



## ***The Danger Imperative: Violence, Death, and the Soul of Policing*, by Michael Sierra-Arevalo; *The Police Machine: Enforcement, Endorsement, and the Illusion of Public Input*, by Tony Cheng**

Alex S. Vitale

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## BOOK REVIEW

***The danger imperative: Violence, death, and the soul of policing***, by Michael Sierra-Arevalo, New York, Columbia University Press, 2024

***The police machine: Enforcement, endorsement, and the illusion of public input***, by Tony Cheng, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2024

The cycle of protest that emerged from the police killings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, among others, launched a significant amount of new empirical research into the daily functioning of the police. Recent monographs by Michael Sierra-Arevalo and Tony Cheng, which utilize extensive ethnographic research that looks closely at some of the central mechanisms that have been promoted as avenues for reforming police—namely, police training and community policing—raise significant questions about the potential of these interventions for doing anything other than strengthening and expanding police power. Though this new research is laudable for its empirical sophistication and deep institutional critiques, it could go further to incorporate the theoretical perspectives that have emerged from the movements motivating much of this new scholarship.

Michael Sierra-Arevalo's *The Danger Imperative* looks at the ways in which the violence at the center of policing is driven by a deep culture of fear that is constantly reinforced throughout the police institution through training, mentoring, and a variety of rituals designed to instill fear of violence as the central concern for police officers in their everyday work lives. The book is the result of 4 years of ethnographic research within the police departments of three medium-size cities: one on the East Coast, one on the West Coast, and one in the Southwest. The fieldwork involved extensive "ride-alongs," presence at police roll calls and academy training classes, and access to some internal police documents. This research was made possible because of agreements by the participating departments to allow Sierra-Arevalo a rare extended look into the everyday workings of police.

One of the central planks of the police reform movement has been the expansion and improvement of police training. This intervention, like many popular today, stems from procedural justice ideals that claim that a more professional police will be less likely to engage in behavior that undermines police legitimacy and alienates communities from the police. More training, it is believed, would enhance the professionalism of police, making it more likely that they would follow appropriate laws and policies guiding police behavior rather than leaving individual officers with excessive discretion, which can open the door to abusive and discriminatory actions. Improvements in police legitimacy can, according to the theory, help increase public willingness to cooperate with police in identifying crime problems and potential perpetrators, which in turn could lead to more arrests.

Sierra-Arevalo, however, finds that the dominant organizing principle in police training is what he calls "the danger imperative," the idea that a police officer's life is in constant danger and that each interaction with the public should be shaped by this awareness and the preparation to respond to threats with deadly force. This kind of training is designed to encourage officers to treat every encounter with the public as potentially deadly and offers them techniques to attempt to mitigate these risks even during seemingly benign encounters with the public.

There has been some attention of late to the worst forms of this kind of training involving independent training courses provided either to departments or to officers on their own time. For example, Dave Grossman, a former army colonel, offers "killology," training that encourages officers to constantly prepare themselves to take someone else's life to potentially protect their own. Sierra-Arevalo describes this training but also shows that these sentiments are widespread in standard academy classes in even the more professional large city departments. These findings are echoed by

Samantha J. Simon (2024) in her new monograph on police training in four small-town Texas departments.

Training extends far beyond the academy in the form of on the job mentoring and in-service training, and all of this is reflected in the routine operations of everyday policing. Sierra-Arevalo describes a scenario in which an officer on routine patrol encounters a group of young boys of color casually walking together. The officer decides to engage the boys, who are likely in their early teens, in conversation to see what they are up to. As he approaches the boys from inside the vehicle, he removes his handgun and points it at the door that separates himself from the boys. This, we are told, is to give the officer the ability to act quickly in the event of a threat, including potentially shooting through the door. While the boys remain unaware that the gun is pointing at them, Sierra-Arevalo points out that the decision to unholster and point a gun is a form of use of force and makes significantly more likely the possibility of an accidental or misguided shooting of the boys. Such a brazen use of a sidearm during a street encounter would have been considered a gross overreaction, but its concealed nature allowed the officer to engage in the activity without concern of objection from passersby or the boys themselves. All of this was based on prejudicial fears that were not grounded in any concrete actions by the boys.

