

Manufacturing Obedience: Coercion and Authority in Border Controls

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journals.sagepub.com/home/pun**Ana Aliverti** 

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Abstract

This article reassesses the relationship between state authority and violence in the context of border controls. Drawing on empirical research conducted with immigration and police officers in the UK, I show that the use of force in this context give rise to distinctively complex ethical questions which shape institutional and individual practices, and is entangled with the legally and politically fragile authority wielded by frontline staff. Faced with a morally, socially and politically controversial mandate, these officers devise a range of strategies to either minimize or conceal the use of violence. In doing so, they sometimes fall into oxymorons and euphemisms that at once evidence the shady line between coercion and consent, and shed light on the some of the profound moral dilemmas they encounter in doing border work. These dilemmas, I conclude, speak of broader challenges to the exercise of state coercive power, and the negotiated, contingent and provisional nature of state authority in a globalized, postcolonial and profoundly unequal world. I also argue for the social and intellectual urge to integrate the study of immigration enforcement in contemporary debates of state penalty.

Introduction

The death of Jimmy Mubenga in October 2010, following unreasonable force applied by G4S staff during a British Airways flight bound to Angola to action his deportation order, prompted fierce criticism over the use of force during immigration law enforcement operations in the UK. The judicial inquest found that he was unlawfully killed after being held down by the guards despite Mr Mubenga warning them that he was unable to breathe (BBC News, 2013). In 2008, the charity Medical Justice documented instances

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of alleged ‘use of inappropriate and dangerous methods of force’, in some cases leading to physical injuries, by custody and escort staff during deportation proceedings (Medical Justice, 2008, 19). In response, in 2014, the UK government commissioned a review to assess ‘the quality and safety to these incidents of systems of restraint’ during deportation, which endorsed the principle of restraint minimization (Shaw, 2014). Still, since 2018 the Inspector of Prisons repeatedly expressed concerns about the excessive and unnecessary use of restraint, in the form of handcuffing, waist belts and leg shackles, during detention and deportation flights (HMIP, 2019, 2018b, 2018a).

Despite these concerns, physical coercion is remarkably rare during immigration enforcement operations as immigration officers rely on ‘consent’ and ‘compliance’ of those subject to immigration powers. The preference for compliance, rather than force, is illustrated by removal and deportation statistics. Since 2010, ‘voluntary returns’ outnumber ‘enforced returns’, and 2019 reported the lowest annual number of ‘enforced returns’ since 2004—22 percent lower than in 2018 (Walsh, 2020, 5). Leaving aside for a moment the problematic nature of this institutional nomenclatures -of which more below, ‘voluntary returns’ refer to ‘departures’ where the person subject to enforcement action has given informed consent and hence is not subject to an order of removal.¹ Even during ‘enforced returns’, the use of force remained relatively rare with typically less than 10 percent of these operations reporting ‘use of force incidents’ since 2015 (with the exception of 2018–2019 where the figure reached 16 percent) (Home Office, 2021a). Immigration enforcement operations have decreased since 2015, shrinking by 16 percent in 2019 (National Audit Office, 2020). Overall, this a picture of growing parsimony in border and immigration enforcement in general (and in the use of force within those proceedings specifically), drastically accelerated by the Covid pandemic, which has been largely overlooked by scholars and practitioners. It offers an opportunity to examine anew the place of coercion in immigration work (Phillips et al., 2006).

In this article, I focus on the moral and affective place of violence in everyday immigration enforcement work, and the relationship between coercion and authority. The relationship between police and violence has been a key concern for sociologists of the police. Violence and coercion have long been identified as the most distinctive aspect of police’s work and culture (Bittner, 1980; Muir, 1977; Reiner, 2010). However, in recent years, the centrality of force in policing has started to be questioned by many scholars at normative and empirical levels. Normatively, the wielding of force to maintain order and achieve compliance with legal rules has been problematized as inadequate and counterproductive in modern democracies, for coercion is said to be a weak basis for building compliance and legitimacy (Bradford, 2014; Lerman and Weaver, 2013; Tyler et al., 2014). Accordingly, the Peelian principle of ‘policing by consent’ has resurfaced in police reforms (Loader, 2016). Empirically, policing scholars the world over have questioned the centrality of coercion and of its crime fighting role in the everyday work of frontline officers (Loftus, 2009, 66), dismantling one of the myths of the police (Reiner, 2010). Although reliant on coercion, they argued, police authority is not reductive to it (Loader, 1997).

Here, I revisit these debates on the relationship between police and violence by placing it in the context of the growing impetus to control mobility within policing. I reflect on the

place of violence and coercion in everyday immigration enforcement. The relatively low incidence of physical coercion and the reluctance by officers to resort to it during operational work should prompt questions about the place of violence *vis-à-vis* issues of authority and legitimacy in this peculiar sphere (Bosworth, 2013, 2019a), and more broadly. How do these officers perceive their work and how important is violence in that perception? To what extent and in which circumstances does coercion (and its threat) enhance or jeopardize their authority? How do they assert their authority and subvert resistance in the context of fragile and low legitimacy? What do moral attitudes to violence by these officers tell us about the exercise of state power?

