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ARTICLES

The Smart, the Artificial and the Authoritarian

New Capital of Egypt as a Paradigm of an “Authoritarian Smart City”

Amr Marzouk & Karolina Podstawa*

Abstract

This article builds on the case study of New Capital of Egypt to frame the features characterizing “authoritarian smart cities”. The authors propose to think of authoritarian smart cities in contrast and respond to the mainstream idea of a smart city as a city that simply exists in an authoritarian context. This context, building on Glasius’s practice-based approach to authoritarianism, is characterized by the coexistence of authoritarian and illiberal practices. Authoritarian smart cities wholeheartedly embrace technology as a means to frame the urban experience; however, unlike in the prevailing narrative, this is not for the betterment of the quality of life of residents but for the security- and accountability-free comfort of the regime. The newly erected and populated New Capital of Egypt offers insights into how the desired features of authoritarian smart cities become distorted in the authoritarian context, thus rendering such urban environments mere playgrounds for technology-supported oversight of population. The authors offer the review of policy and legal documents and propose an analytical lens of approaching smart authoritarian cities.

Keywords: authoritarian smart city, Egypt, AI, surveillance, authoritarian context.

1 Introduction

In his science fiction novel *Neuromancer*, William Gibson thus described the futuristic city: “Night City wasn’t there for its inhabitants, but as a deliberately unsupervised playground for technology itself” (11). This vivid description was not fully wrong, as until now we speak about “SMART city”, with an emphasis on “smart” without much attention to contexts in which these cities exist within, or

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goals behind them. The focus is placed merely on the technology, not on the ideologies or values these cities embody and enable.

While the concept of smart cities has gained global traction over the past three decades, and many different countries across the democratic spectrum embraced it and moved towards smarter cities, limited attention was given to the concept of an “authoritarian smart city”. The enthusiastic implementation by authoritarian regimes of what they see as smart cities raises critical questions about whether the meaning and implementation of “smartness” vary depending on the political context.

This article contributes to the debate by grounding the concept of an “authoritarian smart city” in a case study of Egypt’s New Capital (henceforth referred to interchangeably as “New Capital” or “NC”; in Arabic: *al-Āṣima al-Jadida*, *قديجلا قمصاعلا*, Ahram online, 2021), exploring how this project is framed in official discourse and realized in practice. We argue that the creation and evolution of NC exemplify the construction of a technology-driven “authoritarian context”, drawing on Glasius’s framework of authoritarian and illiberal practices (Glasius, 2018; Marzouk, 2023).

Our analysis begins with the International Telecommunication Union’s widely cited definition of a smart and sustainable city, which emphasizes innovation, efficiency and sustainability through advanced technologies as main features of such cities. Against this background we ask (RQ1) about the extent to which the prevalent definition can be directly applied to an authoritarian smart city and, if not directly, (RQ2) what would be the features that most vividly describe the latter. Finally, we explore (RQ3) how these features demonstrate themselves in the context of New Capital of Egypt in order to answer the ultimate research question as to whether the context matters when discussing the emergence of phenomena such as smart cities (RQ4).

Thus, conducted analysis and discussion of findings will proceed in three interdependent steps: First, we will consider the general features of smart cities as technological and social projects and examine how those normative imaginaries of smart cities are presented in the literature on authoritarian smart cities. Second, we will present the context, New Capital of Egypt, as the testing ground designed to understand the implications of authoritarian smart cities. Third, while offering a detailed account of NC, we will present the distortive framework of authoritarian smart cities. The conclusions and recommendations for the subsequent research will be as the final component of this study, featuring the combined analytical framework with empirical findings.

2 Methodology

The article adopts the bottom-up approach focusing on the case study of New Capital of Egypt. This approach makes it possible to weave the account based predominantly on the contextual data and measure it against theoretical approaches as advocated by authors reporting on authoritarian smart cities (as, for instance, Akbari, 2022). In addition, it permits for creating situated knowledge and

mitigating cultural bias (van Swaaningen, 2021). We chose to reconstruct the narrative on the basis of content analysis of relevant laws, policy documents and an exhaustive list of official press and online statements (Sheydayi & Dadashpoor, 2023) connected to the NC project, complemented by an analysis of secondary sources, including academic literature and media reports. The analysis focused on the period spanning the inception of New Capital (2015) until November 2025.

The research focused on information made available by Egyptian Ministries of Planning and Economic Development, of Communications and Information Technology and National Council for Artificial Intelligence. The analysis of social media posts of these entities as well as spokespersons and executives connected with smart cities projects has also been included in the overview.

Themes explored followed the logic embedded in the definition of smart cities. The preliminary analysis has shown that the detailed search, including all of the features of smart cities, rendered limited results, thus forcing us to adjust the approach and focus on broader categories reflected in the literature review.

This combined legal and contextual analysis enables us to reconstruct the features of NC and assess the extent to which global smart city principles are adapted – or subverted – in a non-democratic context. Importantly, in doing so we clearly demonstrate that the sources are available and reliable (Marzouk, 2023).

2.1 Authoritarian Smart Cities in Perspective – Literature Review

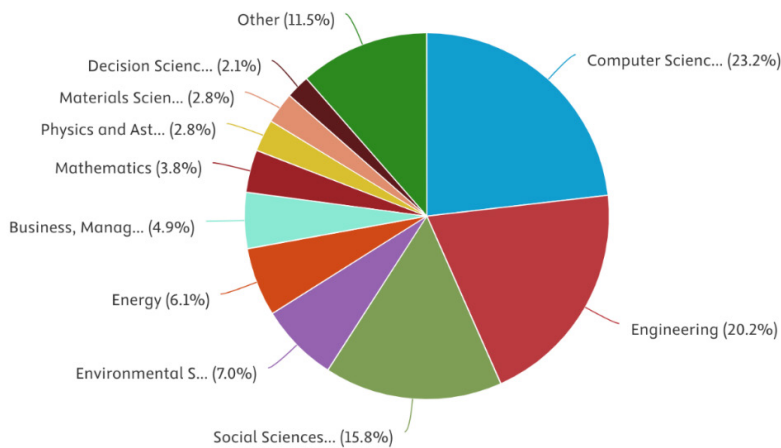
Before defining authoritarian smart city, there is a need to understand the various interdisciplinary perspectives on smart cities. What is a “smart city” is debatable among academics; these cities were defined in a multitude of ways and given additional names (Bisschops & Schuilenburg, 2025; Ojo et al., 2016): data city, cybercity, city of things or entrepreneurial city, just to name a few. Given this context, Akbari argued that the differences in “smart cities” conceptualization stem from different disciplinary perspectives and its reliance on other blurry concepts such as internet of things, privacy, efficiency, sustainability, etc. (Akbari, 2022).