One of the interesting by-products of this tactical focus on the risks of policing is the way in which it is presented in a totally race-neutral manner despite the fact that police violence is heavily disproportionately used against people of color. Sierra-Arevalo points out that policing remains a major reservoir of racist sentiment in American society, despite the fact that the official discourse of policing has become de-racialized. He shows how even the existence of racism is largely discounted by police and openly discriminatory behavior by officers, when discovered by the public, is dismissed as the work of bad apples. Sierra-Arevalo points out that even if all individualized racism were excised from policing, the danger imperative would continue to produce racially disparate negative outcomes because it continues to view actions associated with racialized minorities as more dangerous. The constant seemingly color-blind inducements to prepare for threats fails to take into consideration who is most likely to come into contact with the police and the ways in which the behaviors of the poor and other marginalized groups are always deemed more threatening.

Another often touted avenue for improving police services and enhancing police legitimacy is community policing. Its supporters claim that if police take the time to engage community members in nonpunitive interactions through street outreach, attendance at community meetings, etc., then the police and community will come to have a greater appreciation of each other's needs and that this will lead to greater police effectiveness and community acceptance. Tony Cheng decided to investigate this approach as applied in New York City under their Neighborhood Policing initiative. Unlike Sierra-Arevalo, Chen could not get permission from the NYPD to undertake his research with the cooperation of the police officials, forcing him to rely on public meetings and interviews with members of the public. This is a major challenge for police researchers in the United States, who typically encounter a great deal of resistance to allowing independent research on policing.

Chen found that unlike the rhetoric on community policing, the NYPD's efforts were designed almost entirely to enhance the department's political power, producing what Chen calls "the policing machine," designed to cultivate a core group of neighborhood-based supporters of a police-centered worldview who can be called upon to couch community needs in terms of "crime" to be managed almost exclusively through police interventions. This community-based centering of police power has been used to withstand challenges to police primacy, to call for greater police budgets, and to extend police legitimacy, especially in times of crisis.

Though both books add important empirically grounded insights regarding the limits of standard procedural justice-oriented police reforms, their works would have been strengthened by engaging abolitionist analytic frameworks. This analysis model posits that policing is an inherently problematic institution that mobilizes violence and coercion to reproduce a deeply unequal status quo. Sierra-Arevalo flirts with these ideas in his call to reconsider the extensive scope of policing, claiming that if we restrict the role of police in responding to

mental health crisis calls, routine traffic stops, and a variety of non-criminal nuisance calls, this would reduce the chances of these encounters escalating to the use of violence by police. This analysis could also have been made clearer by looking at the work of scholars such as Micol Siegel's *Violence Work* (Siegel, 2018), which emphasizes the fact that at its core, police are violence workers and therefore to imagine their work being made less violent through reforms like training and oversight is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the institution. Sierra-Arevalo also fails to look at recent critical scholarship on policing from a cultural studies perspective, one that explores the inherently violent nature of police culture through the symbols and practices of police; see, for example, Travis Linnemann's (2022) *The Horror of Police*.

Chen seems to almost go out of his way to avoid any engagement with abolitionist ideas, despite the fact that many people in the book articulate views about policing informed by that exact analysis. Repeatedly, Chen couches the shortcomings of police in reformist language. He posits that the failures of community policing represent a failed opportunity for real engagement with the public rather than seeing it as an inherent aspect of policing and leaves out literature that describes community policing as always grounded in counterinsurgency practices, ideological production, and the desire to mute and co-opt community protest.

These new monographs represent an important expansion of empirical research into the daily functioning of police and are presented in a way that is accessible to undergraduates and researchers in the field. Ideally, future monographs will more seriously engage with abolitionist analyses in ways that expand their empirical findings and strengthen their conclusions.

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Alex S. Vitale  
Brooklyn College, CUNY Graduate Center  
 [avitale@brooklyn.cuny.edu](mailto:avitale@brooklyn.cuny.edu)

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