Based on empirical research conducted with immigration and police officers in the UK, I show that the use of force in this context give rise to distinctively complex ethical questions which shape institutional and individual practices, and is entangled with the legally and politically fragile authority wielded by frontline staff (Aliverti, 2020b, 2021). Faced with a morally, socially and politically controversial mandate, these officers devise a range of strategies to either minimize or conceal the use of violence. In doing so, they sometimes fall into oxymorons and euphemisms that at once evidence the shady line between coercion and consent, and shed light on the some of the profound dilemmas they encounter in doing border work. These dilemmas, I conclude, speak of broader challenges to the exercise of state coercive power, and the negotiated, contingent and provisional nature of state authority in a globalized, postcolonial and profoundly unequal world.

In examining the place of coercion in migration controls, the article seeks to slacken the corseted conceptualization of state violence which sometimes is unhelpfully dissected into distinct institutional, legal and disciplinary domains, such as those pertaining to policing and punishment, or to the criminal and the administrative. Following others (Aas and Bosworth, 2013; Beckett and Herbert, 2010; Fassin, 2018; Hannah-Moffat and Lynch, 2012; Super, 2019), this is an invitation to interrogate the constructed nature of such boundaries and to reflect on the intellectual potentials (conceptually and empirically) of reassessing these boundaries to better document and understand state punitive power under contemporary conditions.

On police violence, punishment and state authority

Conceived as an important part of the civilizing process and the construction of state sovereignty, the centralization and monopoly of the use of legitimate force on the police, has been taken for granted and regarded as sign of political and civic progress, a benchmark to distinguish failed from strong states (Brodeur, 2003). In recent years, however, scholars questioned the assumed precondition of state's centralized violence for political order and denounced the western-centric scaffolding of such construct which neglects its imperial backdrop and the ambivalent and complex relationship between law, violence and state formation (Jaffe, 2013; Saeed, 2020; Taussig, 2007). So too, policing scholars have interrogated state coercive authority -that is the legally sanctioned power to constrain people's autonomy and freedom, including through physical force and violence- as a constitutive and distinctive aspect of the police.

First, they questioned not only the police's monopoly of legitimate violence amid the emergence of a range of non-police actors -such as private security firms and migration agencies, but also the centrality of the actual exercise of force in the everyday work of the police the world over. Given that significant parts of their working lives are spent attending situations that do not require them to use force, Waddington argued (1999, 20), the exercise of authority rather than the exercise of coercion should be the defining element of the police. Loader and Mulcahy (2003, 42) explained that police's authority, although reliant of their coercive capacities, is not reducible to it. In order to understand the place of the (English) police -its authority and power- we need to look at their social meaning and the symbolic power they command. Amid broader transformations to vertical structures of authority in society -which the desacralization of the police is part of, coercion remains a fragile basis for police authority and legitimacy. As Tyler (2003, 323) argued, obedience and compliance to legal authorities -such as the police- are more likely and durable through people's cooperation and 'buy in' than by force. However, as we will see, the distinction between coercion and cooperation is more complex than much procedural justice literature suggests. So too, as Jauregui (2016) explained, the relationship between coercion, authority and legitimacy is far from linear. Legitimacy is not a condition 'that increases or decreases in direct response to individual or institutional behavior, but [it is] a continuous and precarious social process that emerges in dialogue with cultural-political and legal-institutional forces and relations that shift over time' (Jauregui, 2013a, 648). Based on her research on India's Uttar Pradesh Police, she demonstrates that police authority and legitimacy rely on the complex and fluctuating interdependence between the public and the police, where demands for police services (including violence) are contingent. Violence is one resource, important albeit not exclusive, in fulfilling public demands for order and sustaining police authority. Police authority, rather than being absolute, is subject to various conditionalities that renders it provisional. Jauregui discussed how police officers strategize the use or threat of violence in their everyday work to achieve their goals (Jauregui, 2016, 13).

In scrutinising the relationship between police violence and state authority, other scholars cast doubt on the assumption made by sociologist of punishment that, faced with a crisis of sovereignty, state violence is expected as a form of virile reaffirmation of it (Barker, 2017; Garland, 1996). In post-dictatorial Argentina, Frederic (2020) analysed the deployment of the Gendarmerie -the militarized border force- to tackle urban insecurity and quell social protest as a symptom of profound transformations in the role of the state in the provision of security. A move criticized for militarizing internal security, the landing of the 'gendarmes' to patrol impoverished urban neighbourhoods, Frederic claims, should be understood as an attempt by the state to manage the 'social question' in the context of heightened inequalities left behind by neoliberal reforms. This form of governance sought to reinscribe and revamp the state maimed by neoliberal globalization less through repression, denial and acting out, than negotiation and mediation to regain consent and rebuild legitimacy with marginalized communities. Providing security, her interlocutors recounted as they witnessed extreme poverty in their everyday work, demanded their adaptation which in turn revolved less around their military training and more on their interpersonal skills and personal sensibilities (Frederic, 2014).

