Review of

Policing and the poetics of everyday life, by Jonathan M. Wender, Urbana and Chicago, Illinois University Press, 2008, 243 pp., \$40 (hardback), ISBN 0-25-03371-X

The ways human beings are constituted as ‘problems’ through the bureaucratic practices of the police has been a common issue within criminological research. In this interesting text, Jonathan Wender develops these understandings but through an alternative set of perspectives, what he calls *poetics* – defined as ‘lived creations of meaning in which human beings struggle to make sense of their own existence, and the existence of others’ (p. 2). Instead of the more common application of conventional social science, Wender draws heavily from an alternative set of resources, namely how philosophy, art, plays and literature can shed light upon the metaphysics and ontology of police encounters – what he calls ‘a phenomenological aesthetics of encounter’.

In reflexively engaging with the text, it is important to mention that Wender served for 15 years as a police officer in the Pacific Northwest, USA. His self entitled label of ‘philosopher cop’ is perhaps an unconventional one which undoubtedly forms the basis of the text’s key arguments. Drawing closely from the work of Martin Heidegger, notably his Zollikon seminars (Heidegger [2001](#)) which urged practitioners of medicine and psychiatry to challenge their practices of abstracting human subjects into diagnoses and scientific data by grappling with the very ways ontology *creates* clinical practices, the text features two key arguments. Firstly, bureaucratic praxis reifies human beings into abstract ‘problems’ which require a ‘solution’. Secondly, through the use of *poetics*, the ontological foundations of bureaucratic praxis can be illuminated through the meanings of the human beings encountered thereby enabling these very structures to be transcended.

The first part of the text is spent introducing the key arguments reverberating around the limits of bureaucratic fixes to police encounters, with two useful chapters highlighting the limitations of previous research into policing, and subsequent offerings made by phenomenological enquiry. The bulk of the text is made up of a series of fascinating case studies taken from Wender’s own experiences as a police officer, including encounters with juveniles, policing the ‘drug war’, domestic violence, persons in mental and emotional crises and policing death. These experiences are infused with a number of ethnographic vignettes which, whilst interesting in their own right, are carefully used as representations through which to invoke deep ontological insights into the nature and meaning of police citizen encounters. Wender draws upon a number of alternative resources (e.g. art, plays, literature) to shed phenomenological light on police encounters. The use of these resources functions to allow many of the police encounters to ‘come alive’, enabling the reader to grasp how the bureaucratic praxis of police work assumes and takes for granted many vital ontological features of encounters between police officers and citizens. Examples that include human emotions such as suffering, anger, sorrow, tragedy, in part due to the inabilities of language to adequately describe, are claimed to be lost in many studies of policing.

The final chapter attempts to tie the central arguments of the book within a broader engagement with policy, notably in the section entitled ‘the ontological limits of re-form’ (p. 191) during which he casts doubt on conventional administrative, political reforms of the police. Wender offers an application of how bureaucratic praxis can be transcended through the recognition and obligation for empathic understandings of human beings. On the practical–policy level, this seems to be targeted at policing methods indoctrinated by

managerialism (audit, data management, performance indicators, etc.), whilst on the practical–theoretical level calls for social scientists to engage more with *poetics* and phenomenology to enable methodological abstractions of human beings to appear visible and understandable.

Whilst I remain broadly sympathetic to the ideas throughout the text, I do however remain unconvinced by Wender's broad critique of 'mainstream' social science accounts for failing to encapsulate the ontological and metaphysical properties of encounters. For example, ethnographic research strives ultimately for what Geertz ([1973](#)) terms 'thick description', offering experiential insights into the practices which make up policing encounters. Although certain exceptions are highlighted (p. 42), it appears that it is not so much the nature of the enquiry per se which Wender subjects to scrutiny, but the analytic abstractions through social scientific language which feature as the essence of his reductionist critique. Amongst many authors (e.g. Clifford and Marcus [1986](#)) ethnography has been well aware of its tendency to 'invent' rather than 'represent' culture, subsequently having been engaged in similar campaigns to incorporate *poetics* into both the physical acts of 'doing ethnography', and most significantly into the very practice of writing itself. Closer engagement with these debates would have benefited the text further.

In summary, Wender should be applauded for this unique, profoundly original study. His ability to make sense of complex philosophy in illuminating police encounters will undoubtedly provide both interesting reading, and pose some important questions for the conduction of social research into policing practice more generally. For the infrequently acquainted social theorist, some minor difficulties in comprehending some of the theoretical material may be encountered. This should not detract from the work's profound vigour and originality which will no doubt serve the jury in waiting, and hopefully open up a number of interesting debates to take place throughout the social science community.

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