The following analysis of the Scopus data regarding articles and chapters using smart cities as a keyword (2003-2024) supports Akbari’s statement, according to which the conception of a smart city is as fragmented as the geography of disciplines engaging with it.

Clearly, the background of a discipline will affect the adopted definition of a smart city. In response to the definitional chaos, International Telecommunications Union’s definition attempted to do justice to this diversity and represent the vast majority of features of a smart city identified in the literature. And thus,

a smart and sustainable city is an innovative city that uses information and communication technologies and other means to improve quality of life, the efficiency of urban operation and services, and competitiveness, while ensuring that it meets the needs of present and future generations with respect to economic, social, environmental as well as cultural aspects. (International Telecommunication Union, 2015 as cited by Bisschops & Schuilenburg, 2025).

Documents by subject area



The definition attempts to combine various features of smart cities rather objectively. It recognizes the underlying reliance on technology as a means to improve the quality of life of cities' inhabitants from the perspective of sustainability and environment, economy, and social and cultural inclusivity and community building.

Unfortunately, this all-encompassing, ambitious definition of smart cities has proven to be problematic when applied to the New Capital of Egypt. Empirical findings did not allow for the determination of the extent to which the city is innovative or contributes to a sustainable future for its residents. On the contrary, an analysis of the documentation showed pride in technology and absence of people. The detailed components of the definition needed to be clustered, therefore, to permit a more generalized analysis with the awareness of the detailed approach underlying the generalized one.

To facilitate the subsequent analysis and reflecting limited utility of the generalized approaches to smart cities, two meta features of smart cities emerged, positioning them as technological projects and places of social interaction. These will be discussed in turn.

2.1.1 Smart Cities as Technological Projects

Encoded in the concept of smart cities is the "use (of) digital technologies, communication technologies, and data analytics, to create an efficient and effective service environment that improves urban quality of life and promotes sustainability" (Gracias et al., 2023, p. 1724). Whereas many of the technological solutions used in smart cities treat residents as actors with agency to contribute with information on the urban experience such as air or noise pollution or enable direct participation in decision making (Bastos et al., 2022), it is the back governance office – infrastructure/hardware, software and procedures that undergo revolutions.

The interaction between smart cities and technologies is composed of two elements: the development and evolution of appliances and services, on the one hand, and the generation, use and re-use of the data, without which the AI-fuelled software cannot function. Unfortunately, as emphasized by various scholars, the process of engaging technology in smart cities has never been organic, and the push for innovation has often been supply-driven. Tech corporations like IBM and Cisco, have been decisive in this process. On the one hand, through “corporate storytelling” (Söderström et al., 2014, p. 307) and sheer “propaganda” (Schürer, 2019), they popularized a smart city global imaginary (Greenfield, 2013; Townsend, 2013) (Schürer, 2019, p. 137), while, on the other (Halegoua, 2020, Chapter 5), they literally put this imaginary on offer by providing a selection of appliances and tools to municipalities and city’s overseers. The presence of corporations in the driving seat further exacerbates the critical threat posed by the mere existence of the technology deployed at such scale.

Technology perceived as a risk and a promise requires the reassessment of existing governance frameworks (Jechtl, 2022; Kim et al., 2021). This is, first, in order to guarantee that the deployment of technologies at stake is ethical and balanced out with other public interests and individual rights and freedoms (Christofi, 2023; Singh, 2023). Second, it is to ensure that the decisions made are accountable by ensuring that not only the authorities and vendors but also end users have their say (Macaluso, 2023; Voorwinden, 2022). The potential and promise of the smart cities is uniformly recognized but not uncritically welcome with the awareness that realization of features of smart cities may be counterproductive and serve opposite purposes than those for which “smartness” of a city has been enhanced (Halegoua, 2020, pp. 17-19). Thus, the most critical accounts call for an assurance that technology is used in a balanced manner, while social inclusivity is a prevailing paradigm both as an objective of the creation of smart cities and as their governance principle. It is of essence to recall the most pervasive critiques of the concept of a smart city, for they strongly fuel the discussion of the concept of authoritarian smart cities. Probably the most persistent of these critiques focuses on a very simple fact: smartness will not resolve problems inherent in a given context; on the contrary, it can exacerbate them (Rijshouwer et al., 2022).

2.1.2 *Smart Cities as Places of Social Interactions*

The development of a technological layer of smart cities (sometimes referred to as “a digital city”) has never been their sole ambition. The popular utopian imaginary of smart cities conceived of them as a projects predominantly interested in the improvement of the urban experience by individuals. Cities are social projects that are to serve both current inhabitants and generations to come; hence, any changes made to their fabric and governance need to be inherently sustainable.

The literature emphasizes the need for inclusive development (Alizadeh & Sharifi, 2023; Lee et al., 2023; Macaluso, 2023), integrating social rights, democratic values and empowerment of the citizens through participatory governance and community engagement with the necessary evolution of technology (Singh, 2023; Smith & Martín, 2020). Any such development requires a detailed regulatory

framework (Decker, 2014) balancing citizens' rights and the need for the infrastructural advancements based on personal and other data analytics (Auby & Geffray, 2017; Franke & Gailhofer, 2021; Jechtl, 2022; Voorwinden, 2022).

There is a consensus in the literature that questions of fundamental rights, data ownership, use and the impact of smart cities infrastructure are central challenges of smart cities' endeavours (Christofi, 2023; Jechtl, 2022; Jin & Wang, 2025). Some even claim the need to reframe the position of individuals from data sharers to decision makers, given the centrality of their data production for the smart cities' processes (OECD, 2023; Voorwinden, 2022).