Police authority in other postcolonial societies, such as South Africa where the memory of the Apartheid looms large among poor black neighbours, presents similar patterns of provisionality and patchiness. According to Steinberg (2012, 482), police force is strategically calibrated and dosed as non-compliance to police authority is widespread: ‘they play by the unwritten set of rules established by what citizens will tolerate; there rules... are fined-grained, sophisticated and shifting’. Police’s exercise of violence is selectively administered and, even if normalized and routinely employed (Faull, 2018, 134), is also highly uneven, contextual and contingent.

Second, policing scholars have also interrogated the nature and function of police coercion in society, questioning the empirical and normative merits of excluding police violence from conceptualizations of punishment. The distinction between legal and extra-legal, official and unofficial coercion is remarkably blurred as much of policing takes place in the ‘grey zone’ where the boundary of the institutional or legal and the clandestine is rendered confusing and permeable (Auyero, 2007). As ‘punishment in the street’ (Fassin, 2018, 38), the policing field is hence characterized by its ethical, legal and affective complexity, indeterminacy and ‘dirtiness’ (Jauregui, 2013b). It is precisely this indeterminacy that offers the police the opportunity to draw the frontiers of order and disorder where ambivalence prevails (Caimari, 2012, 188). Such grey area where much policing takes place and where different motivations and emotions fuse -from revenge and retribution to edgework and boredom- renders the distinction between police coercion and punishment blurred too (Fassin, 2013, 2018). In advocating for a sociological reconceptualization of punishment, Didier Fassin argues that the use of police coercive powers selectively on those regarded as ‘police property’, which compounded effect is the control and subjection of entire populations, turn such distinction empirically, if not normatively, vacuous. It is precisely in this selectivity on the targets of police violence that we can understand the paradox of high public demand for policing at a time when the police emerge as one of the most controversial institutions in the contemporary world amid frequent allegations of corruption, brutality and discrimination (Fassin, 2017, 2; Harkin, 2015; Caldeira, 2006). As a loosely regulated form of state power and the most powerful mechanism of social control, the work of the police -and by extension that of immigration officers- ought to feature in contemporary understanding of state coercion.

The discussion above suggests the need for a reassessment of our understanding of the relation between police violence and state power (and of violence itself) that takes seriously the question of provisionality, fluidity and contingency, and the incomplete and negotiated nature of state power in the context of globalization (Bosworth et al., 2018; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2017). As Northern states seek to re-spatialize their authority transnationally, Sharma and Gupta (2006, 28) queried, ‘How do mechanisms of rule operate not simply within the borders of nation-states but at a scale and in a space that is of a different order?’. They urged social scientists to investigate how ‘[t]he current regime of neoliberal governmentality, which is spreading governmental methods across different contexts and proliferating state-like bodies that operate transnationally, is reconfiguring conventional and territorial notions of the state, of state power, and of rule’.

This article seeks to make progress in that direction, by examining how the relationship between state authority and violence is complicated in an age of globalization. Much of the labour of social sorting and the management of social marginality in Northern societies, such as the UK, falls on immigration staff and is oriented towards the territorial exclusion of impoverished and racialized groups hailing from the South. As I will show, the everyday labour of policing social marginality in Britain's post-industrial cities starkly brings to the fore the highly contradictory nature of such task displaying 'a constant see-sawing between coercive and supportive roles in response to inequality's various effects' (Herbert et al., 2018, 1496). In doing so, it seeks to engage with broader discussions within the sociology of punishment about the empirical and normative borders of punishment. If these intellectual debates on punishment are to remain relevant, they need to be anchored to its empirical reality and its shifting contours, while also acknowledging the specificities of various forms state coercion and compulsion. It is pertinent, then, to incorporate these state practices of social control as manifestations of its mutations, and critical to examine the peculiar nature of immigration work and its relevance for understanding state violence and authority.

Ethnographing immigration enforcement violence

This article draws on empirical material, in the form of observations of and interviews with police and immigration officers in the UK. I conducted fieldwork between 2017 and 2019 in two large English police forces and Immigration Compliance and Enforcement (ICE) teams. The ICE teams are the operational arm of the Home Office's Immigration Enforcement (IE), which is tasked with inland enforcement.² In this article, I report on data from formal interviews with 51 immigration staff at different ranks: immigration officers (IOs), chief immigration officers (CIOs), inspectors, and assistant directors. I also rely on ethnographic observations of police custody, where some IOs are placed, and of enforcement operations conducted by immigration and police staff on residences and businesses. I attended police custody daily for a period of four months and observed immigration enforcement operations fortnightly during fieldwork. The data collected was audio recorded (interview data) and written down in diaries (observation data). Both were later transcribed and coded using NVivo. I use pseudonyms to refer to staff to ensure their anonymity.

