes. Sensing this feeling of bewilderment, Tabita promised them that 'once I have the thumbs up [to arrest EEA nationals for not exercising EEA rights, such as working or studying], I can give you a call' and took the details of the police officers.

An experienced police constable who had worked alongside immigration officers for some time, PC Lindsey articulated this frustration:

> The goal posts [in Immigration Enforcement] get changed, and we have had Missouri,[2] and we have had a period of time where Missouri was [the] flavour of the month, and it was 'yes, he can go, yes, he can go, yes, he can go', that is one week. The following week, you will have exactly the same scenario, and they will say, 'no, he can't', 'well, why not? Last week, yes, he could', and 'our parameters have changed, what we are looking at has changed', and it will be a frustration because it all depends on what week you go, as to what result you get, and it can be … fractious because someone who could have gone last week, this week can't go.

Other than making 'the law', these officers made different rules as they went along. These were not merely personal styles but practices that were consequential on the individuals being subjected to their power. For instance, one of the officers I shadowed adopted the practice of recording police arrests in the immigration database, a notification that can have significant repercussions on the granting, extension or curtailment of visas, residence status or citizenship. Other officers did not take such an approach. Another officer had 'lobbied' her manager to make driving convictions (e.g., parking or speeding infractions) accessible to immigration officers so that they could be considered when making individual immigration decisions. Although potentially consequential to individuals, the decision to make this information available to immigration staff was apparently not subject to any legal constraint.

Immigration decisions depend on factors that the individuals or the officers cannot fully control. The nationality of the person is of critical importance, as is the availability of beds and seats on specific charter flights at any particular point. A source of significant frustration among police and immigration officers, these hazardous work routines mean that many of the people they arrest are later released due to logistical obstacles. IO Joe explained the vagrancy of immigration:

> Every single job is different. You can't say one person is going to be removed and another is not, and I think that, to the police, is very, quite unfathomable, to them … because they work within a very structured criminal justice system, they know what they've got to do. With us, we've got how many different nationalities? On a regular basis, maybe 20 to 30, each one has its own challenges, you know. This person, this nationality, you're never going to get a document for, so you've got to treat them different[ly]. This person, 'oh well, he's going to claim asylum', so you've got to treat them different[ly] … I don't think the police understand that each nationality presents us with a unique problem.

The hazardous, unpredictable and arbitrary exercise of power leaves those subject to it bereft of agency and puzzled. Their fates are subject to the vagrancies of immigration, hinge on officers' moods, diplomatic games and logistical arithmetic, and lead to confusion and helplessness. That feeling of perplexity was patent in an exchange Tabita had with Maria, a woman from Iran who was arrested on suspicion of carrying a firearm and then referred to immigration. Tabita visited her in the police cell to gather information on her status in the UK. 'It is strange to have a woman [arrested for] carrying a firearm', she reckoned. As she questioned her, Maria explained in broken English that she carried pepper spray to protect herself because she had been harassed and targeted in her neighbourhood. I was also confused by Tabita's insistence on her possession of a firearm. Apparently, Tabita drew from a police report the information on the firearm, which I did not sight. She told Maria that 'it is [a] very serious offence to carry a firearm in this country' and that:

> you should know about it, having been here for so long. It's dangerous, and you shouldn't be having that in your possession. I will make a note of this in your case, and it may damage your application [for asylum]. You can jeopardise the chances of being here.

The woman was shattered and broke out into tears. She said that she had never intended to hurt anybody, and she only tried to protect herself. Maria's disquiet at not being able to understand the reasons for her arrest and its ramifications and the difficulties she experienced in being unable to explain herself spelt out the despair of being caught within a Kafkaesque maze apparently produced by a chain of bureaucracy's mistakes and miscommunication.

In other words, rather than producing a cognitive template to make sense of a strange, chaotic world, immigration enforcement practices show illegibility as a hallmark of the state or, in Vena Das's (2004) expression, the 'state's signature'. In documenting the politics of waiting in the administration of welfare benefits in Argentina, Javier Auyero (2012) explored a very similar form of exercising power wrought by uncertainty and arbitrariness. The discretion in the allocation of benefits, he noted, cannot be entirely explained by examining the work of individual street-level bureaucrats but stems from 'above'—particularly the world of politics. He portrayed this process as a 'game of chance' where 'ad hoc decisions dominate much of the distribution of resources' suffused by hassles and mistakes, where 'random changes in procedure, scheduling, the number and cash amount of instalments, and the requirement are the rule' (Auyero 2012: 102-103). Randomness and arbitrariness, he argued, is a form of domesticating the poor, which ultimately produces domination.

State Magic: Illusion and Confusion

As storytelling and magical thinking permeate immigration, it also reminds us of its importance for understanding state power more broadly. Far from being the beacon of rational bureaucracy, the 'state' works through illusion and confusion. The 'magic of the state', Taussig (1997) elaborated, emanates from a Hobbesian fiction and a mythical covenant creating a unified, embodied entity: an artificial man. 'The play of disguise no less than force and fraud emerges from the very interior of the rationality of contract' (Taussig 1997: 125). The rational form that underpins its existence functions as a veil of fantasy, a fable, a fiction:

> No matter how historically inaccurate this fable obviously is, it is nevertheless a telling account of the mythological principles inevitably and necessarily involved in modern state formation … these stories of the coming into being of the state are not only fantastic history but … precisely as fantasy is essential to what they purport to explain such that any engagement with the thing called the state will perforce to be an engagement with this heart of fiction. (Taussig 1997: 124)

This fantasy or illusion of the 'state' as discreet, bounded, coherent and real is reproduced through different registers (laws, uniforms and buildings) and practices, in what Bourdieu (1994) called 'symbolic power'. Rather than coercion, this power resides in its monopoly on sensorial registers and cognitive structures, forms and categories. This 'quasi-divine' cultural power to produce and impose categories of thought is where the modern state is more efficacious. Framed in terms of 'legibility', James Scott (1998) suggested that such authority emanates from the state's ability to monopolise a sensorial experience of knowing the social world—of 'seeing' and 'feeling' like the state—and devising a normative social order (see also Cooper 2019). Legibility as a central problem of modern statecraft was particularly apparent in the context of European conquests as colonial administrators wrestled with rendering strange lands and people familiar. Through practices of seeing, naming, classifying and ordering, the state 'performs' sovereignty (Bryant and Reeves 2021; Mitchell 1990).