Finally, the centrality of the idea of a smart city as a social project implies the awareness and mitigation of inherent risks that come with the technology, while ensuring that innovation advances the quality of individuals' lives. Positioning the individual in the centre of the smart city design is of essence to prevent surveillance creep (repurposing of the data collected) and accountability of the technologies and authorities thanks to the assurance of transparency and accountability (OECD, 2023). AI-fuelled technologies' inherent biases must be taken into account, and technologies must be secure both for the benefit of cities and for individuals residing there.

2.2 Smart Cities in Authoritarian Contexts – Emergent Analytical Framework

2.2.1 Case-by-Case Accounts

Against the background of the discussion of smart cities appears the main theoretical and applied research question of this contribution: does the governance context matter in framing the conception of a smart city (RQ4)? What happens if a theoretical smart city conceived of as a technological and social project is practised in an illiberal and authoritarian context?

Even though multiple authors have examined the notion of authoritarian smart cities, conclusions to date have emphasized the need for a case-by-case approach. Few attempts have been made to identify common features of such cities or honestly assess their smart character. As a result, the concept of a "smart city" has remained a Global North creation, the application of which to the Global South context yields curious results.

Pali & Schuilenburg (2020), for example, emphasized that imaginaries of smart cities conceived of as places of good governance and economic prosperity must be questioned and tested: even though the technologies underlying smart cities are allegedly neutral, their deployment cannot be explored without studying the power relations that produce their imaginaries and employ them.

Comprehensive theoretical frameworks of authoritarian smart cities appear infrequently, and the one presented by Akbari (2022) remains the most detailed overview to date. In the vast majority of cases smart cities are presented in comparison with democratic counterparts.

Wagner, Givens, and Lam (2020), for instance, compared smart cities in economically developed democracies in Europe and North America with the Chinese model of smart cities. They argued that economically developed democracies and their corporations need to invest more in smart cities since they

benefit citizens and because the world needs privacy-oriented smart cities, which non-democratic countries cannot provide (2020). They recommended more investment by the governments of democratic countries in smart cities' innovations to catch up with their Chinese counterpart and more transparent laws regarding data and privacy in smart cities (2020).

Da Vinha's inquiry into the connection between digital authoritarianism and smart cities in Africa concluded, rather underwhelmingly, that there is a need for awareness-raising regarding the digital authoritarian threat by democratic countries in their own contexts and in the contexts of fragile democracies (2024). The text does not offer a more nuanced analytical framework for authoritarian cities. Moreover, the reflection focuses on apparently uniform "African leaders" and some generalized notion of 54 African countries.

These dispersive accounts do not permit any conclusions to be drawn as to what the features of authoritarian smart cities are. Instead, they exemplify cultural bias embedded in a conception of a smart city. Largely, this contribution embraces the need to examine on a case-by-case basis smart cities in authoritarian contexts, albeit not to simply apply the label to the phenomenon, but to examine how the lack of democratic governance and accountability distorts the concept and its execution.

2.2.2 *Introducing the Notion of an "Authoritarian Context"*

To present this notion systematically, we propose to draw a connection between an authoritarian context and a smart city. Authoritarian context is

understood as a context where the government or power holders within a society relies on authoritarian practices and illiberal practices to ensure their power and prevent the public from seeking or achieving change. (Marzouk, 2023, p. 43)

The concept of the context builds on Glasius's notion of authoritarian practices (thus, practices aimed at eroding accountability) and illiberal practices (those that limit personal freedoms) (Glasius, 2018). Glasius's approach moves beyond the state structures and allows for a nuanced description of various settings and examination of power attributions in the society that take account of actors beyond and within the state (Glasius, 2023). The presented definition of the "authoritarian context" brings to attention power relations and the ultimate objective of power holders.

In the light of the previous considerations, we propose the following framework for the discussion of authoritarian smart cities: First, the power relations and the objective of the city creation will frame the context within which smart cities are to operate. Second, the technological aspect of NC is presented and analysed as a conduit for the analysis of authoritarian practices. The city is not socially accessible in this narrative. Third, the social aspect of a smart city project is considered as a vehicle of consideration of illiberal practices, in particular, how surveillance safeguards fail cities' residents. Finally, the grand absentees of the smart cities'

practice in authoritarian contexts are flagged. Such an approach allows us to respond to RQ2 and RQ3.

3 The Context: New Capital of Egypt

In 2015, the Egyptian government announced the creation of a new capital, which would cost, according to the Minister of Housing, Mostafa Madbouly, an estimated \$45 billion (BBC News, 2015). In 2016, the Presidential Decree mandated a creation of a company to realize this objective: the New Capital is an Egyptian stock company founded by New Urban Communities Authority (NUCA), National Service Products Organization (NSPO) and Armed Forces National Lands Projects Agency (AFNLPA) (Art. 2, Decree no 57/2016). The company started with a capital of 6 billion Egyptian pounds (State Information Service, 2017). Its board consists of 1 members, 3 of whom represent NUCA, 4 the military and 6 independent experts (Hassan, 2016).

The New Capital's area is 170,000 acres, and it is situated about 60 km from Cairo and a similar distance to Suez (State Information Service, 2019). According to the State Information Service in Egypt, NC is to alleviate the pressure on Cairo, where, it is estimated, over 23 million people reside (World Population Review, 2025).

The new capital, according to the Ministry of Housing website, is to be a

- 1 Green city, where a person's share of green space is 15 M2;
- 2 Sustainable city: recycling-based city with 70% of roofs having solar panels;
- 3 Pedestrian city: 40% of roads are for pedestrians and cyclists;
- 4 Connected city: different modes of transportation;
- 5 Smart city: Wi-Fi connected and fully relying on electronic services;
- 6 Business City: 30% of the city is dedicated for business;
- 7 City of life and living different classes: 30% of the city is dedicated to housing (MHUC, n.d.).