The question of coercion and violence was not the original focus of the project. Yet, as fieldwork evolved and I started to collate and analyse the data, it became clear that it was a central, albeit obscured and unintelligible, aspect of the everyday work of the officers I observed. State coercion as wielded by officers surfaced subtly and quietly in some of the immigration interrogations when they, after sustaining convivial conversations with suspects about their family and distant homes, suddenly announced that their interlocutors were under arrest and would be taken to a detention centre. These violent interruptions, mediated by changes in tone and body language of the people involved, and a flurry of paperwork that the person being interrogated was obliged to fill and sign, created a strange and sudden moral distance. They evidenced the inherent coerciveness of these encounters, yet they also made manifest the challenges, discomforts and tensions involved in acknowledging such violence at the operational and institutional levels.

As policing ethnographers confessed, witnessing violence is morally and emotionally taxing and draining (Hornberger, 2017; Jauregui, 2013b; Westmarland, 2001). Given its ubiquity and evasiveness, the corrosive effect of violence in the context of immigration enforcement is more insidious. It risks desensitization and dehumanization; hence the importance of reflecting on it. While incidents of extraordinary violence are reported in the media and investigated by IE watchdogs, my interest is to explore ordinary instances of violence and coercion. In so doing, I follow Das (2007, 164) who urged us to study the state by ‘shifting our gaze from the obvious places where power is expected to reside to the margins and recesses of everyday life, where such infelicities become observable’. In placing my gaze on the everyday exercise of state coercion, I also seek to reflect on its blurred, dirty contours, its grey zones, and rescue their relevance for theorizing state power. I report on them in the following sections.

Violent encounters? Coercion and authority in immigration work

In recent years, reports of injuries and deaths in immigration custody and during deportation prompted scrutiny over the powers to use force by immigration enforcement officers, and renewed criticisms over the detention of vulnerable individuals (Shaw, 2016, 2014). Such concerns, compounded by the impact of the Covid pandemic, affected IE quantitatively and qualitatively. As I write this piece, in the midst of the pandemic, detention figures are historically low and enforcement operations have plummeted, while IE has favoured ‘voluntary’ return, as opposed to forced deportation and removal, as a more humane and cost-effective immigration enforcement tool. Notwithstanding discussions about the punitive and punishment-like nature of immigration detention and deportation (Bosworth, 2012, 2019b; Campesi, 2015), the question of force and violence in this sphere has been subject to scarce analytical reflection. This question is unsurprisingly a thorny one fraught with profound ethical difficulties concerning the justification of the exercise of coercion to enforce an accident of birth in an unequal world (Franko, 2019; Hidalgo, 2018). It gives raise to broader questions about legitimate violence and social inequalities, which have started to be tackled in moral and political philosophy (Gargarella, 2011).

This section explores the perceptions of immigration frontline officers on violence and coercion in their everyday work. Despite seducing them into the job and being one of the most attractive aspects of it (Aliverti, 2021, 50), the power and the threat of violence animates ambivalent views and sentiments among many officers. In their down time, officers relayed the hazardous nature of their work, made of heroic chases, forced entries and adrenaline-packed shifts. However, as they also acknowledged with a mix of bitter resignation and relief, such eventful shifts are rare. The bulk of their work revolves around low level administrative breaches concerned with expired or improper visas, and lack of identity papers. Their daily labour is made of repetitive and tedious questioning in businesses and homes of mostly compliant individuals who ‘just want a better life’. They are ‘pleasant’ and ‘placid’ people, ‘they are not criminal’, I heard repeatedly, so they are less inclined to ‘kick off’, to resist, than the usual police’s clientele who are

noisy and violent. Illustrating the non-violent nature of their everyday work, IO Roger -a former prison officer- told me he used force only four times in his four years of service. He recounted that in the prison, he would use force all the time, and that this was one of the reasons he switched jobs. Likewise, a longstanding IO, Fred, explained they rarely use their baton during operational work and when they use it, they must write a report. 'I think the police would kind of laugh at it... I think we are seen not as police officers and we don't have that gravitas, we don't have that impact'. The bureaucratic implications of using physical violence, they suggest, placed them afar from their police colleagues who are perceived as less scrutinized.

While the police remain its best comparator, ICE staff are aware of the gulf between the two agencies. To start with, immigration officers have less powers than the police and still rely on the police to conduct operations which demand specific skills (such as forced entry) or present specific risks (involving dangerous individuals). Because of the limited enforcement powers, most of the immigration operations I observed relied on the consent of suspects rather than pursuant to a judicial warrant. As I witnessed during these visits, people are remarkably cooperative when Immigration knocks at their doors—during fieldwork, hardly any visits were frustrated due to people's refusal. One thing that still puzzles Roger is why people open the door and answer their questions when they act on 'informed consent' (Home Office, 2020a, 6). Even if they explain to them that they are free to refuse to engage, most people answer their questions and allow them in. 'It's the uniform' he reckons. Unwittingly hinting at the blurred line between consent and coercion -or at the oxymoron coined by critics as 'coerced consent' (Rawlison, 2020), he suggests that most of the people do not understand what they are saying and think that, because they are in uniform, they have to comply.

