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Hegel's *Polizei*

1. “The Police should have oversight over everything.”

G. W. F. Hegel once said, accusingly: “[J. G.] Fichte’s state is centered on the police”.¹ This refers to Fichte’s dystopian and totalitarian passport police. So too, Hegel’s state *is* the police. As Frank Ruda remarks: “The police is the decisive institution.”² Hegel’s monarch is clumsy and trivial, the legislative body a channel for the Estates. The police are the *essential* state institution that intercedes into and supports civil society. Little has been written about Hegel’s *Polizei* and the still-standard reading renders the police an ambiguous, feeble, and idealized institution. It was once a common refrain to deride historical debates about police as anachronistic. Translators and commentators have perpetuated a consensus that Hegel’s *Polizei* is broad, vague, and distinct from our understanding of contemporary police institutions.³ T.M. Knox’s curt observation, in the initial English translation of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, was that: “*Polizei*, translated ‘police’ here, has a wider sense than that conveyed by ‘police’ in English. Hence in what follows it is generally translated ‘public authority.’”⁴ Allen Wood’s sole contribution mildly states: “This usage was in his day not the least idiosyncratic.”⁵ Even recent scholarship by Mark Neocleous and Frank Ruda is limited to the role of the police in regulating the market. My study situates the development of police bureaucracy as the central theme (and the most interesting and perplexing) of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, incorporating Hegel’s criticism and defense of the security state alongside his futile exhortation of the welfare state, and by arguing that Hegel cryptically predicted the evolution of police into something altogether different than the police of his day.

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on Natural Right and Political Science*, Berkeley 1995, 212.

² Frank Ruda, *Hegel’s Rabble: An Investigation into Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, London 2011, 24.

³ Mark Neocleous, “Policing the System of Needs: Hegel, Political Economy and the police of the Market”, in: *History of European Ideas*, 24 (1998), 47.

⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, London 1967, 360.

⁵ Allen Wood, *Hegel’s Ethical Thought*, Cambridge 1990, 283.