According to the state promotion materials, the new capital is one of 37 cities to be built across Egypt, collectively referred to as 4th generation cities (State Information Service, 2023 a). They are described as "cities which employ the digitalization processes and technological advancement to transform local and public services and economy" (Hunter et al, 2022, P.2)). They do so by integrating digital solutions and data with the aim of connecting citizens and fostering sustainable and favourable results (Hunter et al., 2022). The new cities will have an area of 661.600 acres and will be able to accommodate 39,000,000 citizens at a cost of 1.3 trillion EGP (Daabes, 2024; State Information Service, 2018). The new "smart" cities, as highlighted previously, aim to create a new sustainable community away from the Nile valley with the hope of accommodating the growing population of 'Egypt, estimated as 142-157 million within the next couple of years (Essam El-Din, 2023). The smart cities, aligning with Egypt's Vision 2030 and the Sustainable Development Strategy 2052, are also to attract direct foreign

investment. In particular, the New Capital is being built with a goal of being a world class global city and an international business hub similar to Dubai (Bolleter & Cameron, 2021; State Information Service, 2018).

The New Capital started to serve as the seat of some of government ministries as early as in 2023 and, according to governmental sources, has been hosting 10,000 families towards the end of 2024 (NASA Earth Observatory, 2024). The transfer of governmental institutions to NC has required a formal endorsement of NC as a borough of Cairo (Presidential Decree no 314/2022). This is because, in the light of Article 222 of the 2014 Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt (OHCHR, 2014), Cairo, as the capital city of Egypt, is the seat of the House of Representatives (Art. 114) and of the Supreme Court (Art. 191) (OHCHR, 2014).

This basic information confirms the utility of NC as an excellent example of a city designed and publicized as a smart one by an authoritarian regime. It is perhaps even a better example of an authoritarian smart city as it is to be the centre of power from which the entirety of the state is to be governed.

4 New Capital of Egypt and Its “Authoritarian Smart City” Features

This section presents the New Capital as a paradigmatic authoritarian smart city, weaving the findings of the content analysis with the theoretical framework that points to certain features of such a city, conceived of on the basis of and, to a certain extent, in contrast to the mainstream Global North conceptions. The findings are organized around features that either directly match or echo the definitional components of smart cities, as discussed in the literature review. The distortive element is framed in line with the theoretical framework of an authoritarian context and, thereby, coexistence of authoritarian and illiberal practices.

4.1 Feature 1: *The Objective for Building the New Capital*

In a vast majority of cases, moving a capital city is a critical decision, motivated by various objective circumstances: reunification (Berlin); the need for an independent, neutral seat (Botswana, Brazil or Washington D.C.); or an environmental disaster (1960s Belize’s capital, Belmopan), to a certain extent, the new Indonesian capital city, which is to take over overpopulated and literally sinking Jakarta [Nusantara in East Kalimantan province (Ibrahim & Tarigan, 2024)]. Historically, one should add to these reasons need to defend a new capital, move it farther away from the borders or simply to break with the history of former rulers (Bosker, 2022).

The more recent “by-design” capital city moves, although justified on paper by a need for efficiency and for a response to environmental and demographic problems, has a different founding tale. New Capital of Egypt is similar in this regard to Kazakhstan’s Astana and Myanmar’s Naypyidaw. The objective of NC can be traced to both the very personalized presidential future vision of the country featuring an iron grip over the population and its political spaces (Cities 4.0). It echoes the history of Egypt, for erecting new “capitals” is its particular tradition. The 20th century witnessed the erection of Nasser City in the 1950s (under President Gamal Abd El Nasser) and the industrial hub, El Sadat City, in the 1970s

(under President Sadat) (Gemiei, 2023). Interestingly, under President Mubarak (1981-2011) a sole 2007 proposal to build a new capital was dismissed 48 hours after its announcement (Gemiei, 2023). Mubarak, in fact, considered building a new capital a waste and that the funds could be used to achieve social justice (Gemiei, 2023).

Cairo itself was designated as a new capital in 969 by Caliph Al Moez and erected by the leader of the Fatimat Army Jawhar Al Siqilli after the successful conquest of the territory of Egypt, which was to become one of the provinces of the Caliphate. The capital city became known as Qahirat Al-Moez (The Victorious city of Al-Moez) (Cairo Governorate, n.d. a.). Subsequently, in 1176, Salah El-Din, erected a fortified citadel on top of the hills of Al-Moqattam, which became the seat of governance in Egypt for the next 700 years (Cairo Governorate, n.d. b.). The citadel fulfilled the usual function at the time: a fortification protecting against invaders or against locals in case of rebellion.

NC is an echo of the citadel of Salah El-Din, constructed away from Cairo and the people of Cairo, who might be tempted to rebel again as they did in 2011: it is an exclusive venue accessible for the few; it features groups of individuals that visibly serve and submits the ideas of sustainability to the dreams of grandeur.

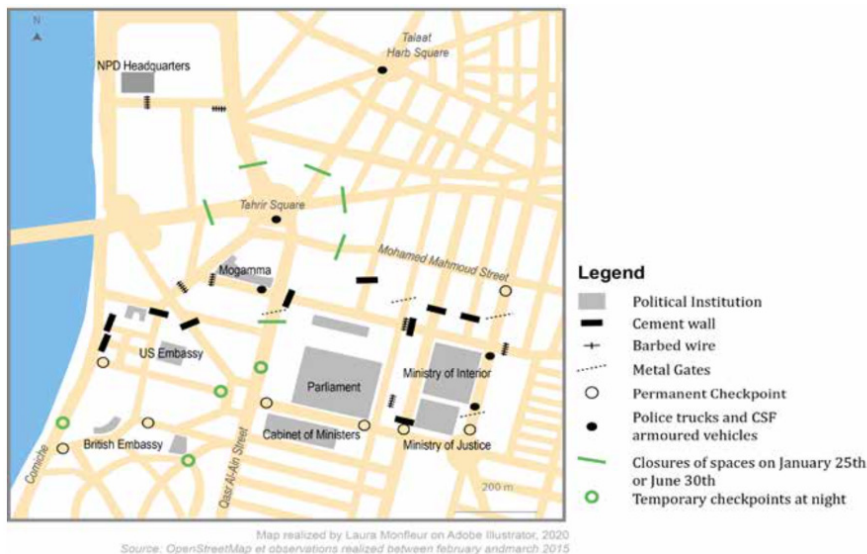
This objective can be traced back to the repeated, ultimately failed, attempts to put under control the political heart of Cairo: Tahrir square. The Square, the beating heart of the nation and its feverish brain (as illustrated in Jehane Noujaim's documentary, *The Square* 2013), and its immediate vicinity hosted Arab Spring manifestations between 25 January 2011 and 11 February 2011 (the end of Hosni Mubarak's 30-year-long reign) and beyond.