As an attempt to clad their authority, in an instance of 'symbolic borrowing' (Thumala et al., 2011), since the early 2000s immigration staff were vested with their own blue uniforms, police gear (handcuffs, padded vests and batons) and marked vans. For those serving at the time, the introduction of the official attire was celebrated as an institutional sign of the social worth of their job, that 'we're starting to be respected and given the tools we need to do the job'. Fred recalls: '[Before] I think we were looked on as kind of a soft unit. [...] Then when we got the stab vests, gradually they brought in the uniforms, and it gives you more of a professional image: "oh they are like police officers, they wear the same gear" [...] that had upper the presence and the authority in some respects'. Their authority was reinforced with an artillery of laws that made disobedience to their orders a crime.³

And yet, despite efforts to place them on a par with their police colleagues, immigration officers still feel diminished in their authority, morally, legally, and operationally. Compared to the police, immigration enforcement is 'low key' and their 'ugly cousin', as ICE staff lamented. They do not inspire the same respect and authority among the public either. They are frequently exposed to abuses and charges of racism and xenophobia. IO Samira put it bluntly: 'Immigration haven't had the respect. Police don't see Immigration as a force; they see them as a waste of space'. Not only are they a much younger institution; the remit of their role is highly controversial raising doubts about their public virtuosity (Loader and Walker, 2001) and depriving them of what Cooper-Knock and Owen call 'ideational legitimacy' (2015, 369). As CIO Paul

explained: ‘the police, they have a multifaceted role, whereas we don’t. We’re very one track unfortunately and within the local community the police can do a lot more work than we can [...] If we asked them to speak to people, generally they can approach someone and speak to them. [Instead, when we approach them], they might run off, you know. It is that kind of thing, at its most basic level.’

These officers perceive their work as dirty (Garrity, 2021) which taints them both physically and emotionally. Bestowed with a controversial mandate and fragile authority, ICE staff’s exercise of coercion is fraught with dilemmas, tensions, and contradictions. I turn to them in the next section.

Moral ambivalence at the border: coercion, gender and linguistic fog

Despite belonging to an enforcement body, many officers I spoke to were ambivalent about the use of force and indicated it as the most challenging part of their role. Although she is trained to arrest and is equipped with her police-type gear, IO Tabita confessed to being uncomfortable about using it—particularly the baton—and would prefer not to be given powers to use sprays or tasers. One of her colleagues used his baton against a person escaping from a restaurant and, she said, he was very traumatized for hurting them. Such moral discomfort is entangled with gender relations. Female officers acknowledged that their work is very masculine not only in terms of the shift patterns (which impact staff with caring responsibilities the most), but also in relation to its content. And yet, women represent two thirds of IE’s workforce at lower ranks (both in administrative and enforcement roles).⁴ Women officers generally preferred to do non-operational work and when on the beat they assert the distinctive skills they bring to enforcement, as IO Felicity explains: ‘this job doesn’t suit everybody, but I think if you’re like-minded and you go “right you know what? I know that you are a 6-foot man and you’re going to be stronger than what I am through the door, but my tact comms might be better than yours”’. Due to their said ability to deescalate situations, women are strategically deployed in the teams, IO Meghan confided: ‘sometimes they send a woman to visits because it completely changes the tone of it, the female component’. Research on the US police showed that policewomen are significantly less likely to use force and less likely to agree that it is more useful to be aggressive than courteous than men officers (Pew Research Center, 2017). While this stereotypical representation of women officers as non-aggressive has been unsettled by other studies (Paoline and Terrill, 2004), such a distinct demographic composition of IE may explain in part the aversion and reluctance to deploy coercion.

The reported ambivalence and discomfort about coercion is also evident in the IE’s institutional semiotics. During fieldwork, I noticed how some expressions relating to the remit of their job were highly sanitized and references to violence euphemized. The language of ‘return’ or ‘going home’, ‘visits’, ‘holding rooms’, and ‘clients’ or ‘targets’ to refer to removal and deportation, enforcement operations, detention and suspects or offenders, respectively, conveys difficulties in acknowledging the coercive nature of border work, and reveals a subtle determination to create ambiguity and confusion. Embedding the ‘vulnerability’ agenda in IE has made such ‘linguistic roundabouts’

even more insidious (Aliverti, 2020a). Exploiting the opacity linguistic ambiguity affords, in a meeting one immigration manager communicated to her staff proudly that one of the functions of IE is ‘to protect vulnerable people, even victims, and help them to *move homes*’. This ‘linguistic fog’, anthropologist Irvine (2011) argues, avoids taboo, toxic and unspeakable language, acting as containers, or ‘linguistic cordon sanitaire’, deflecting responsibility, or downplaying the impact of an action. Impersonal, passive, and bureaucratic language in legal and police discourse, what socio-linguists call ‘policeseak’ (Fox, 1993), is not just related to the economy of policing and the need for clarity and precision, but is critical for asserting authority and domination (Shuy, 2005), and -I would add- masking violence.