Being able to 'read' people and things, to make them legible, is precisely the role of the immigration officers and, by extension, the police. As the fieldwork analysis above suggests, these frontline officers play a key part in building the cognitive scaffold of our globalised social world through their everyday practices and narratives. Such practices and narratives crafted to rein in a world perceived as inchoate, boundless and fluid are underpinned by intuition and bespoke informal tools and technologies to 'draw truth from the body' (Fassin and D'Halluin 2005: 605; see also Ticktin 2011), and contain and pin down fractal identities. Although seldom recognised as such, the mundane immigration stories and narratives of the kind described in this article form part of the technologies of governance that enact the state in everyday life as an authoritative entity that can 'recognize, adjudicate and authorize' (Hansen and Stepputat 2001: 10).

Yet, the 'State' as enacted through these practices is far from complete and knowledgeable. Metaphorically, the illusion of the state—like a theatrical play—is always at risk of leaking and revealing its fictional nature. Hence, it demands constant reinforcement, sometimes through carnivalesque excesses (Mbembe 2001) in the form of infrastructures of virile, spectacular force (Brown 2010). Under contemporary conditions, border control technologies and practices are important sites for understanding the 'state'—even its European incarnation—as an incomplete and precarious project (Aliverti 2021b; Barker 2017; Reeves 2014). Because of their indeterminacy, the social and geographical borders are critical sites for unsettling the

solidity of the state (Das and Poole 2004: 20). In theorising the state, Das and Poole (2004) argued that the margins—the spaces of incompleteness, disorder and blurriness between legal and illegal—are not its negation but its entailment. In other words, rather than understanding disorder as spaces yet to be conquered by state power, they provocatively suggest that these are precisely the hallmark of the state itself. We need to understand the state not through attempts to make reality legible and orderly, but rather the contrary, through its illegibility and disorder: 'the state is continually both experienced and undone through the illegibility of its practices, documents, and words' (Das and Poole 2004: 10). As Madeleine Reeves (2014: 21) observed, 'the work of bordering highlights the improvisatory work of everyday state formation, and affords an insight into a mode of governance in which power thrives less on rendering populations and places legible than on working the gap between life and law'.

The task of drawing the boundary between life and law is central to border control work. And yet, as frontline officers come to realise, such a boundary is slippery and oblique, not only due to attempts to foul them (Aliverti 2022) but in large part because the state's own rules are unreadable. Confusion and illegibility pervade their everyday work. Illegibility, according to Das (2004), emerges from the two dimensions of the state: the rational and the magical. The spectral presence of the state in society combines its rational mode—through invocations of legal and bureaucratic structures—and its magical mode, characterised by its obscurity and pervasiveness (Das 2004).

In making magic a centrepiece to understand state power, Das, Poole and Taussig unsettled not only our understanding of the state but a division of labour between the state and society. Following Weberian and Foucauldian traditions, the modern state has been conceived as a rational, coherent, impersonal structure. As Tim Mitchell (1990: 90) explained:

> the nation state is arguably the paramount *structural effect* of the modern technical era … It includes within itself many of the particular institutions already discussed, such as armies, schools, and bureaucracies. Beyond these, the larger presence of the state in several ways takes the form of a framework that appears to stand apart from the social world and provide an external structure (italics in original).

Conversely, 'society' is characterised as irrational, superstitious and credulous. These attributes have been particularly marked in the post-colonies, where magic stands as a 'vague marker of otherness that freezes non-Western subjects in premodern time' (Greenwood 2009: 2). Yet, while magic and the 'dark arts' have lost its prominence in modern northern cultural imagination, its importance for shaping individual and institutional beliefs, views and practices is undeniable (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Crais 2002; Fitzpatrick 1992). The law and its institutions are replete with symbols, rituals and myths, which are crucial for their authority and legitimacy. The grammar of magic as a resource of the powerless to make sense of social maelstrom and to tilt fate, as it turns out, is increasingly appropriated by state workers to harness occult forces 'in situations of rapid social transformation, under historical conditions that yield an ambiguous mix of possibility and powerlessness' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 283).

In foregrounding storytelling and magic in the analysis of the British immigration bureaucracy, I have sought to 'exoticise' it—that is, reveal its myths and tales and its magical efficacy—and break it open to underexplored dimensions and angles. Theorising policing through the magical tales officers tell themselves and their audiences reminds us of its inextricably embodied nature and sociocultural bases and, in turn, the fragility and instability of policing truths. As I have argued, the British 'foreigners' police' is particularly prone to this analysis given the prominence of unorthodox tools and skills to tame wildness and re-spatialise state power. The article has advocated for a rethinking of our conceptual frameworks and opening up to new insights to better understand social control and power in a globalised world.

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[1] A UK fast food delivery service.
[2] He referred to 'Operation Missouri'. This was one of the strands, an operational avenue, for deporting foreign nationals who had accrued three or more criminal convictions. 'Missouri' was born out of the interpretation of statutory laws and judicial rulings.

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