To say that Tahrir square is the heart of Cairo will be an understatement. It was initially named Ismailia square after Khedive Ismail, who during his reign had an ambition to transform Cairo into the Paris of Egypt (Nassar, 2011). In this tradition, from its beginning, the square was designed to be a formal public space (Al Sayyad, 2011). Later called Tahrir, meaning "Liberation", the square has hosted numerous demonstrations against the different regimes of Egypt (Nassar, 2011). Tahrir square and its vicinity are the seats of the American University in Cairo, the (original) Egyptian Museum, the Egyptian Parliament, the Arab League HQs, Al Mojamaa (the biggest government building in Egypt) and the Interior Affairs Ministry. The American and British embassies are located nearby, in the enclave of Garden City. After the communication blockage of 28 January 2011, it was obvious to the authorities that the "demonstration-free zones" were to be, in fact, the square and its direct neighbourhood. Thus, the law that turned Tahrir into a secure public space where no demonstrations should take place had had as its aim the transfer of its space to the governmental service rather than to the public at large.

As many as 107,5 demonstrations per day took place during the Supreme Council of Armed Forces rule between February 2011 and June 2013 (Holmes & Baoumi, 2016). Subsequently, there were 38.6 during Mohamed Morsi's presidency, before he was ousted by mass demonstrations which were supported by the Army in 2013 (Holmes & Baoumi, 2016). The number of protests decreased by 52% after the Anti-Demonstration Law was adopted by the president ad interim Adly Mansour (Holmes & Baoumi, 2016). Mansour, who was the Chief Justice of Egypt,

just three months after the ousting from power of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, mandated by decree that organizers of manifestations notify the police about the intended time and place of the demonstration (Decree 107/2013, Art. 8). Article 10 of this decree allowed the police to reject or change the course and date of any demonstration based on evidence or information. The law also created “no demonstration zones” such as in the vicinity of “presidential palaces, the parliament, international organizations, embassies, security and military offices, courts, educational institutions and museums” (Art. 14, Decree 107/2013). This was the first step by the new regime to ensure that the public spaces in Egypt, including Tahrir square, are off limits as spaces for expressing citizens’ discontent.

In the following figure, Monfleur demonstrates how the Tahrir presented a threat to the state due to its proximity to “political institutions”. To secure these institutions, the state aimed to infrastructurally create spaces of “emptiness” (Monfleur, 2021). These were buffer zones between the securitized places and the places of protest; walls were erected to separate the undesired (protestors) from the spaces of “ruling”. These areas are also easier to monitor, and thus any “unusual” gathering is easily spotted. Furthermore, some of these borders were also gates which the state controlled either to allow access to the public or to close it based on its signs of danger. The gates and the general area of Tahrir will remain closed during the anniversaries of 25 January demonstrations or at any other moments when the state feared demonstrations. The same policies were adopted towards the Sadat metro station, positioned under Tahrir square, which is usually closed during the 25 January commemoration days or during other calls for protest (Egypt Independent, 2017).



From the moment all the governmental buildings relocate to the New Capital, a detached new borough of Cairo with clear entry and exit points and a full control

over its streets, government's worst Arab Spring-type dreams will no longer materialize. The city and the discourse around it seem to be yet another move on the chess board named Egypt's governance, with some squares obscure, thus rendering each of the moves a type of a blind checkmate. In truth, Egyptians did not need a new capital; their government did.

Thus, the erection of NC is the realization of the main objective of power holders: to stay in power by creating physical distance and space from society. The government employs for this purpose a series of, what could be called, authoritarian and illiberal practices, to ensure that the objective is attained.

4.2 Feature 2: Significance of Technology Embedded in Infrastructure

The main and most prevalent feature of authoritarian smart cities is their technology which is embedded in the structure of the city. However, whereas the purpose of the use of technology in smart cities is to improve the quality of life, in the context of NC it seems to be mostly the ability to hold the city under control and thus surveillance.

4.2.1 Smart Surveillance from Scratch

Infrastructure, by design and by default, prepares for the ongoing surveillance, AI-driven data analytics and decision making, which is prevalent and does not allow for opting out. NC is, therefore, to be equipped with 28,000 cameras (originally 6,000) (Karam & El-Habal, 2021), according to the director of the Administrative Capital company Ahmed Zaki Abdeen (Mamdoh, 2022). Of these, in the words of the new Director of the ACUD, 15,000 cameras will be positioned in the government quarter to achieve the highest level of security (Abd El Fattah, 2023).

NC will also feature smart columns every 250 metres, which will be equipped with surveillance cameras, smart lighting and public Wi-Fi (Al Hathloul, 2022). The project of the smart columns was won by the Arab International Optronics (AIO) after defeating nine other companies for the contract (Zaki, 2021). AIO is an Egyptian company founded in 1982 as a partnership between NSPO (51%) and French company Thales (49%) (Gamal, 2025) specialized in electrical systems, aerospace, defence transportation and security (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, n.d.).

To oversee the goings-on within the premises of the NC, three command centres will be erected. The first will be the Security Command Centre, built by Honeywell and managed by the Interior Affairs Ministry (Karam & Habal, 2021). The second is the Command Centre for City Services Management, which will employ AI to identify infrastructural problems and solve them immediately. The third command centre will act as the data centre of the capital (Karam & Habal, 2021).