Despite attempts to bleach it, coercion looms large in the everyday work of these officers and resists concealment. Some of the vans used in immigration enforcement operations contain cages at the back, lined with rows of fixed seats. In their offices, where people attend interviews, tables and chairs are chained to the floor (a dire reminder of the high stakes involved and the emotional upheaval that their decisions can animate). At the back, there are ‘holding rooms’ (I was corrected by an IO when I called them cells) surrounded by glassed windows facing an office constantly monitored by guards and CCTV cameras. They have no beds, just a table and two chairs fixed to the floor. Unlike police cells, which are bare, immigration cells are strangely decorated and equipped with a mix of homely features (the map of England, pictures of animals, games) and posters warning detainees about the risk of human trafficking and female genital mutilation. A list fixated to the wall offered rice, noodles, curry boxes and crisps, and detainees are reminded that if they need food or a drink, ‘they just need to ask a member of the staff’. These cells, as the detention centres where detainees will eventually be taken, IOs assured them, are not like a prison. In one instance, a woman found to be in breach of her student visa started to cry when the ICE team took her to the police station to question her and take her fingerprints. She insisted that her lawyer had submitted an application to the Home Office to extend her stay. IO Henry tried to appease her by suggesting that her removal was not imminent: ‘there is a long way for you to go back to India. There is no flight booked for you yet’, he explained reassuringly. ‘An application is coming your way: if not here, when you are in the detention centre. Here it is not comfortable, but the detention centre is more relaxed. You can move, you can use your phone all the time’, there is a library and free internet.

Such portrayal, more akin to a holiday club than a closed institution, evidences the semantic fogs of immigration and the moral difficulties in spelling out its coercive nature. It might also aim at manufacturing obedience and placating resistance. In the next section, I explore the relationship between affect and coercion. I look at how officers sense violence and the strategies they use to diffuse violent reactions, placate resistance, and negotiate consent.

Sensing violence: emotions, race and the fluidity of coercion and consent

According to the Home Office’s guidance on arrest and restraint, ICE staff should use force when it is necessary, proportionate, and reasonable to do so. ‘Non-compliance

force' is defined as 'laying hands' or handcuffing a suspect, using or removing the baton from its holder, and applying 'escort position'. Although it affords officers some discretion, the guidance requires officers to rely on objective grounds for using force, that is, if the person being arrested may escape or use violence against them or the public. Officers must record the use of force, including handcuffs, and the grounds for using them as well as any injuries caused. Inspectors should make sure that officers complete these reports and organize witness statements on the episode, which are subject to periodic audit (Home Office, 2016, 17–23). In contrast to police statistics on the use of force which are published quarterly, and perhaps as evidence of the moral, political and legal questions coercion in immigration enforcement arouse, equivalent data for the ICE team is not systematically collected and published.⁵

In practice, frontline staff reported having resorted to force sparingly. During my two-years fieldwork, I never witnessed a baton being wielded during operations while handcuffs were rarely used. IO Harry confirms: 'We don't do it [handcuff people] very often, less often than the police. The people we deal with are compliant. We use it when there are warning markers, or risk of harm, violence, or self-harm. Or when the person is well-built and the IO is like you, small, for example'. Following an enforcement operation where a man replenishing shelves in a small grocery shop was arrested, I asked IO Fanny about her decision to handcuff him. 'It's a fluid environment', she explained, 'You don't know at what point it can all get out of control'. 'Cheeky little Indians!', she interjected referring in infantilizing language to the man and his fellow employees who were found working without valid visas in the shop. Although submissive, she surmised, they can easily escape and avoid arrest.

Other officers referred to 'flashpoints' during operations. Through experience, immigration officers develop a fine grasp, an intuition, to anticipate physical violence. 'When someone was on edge [...] or whether someone's sensing they're going to be arrested, or if someone's illegal,' CIO Chris confides, 'you get that sense, that comes with the job. What I've learned is how to deal with certain situations and how to speak to people in different ways because everyone is different.' This learnt 'sense' of the economy of violence during immigration enforcement operations helps them anticipate resistance. Tabita noticed: 'it's when they know they will be deported when they start to resist'. Felicity elaborates on these 'flashpoints':

you might be calm at one moment but then I am telling you that you're coming with me now, [...] that is a flashpoint. They might accept that, then once you start escorting them out of the house that is the next flashpoint [...] Then there is all of these various flashpoints that you're aware that might trigger a reaction and then obviously you have got the transport from the house to the vehicle, you might have neighbour intervention so you have got to be aware of that and then the actual... we have had people who are really calm and compliant up to the point of actually putting them into the vehicle and then I think the reality has hit them that "actually I am not going to be coming back to this house" and that is when they have basically resisted or things have happened...

'Sensing violence' is not only attached to the temporal and spatial dynamics of enforcement work, but also to physiques. Perceptions of violence as a physical, cultural,

and emotional phenomenon are highly gendered and racialized. Asian women are perceived as submissive and passive, while men from some African countries are regarded as riskier and threatening. Given the centrality of race and gender in everyday border work (Bosworth and Slade, 2014; Parmar, 2020), the relationship between violence and policing acquires a distinctive feature. Discretionary decisions on the use of force are hence shaped by stereotypes about dangerous and risky nationalities.

Anticipating and 'sensing' violence is a crucial aspect of officers' skills to deescalate situations and manufacture consent. Often, frontline officers resorted to the soft power of persuasion rather than to blunt force. Those skills are in high demand given the unsurmountable challenges involved in sending people away. The delicate ecology of enforcement infrastructure that these officers need to navigate renders them hostage to logistical details, legal rules, and the international politics of border controls, often leaving them devoid of power. As I argued elsewhere (Aliverti, 2021, 81), the peculiar features of immigration enforcement require frontline officers to use creative, ad-hoc, informal strategies to secure enforcement goals. In this context, negotiation and compliance, rather than coercion and imposition, become central. Echoing lessons from procedural justice research, Inspector Mariel, an experienced enforcement officer in charge of overseeing the 'vulnerability agenda', articulates the instrumentality of compassion:

I think if we look after people at the beginning, and we have factored in those vulnerabilities [...] when it comes to actually removing somebody it makes the job so much easier anyway. It makes the likelihood of someone jumping up and biting you on the backside, because you haven't considered something, goes out the window. The likelihood of someone throwing in medical aspects, that means you can't put them on a flight, goes out of the window.

By resorting to their multicultural knowledge and skills, other officers are able to grasp the 'chemistry of compliance'. IO Vinay prides himself on his 'Indian connection' which not only allows him to speak different languages but, crucially, understand how 'clients' heads work'. 'Only Indians can do this job', he told me once hinting at 'ethnic matching' as an unwritten specification of his employment. On one occasion, one of his colleagues was interviewing a man from India who suffered from diabetes. He had been arrested earlier that day for having no legal status in the UK, and taken to police custody. He entered the UK clandestinely a decade ago and had been arrested by the ICE team before but apparently the removal attempt against him failed. Although his fingerprints matched, his name and date of birth appeared to differ from the ones on the system. Samira needed to establish his real identity not only to obtain an emergency passport to send him back to India, but also to get a prescription since without medication his detention would not be authorized. Samira reckoned that the man knew how the system works and he was trying to game it. She was furious and desperate: 'I will grill him, so you won't come' she warned me. She called her colleague, Vinay, who possesses that 'cultural knowledge to get to his real identity'. Ultimately, I managed to squeeze in the interview. The man was brought from the cell and Samira proceeded to ask the ordinary line of questions about his employment and family which Vinay simultaneously translated into Punjabi. At some point, the man started to cry and sob. Vinay addressed

Samira: ‘I don’t think he is lying’. He took the ropes of the interrogation and spoke to him in Punjabi without translating. I learnt later that Vinay told him that he was a grown-up, he was just prolonging things, that he was not going anywhere but he needed to tell the truth. The man obediently wrote down his name, date of birth and address. Apparently, the confusion over his identity was caused by an error in the recording of his name by the officers who arrested him. After being fingerprinted and photographed, he was eventually released because he needed daily medication and was unlikely to be admitted in detention in his frail condition.

Devoid of the formalities and rituals surrounding police interviews, immigration interrogations are akin to conversations with an acquaintance as officers straddle their positions as confidants and enforcement agents, merging the official and unofficial. On the face of it, immigration officers abdicate the ‘sovereign power’ of speech. As Butler (1997, 32) observes: ‘Human speech rarely mimes that divine effect except in the cases where the speech is backed by state power’. To understand the ‘magical efficacy of words’, she argues, we need to pay attention to the citational dimension of speech, including the rituals surrounding it: ‘The ritual dimension of convention implies that the moment of utterance is informed by the prior and, indeed, future moments that are occluded by the moment itself’ (Butler, 1997, 25). On further examination, we see that such sovereign power is strategized when the force of speech finds its limits. Eventually, the convivial tone of the encounter is interrupted, and coercive nature of the interrogation revealed, when the speaker informs the subject that they are ‘illegal’ and that they are under arrest

The delicate strategizing of persuasion and coercion to obtain consent in the everyday praxis of immigration enforcement extends to the domestic domain, the international development politics of threat and incentives where migration controls are a condition for receiving aid (Aliverti and Tan, 2020). Bargain and negotiation, according to CIO Bruce, are vital aspects to facilitate removal: ‘it’s more than just “we’re putting somebody on a plane, and you get off at the other side” [...] It’s also a bit of positive reward as well, because we ban people for 10 years for applying for a visa. They [immigration officers] need to have a bit of negotiation there and say to them [people under arrest]: “Look, come back in 3 years’ time. They will accept an application”’. The limits of coercion to force compliance ultimately demonstrate the fragility of state sovereign powers and the negotiated nature of state authority in a globalizing world.