In addition to the 28,000 cameras all over the city, the taxi services in NC will also be used for surveillance. The electric NC taxi fleet (145 cars) will be installed with cameras inside and outside the vehicles (Ezzat, 2025). General Hassan El Lithy, the general manager of smart transportation in the new capital, thus spoke of the taxi system:

the car is supported with all tools of safety and control, there is a camera which oversees the driver and the car, so the passenger will be safe. We will be seeing the passenger from our command centre. (Sada El Balad, 2024)

In the discourse delivered by the public authorities, there is not a single mention of the legal safeguards that may be placed to protect the individuals in the city from the misuse of surveillance. In the case of the Administrative New Capital of Egypt one thing is clear: it may be indeed the improvement of the functioning of the city, but ultimately it seems to be safety and governance understood as state stronghold of the society. The legal basis for surveillance, instead of providing for the limitation of individual rights, only grants additional privileges to public authorities and imposes additional obligations on businesses.

4.2.2 *Legal Framework for Surveillance*

Clearly, surveillance of public spaces is not a new phenomenon for Egypt; however, it has been undergoing a gradual change mandated by the law and the government and not by the legitimate interests of individuals and businesses. The NC's surveillance system builds on this legacy.

Hossam El-Hamalawy reported that the Egyptian state before the revolution of 2011 relied on the network of informants, to oversee public spaces (El-Hamalawy, 2023). However, subsequently, technology has taken over.

In 2015 the Prime Minister announced the establishing of the "The Permanent Committee for Security Coordination for the Monitoring Cameras" (Hamalawy, 2023, Decree no 1032/2015). The Committee's role was to assess the CCTV security efforts and to create a plan for the securitization of important buildings and strategic roads all over the country (Decree no 1032/2015). In 2015, the Minister of Islamic Endowments "Awkaf" announced a plan to monitor mosques (El-Hamalawy, 2023). This was followed by a series of decrees aiming to intensify surveillance in Egypt.

First the governor of Cairo (Decree no 12567/2016) mandated all the public, commercial, industrial and tourist spaces to install CCTV within and without and to record images captured by cameras (Mohi, 2017). In December 2016, the governor of El Dakahlya ordered the instalment of CCTV on all lampposts, banks, prisons, police stations, water stations and mosques (Heza, 2016). In 2017, the government introduced a Law on CCTV in public spaces mandating the installation of CCTV cameras in any space of public importance (Mohi, 2017). The Law also gave the police the power to access and copy the recordings of the CCTV without any supervision from the judiciary (Mohi, 2017).

When in September 2019 an exiled businessman/actor named Mohamed Aly published videos calling for action against corruption in Egypt, a couple of hundred Egyptians turned up at the Tahrir square (Saba, 2019). In response, on 1 October 2019, the parliament issued the Law no154/2019 regarding the public spaces in Egypt and codifying the CCTV and surveillance practices in Egypt. The law mandated all the public stores to install CCTV inside and outside (Art. 23/145). In 2022, the executive regulations of the law specified the rules of the CCTV cameras as the following: (1) the cameras need to be able to record and broadcast

live feed at the same time; (2) they need to enable 24 hours of recording, with recording capacity of at least 15 days; (3) the cameras must have the ability to zoom and move in different directions (Decree 590, 2020).

The law also demanded the installation of cameras in the following spaces: the entrances and exits, spaces of dealing with the customers, safes and cashiers, the front of the stores, the loading and unloading areas.

Two comments must be made in relation to the regulatory surveillance framework: First, the state must be admired for its insistence on providing legitimacy to the surveillance effort. Second, this effort within the walls of the old capital, is reactionary and, third, builds on existing infrastructure with minimal technical requirements. Egypt has around 500,000 cameras, of which about 50,000 are located in Cairo (Gamal, 2023). There has been, so far, no reference to legislation on AI surveillance.

4.2.3 *AI Dreams and Chatbot Realities*

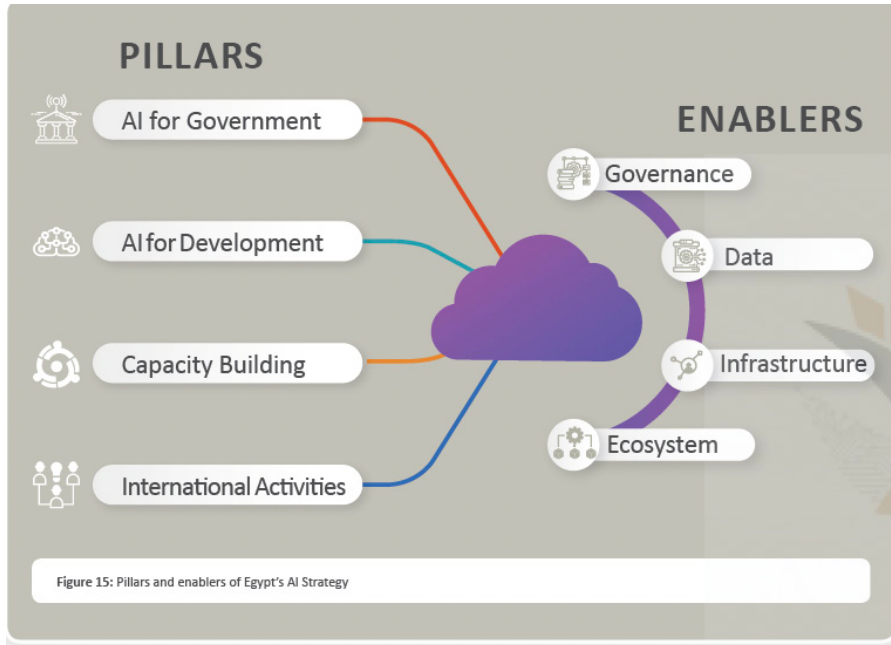
To realize the dream of the smart city, AI technology will be deployed to ensure appropriate real-time coverage and decision-making capacities of the New Capital. There is not much detail on what it will entail as there have been few official statements issued either by public officials or by Honeywell, the provider of technology. Incidental evidence offers insights into infrastructure algorithms but does not go beyond (as in the case of the algorithm serving the purpose of adjusting the camera's angle: Eldrandaly et al., 2019).