Conclusion

In conceptualizing symbolic violence, Bourdieu (2006, 96) explained: ‘The exhibition of force [...] implies an exhibition of the mastery of force, thereby kept in the status of a potential force, which could be used but it is not used’. This simultaneous negation and affirmation of force is the staple of ‘civilized’ police forces, ‘capable of forgetting and making it forgotten that it is force and so converted into legitimate violence, misrecognized and recognized, into symbolic violence’. Symbolic violence is invisible and silent, it is ‘an almost magical power which enables one to obtain the equivalent of what is obtained through force’ (1992, 170). It is a coercion ‘set up only through the

consent that the dominated cannot fail to give to the dominator' (Bourdieu, 2006, 170), complicating the distinction between coercion and submission. On the face of it, the scarce reliance on physical force in the immigration enforcement context might be explained by the wielding of symbolic violence by officers. Seen another way, however, the fragile, patchy, and provisional authority they command casts doubts on such 'quasi-magical' power to achieve domination and submission.

The careful calibration in the use of violence and the euphemizing of it in this context is, I argue, a symptom of broader moral, political and practical challenges, discomforts, and dilemmas these officers feel and experience in doing border work. The magical dimension of their powers -the capacity to achieve policing goals through unorthodox means- rely less on the unconscious internalization of structures of domination by the dominated, their acceptance and legitimacy, but precisely the opposite. Immigration enforcement as a field of governance remains exposed to problems of legitimation in a way that no other form of state (coercive) powers is.

In this context of fragmented legitimacy and provisional authority, frontline staff resort to creative forms of policing that blend the official and unofficial, through persuasion and bargaining, to manufacture obedience. In understanding the magic of state power and the chemistry of obedience matters of identity (of those who wield this power and those at its receiving end) take centre stage. Policing encounters bring to the fore the personal and relational nature of state power and authority (Fassin, 2013; Frederic, 2020; Jauregui, 2016). The task of policing the borders within turns social constructions about race, with their moral and emotional corollaries, into critical registers not only for 'spotting foreigners' but also for calibrating and dosing violence. The covert, surreptitious, and bleached forms of coercion explored here ultimately reveal the blurred line between legal and arbitrary use of force in the immigration enforcement field. They cast doubt on the clear lines between coercion and consent, and between compulsion, compliance and obedience drawn by much of the procedural justice literature. In this context, and contrary to Mariel's expectations, compliance with state authority is always fragile and provisional too. Following Bourdieu, we need to develop theories of state punitive power which attend to its nuanced and subtle manifestations and operation to manufacture obedience under contemporary conditions where the authority of the Northern state is being challenged from the inside and the outside.

The practice of immigration enforcement provides important insights into the complex and subtle dynamics of Northern state coercive power, and its limits. Whether we choose to conceptualize this form of power as punishment or as something altogether different⁶ is not central to my argument. Punishment, we may argue, with its intellectual, legal and institutional baggage and pedigree, is too constraining a concept to appraise the distinctive nature and intensity of the form of state power analysed here. As the immigration officers I shadowed remarked, their professional mandate set them apart from the police and, as their bosses, they are deeply ambivalent about resorting to the more familiar criminal justice vocabulary of crime and punishment to describe their roles. These testimonies suggest the need for a careful conceptualization of these practices which both challenge legal and institutional boundaries, and recognize their specificity. As scholars of state violence, we need to take such nuances and ambivalences seriously to understand the distinct

forms and logics of state power in this field, while placing them within a broader spectrum of state coercive forms. The study of these institutional practices and the work of these officers as key actors in the governance of the social question and the reproduction of social inequalities should be part of debates on contemporary state violence if the field of punishment and society is to remain intellectually vibrant and socially relevant.

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Notes

1. In Home Office bureaucracy, the ‘voluntary’ nature of the return, that the person commits to leave the UK on their own accord, must be documented through a ‘IS.101 disclaimer’ (Home Office, 2021b, 5).
2. For a detailed account of the project’s methodology, see author (Aliverti, 2021), Introduction.
3. See for example, section 35(3), Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants etc) Act 2004 (failure to cooperate in one’s redocumentation); sections 43B and 46B, UK Borders Act 2007 (failure to provide one’s nationality and national document).
4. In 2019, they occupied almost 40 percent of the managerial roles at Senior Civil Service level: cf. Freedom of Information (FOI) request 57278 (filed by the author).
5. I filled a Freedom of Information request to obtain such data, which was rejected due to administrative constraints:
FoI request 65251 (18 August 2021). In contrast, data on the police use of force is publicly available.
6. On the latter, see (Garland, 2018) and (Zedner, 2015).

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