In 2019 Honeywell announced that the technology is to feature “sophisticated video analytics to monitor crowds and traffic congestion, detect incidents of theft, observe suspicious people or objects, and trigger automated alarms in emergency situations” (Reuters, 2023). The system will be based on “advanced Internet of Things (IoT) software and hardware solutions for a holistic city view that provides unified public safety services, coordinating security response units, city police and medical dispatch” (Reuters, 2023). Live feeds will be made available to the overseeing functionaries in one of the command centres (Reuters, 2023).

The system will feature live facial recognition technology in addition to the crowd and incident monitoring (Reuters, 2023). Nevertheless, the risk of abuse of the system persists, as in the case of the French AI surveillance law conceived of as the extension of the extraordinary measure during the 2024 Paris Olympic Games (Loin° 2023-380). There, human rights organizations (European Digital Rights, 2023) and civil society organizations (Barbarit, 2024; Urbach) have pointed to the risks of such systems that include bias, inaccuracy and the excess of capacities (the systems are able to identify individuals on the basis of biometric data and compare that data to databases held by law enforcement). The legislation referred to in the previous section (Urbach, 2025) also provides authorities with a legal basis for multi-purposing of the data obtained through CCTV feeds, thus permitting them to, ultimately, conduct a deep surveillance of individuals within the municipal limits of the territory.

As in the case of data protection, Egypt's government remained up to speed and adopted their governance approach to AI as early as in 2019, with its National AI Strategy (Egypt's National AI Strategy, 2019) and subsequent 2023 Egypt's

Charter for Responsible Artificial Intelligence. Both documents are as ambitious as the NC. The Strategy embeds sustainability into the various pillars of the use of AI and positions Egypt as a leader in the region with clear implementation phases (Rahim & Grau, 2024). The following figure shows the pillars of the strategy: AI for government, AI for development, AI for capacity building, AI for international relations) and the strategy enablers (governance, data, infrastructure, ecosystem) (Egypt's National AI Strategy, 2019).



In connection to smart cities and according to the National Council for Artificial Intelligence, Egypt has two current projects. The first project is between the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT) and the Ministry of Justice to develop AI to convert speech into text during court proceedings (State Information Service, 2024).

The second project is a partnership between MCIT and Thales Group with the aim of building applications regarding smart infrastructures, smart governance and transportation and smart cities (Egyptian National Council for Artificial Intelligence, 2021). Thales is a partner of the Ministry of Defence through the AIO, which got the project of the smart columns of NC, as mentioned earlier.

Another AI achievement, somewhat on the fringes of the smart cities initiatives, is Kmet, the AI administrative assistant, which resulted from a collaboration between MCIT and Widbot, an Egyptian AI company founded in 2016 (Egyptinnovate, 2024). The AI chatbot can answer 50,000 different questions regarding the Civil Service Act No. 81 of 2016 and its executive regulation (Egyptinnovate, 2024). Kmet was officially launched on 25 February 2024, and it is

heavily used. In October 2024 alone Kmet answered 92,531 questions through different channels (WhatsApp, website, Facebook) (Amin, 2024 b). Thus, while the state aims to obtain AI surveillance ability by partnering with international companies, it also experiments with the AI as a tool of engagement with the citizens.

The first phase of the National AI Strategy was completed in May 2024 and featured, among others, adoption of the Egyptian Charter for Responsible AI. The Charter echoes similar instruments adopted around the globe referring to the use of responsible AI and emphasizes the significance of the “no harm” principle and compliance with national laws. Similarly, attention is given to human oversight of automated decisions made by AI, capacity building, risk assessment and management.

Needless to say, this AI soft law framework does not feature in the government discourse or official information on NC, nor has it been echoed in the statements of Honeywell.

4.3 Feature 3: Authoritarian Smart Cities as Elite-Driven and Elite-Serving Projects

Echoing the compelling summary by Schuilenburg and Pali (2020) the smart city has become a global narrative that promises to improve city-wide efficiency, decision-making, and safety (Datta, 2015; Ersoy, 2017; Townsend, 2013). Any smart city relies on the data collected from the citizens and is to interact accordingly to improve the experiences of those citizens. This can be done by subjecting citizens to constant surveillance or inviting them to participate in the minute-to-minute governance by offering information or involving their time or opinion. For example, in Dutch Eindhoven tensions in public spaces are reduced with smart lighting, sound detection or odour detection, while in Santander, Spain, the Pulse of the City app helps optimize city services using real-time data from residents' smartphones (Schuilenburg & Pali, 2020).

In the context of NC, aside from the information materials outlining the chief characteristics of the new 4.0 generation of cities and mentioning the necessary descriptors (participation, efficiency, etc.), individuals are not considered to be essential elements for organic evolution of a smart city. Instead, they are subjects of surveillance that is conducted through Honeywell-designed infrastructure and software. Few, in fact, can be physically present on the premises: these are selected “court” members in the form of selected and trained employees; petitioners that come to the “court” to interact with the government and, finally, the city's inhabitants. In the efficiency and sustainability discourse, there is not even a mention of gap analysis that would indicate that the biggest stadium, mosque, church, etc. indeed respond to the needs of the population.

Even the choice of the name through the popular vote was not granted to the people of Egypt. NC remains a government city through and through, not a social project, as will be exemplified in subsequent sections.

4.3.1 *Salvaging Rights? Questions of Governance and Egypt's Personal Data Protection Law*

Protection of individuals in the smart cities context should be based on general principles of law positioning individuals vis-à-vis public authorities entrusted with overseeing a specific territory and area of law. Governance framework would involve a specific attribution of duties and obligations with clear lines of accountability. Rights guaranteed by the Constitution should be similarly protected, with due attention given to risks that will be inherently posed by the deployment of technology.

There is no evidence that any of the foregoing considerations have been taken into account by the government and legislature for the New Capital. In the heavily surveilled context of a smart city, of particular importance is the right to privacy and its manifestation: the right to personal data protection.

The legislative framework of surveillance outlined previously is a limitation of a right to privacy through legislative means, with the laws mandating CCTV surveillance featuring the conditions for limitations of the right to privacy.

Yet whereas Article 57 of 2014 Egyptian Constitution (OHCHR, 2014) provides for the protection of the right to privacy, it does not give substance to the understanding of the limitation of such a right. The statement "Private life is inviolable, safeguarded and may not be infringed upon" is followed by the guarantee of the privacy of correspondence and right to communication via publicly available means. Right to personal data protection is not mentioned by the Constitution, however, as under international human rights law, is one of manifestations of the right to privacy.

Even though Egypt's Personal Data Protection Law (PDPL) was published in the Official Gazette on 15 July 2020 and entered into force on 15 October 2020, the executive order necessary for its implementation has, to date, been neither a subject of the public debate, nor adopted (Personal Data Protection Law, 2020). This means that the law is largely non-operational as it lacks the instruments allowing for regulatory compliance, and, in particular, the system of licences, permits and certificates allowing various entities (both governmental and private) to process personal data (understood similarly to GDPR, broadly, but under PDPL involving only electronic and not manual means).

Personal Data Protection Centre (Art. 19 PDPL), the authority charged with oversight over organizations processing personal data and a registry-type of tasks of issuing licences, permits and certificates, has never been created. This implies that it is difficult to assess which would be the implications of obtaining one of the above, given the blurring of the position of personal data controllers and processors and their almost equal liability. Proportionality-related principles of data minimization and storage limitation have been adopted in the Egyptian PDPL. The legal bases for processing of ordinary data echoes EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Art. 3 and 4 PDPL) and similarly, the legal basis for processing sensitive data includes legislative acts (Art. 12 PDPL) as well. At all times, the PDPL does not apply to national security bodies (Art. 3), which denotes a broad range of institutions which also enjoy discretion to repurpose data.

Formally, processing of ordinary or sensitive data (note that the PDPL does not consider information about race to be sensitive data, Art. 1 PDPL) in the light of Art. 6 and 11 PDPD is possible to fulfil the legally imposed obligation. This could be, for instance, all the decrees mandating CCTV installation by both public and private actors, and the subsequent related processing of personal data, including granting access to law enforcement and national security authorities. However, given that these laws predate PDPL, it is reasonable to assume that they would not stand the test of proportionality enshrined in Article 3 and 4 PDPL.

In addition, in the absence of the executive decree, it is impossible to ascertain how the existing processing activities would be approached from the perspective of the need to obtain an additional permit or licence and, in particular, whether public authorities must fulfil such obligation. Article 26(5) PDPL specifically requires that appropriate licence or permit is issued for the purposes of visual surveillance in public places. It is up to the Personal Data Protection Centre to determine what type of permits and licences should be issued (Art. 26(1) PDPL), which should follow the executive regulation containing information on “the types, specifications, levels, Permits, Licenses, Certifications, procedures and conditions of issuance and forms used”. Importantly, issuance of a licence or permit should be done in exchange for a fee of a maximum of 2 million Egyptian pounds and 500,000 Egyptian pounds, respectively (equivalents of ca 39,000 and 9,900 USD). Importantly, the application for a permit or licence should contain the “proof of the applicant’s financial ability and his ability to implement the requirements and technical standards stipulated”, and not the proof that appropriate considerations and safeguards have been put in place.

4.3.2 *Exclusivity and Control of Access*

NC was criticized and even compared to the Baghdad’s Green Zone in regard to security and control of access (Dun, 2018). These accusations prompted the government to state, in 2019 and then in 2021, that neither NC nor any of Generation 4.0 cities would be walled in. It was to be accessible at all times to all (Al Masry El Youm, 2019). NC will have, however, six different gates connected to the six different roads to the city to give it a “beautiful outlook since the city is the biggest smart city in the Middle East” (Hassan, 2021).

Similarly, the housing in NC will be made available to all classes (Ramadan, 2021). However, as observed by Rowaq Arabi’ (2024) or Waisová (2022), the new capital is exclusionary in its design and implementation. Waisová pointed to factors such as the military involvement in constructing the new capital and the high prices in residential areas that are markers of exclusion from the new city (2022). Rowaq Arabi (2024) provided a more detailed image of the prices of the new capital: one square metre cost US\$505 in June 2024. The current price of a metre in the NC is 27,800 EGP (US\$552,48) (Aqarmap, 2025), while in 2024, the government boasted about raising the minimum wages to 6,000 EGP (around US\$119) (Amin, 2024a). What are marketed as affordable parts of the city: Badr City and Hadaik El Asmea (the gardens of the capital) sell properties at the cost of 8,000 EGP, 21,000 EGP respectively (Aqarmap, 2025c; Aqarmap, 2025a).

There is no doubt that NC is meant for those who can afford to be there; they are the ones who will get access to the “smart” features of the city, while the poorer classes will remain kept out by different means. In fact, some workers highlighted to Mada Masr in 2023 that they “waste 4 hours” daily on transportation to and from NC (Mamdoh, 2023). Rowaq Arabi echoed that sentiment, stating that despite the state providing commute allowance for the workers to use the public transportation, many prefer to use buses, which they rent collectively as public transportation takes much more time and housing within the city is unaffordable and inaccessible to their entire families (2024). Finally, Mada Masr highlighted that the electronic systems have not been operational, and many workers thus spend their days doing nothing: after all, the old-style desk work is no longer permitted (Mamdoh, 2023).

4.3.3 “The Court”

Given that some ministries (14) have already been transferred to NC in 2023, employees have been present on the premises of NC since (Ministry of Communications and Information Technology: 2020). However, not every employee could have moved to NC.

In fact, there were conditions and tests which would need to be fulfilled to qualify a government employee to move to the new capital. According to Dr. Saleh El Shikh, the president of the Central Agency for Organization and Administration, stated that there is an evaluation process for employees who are nominated to move to the new capital (Hamada, 2021). These evaluations test Arabic and English language competency, general computer literacy and soft skills (Hamada, 2021). These employees will be subsequently trained according to a curriculum created by the following entities “Central Agency for Organization and Administration, National Anti-Corruption Academy, MCIT, Systems Administration of the Armed Forces, National Training Academy” (Sis. Gov, 2020). The training would involve programmes focusing on topics such as “raising the national awareness” and national security and the concept of the 4th generation of war (Sis. Gov, 2020). The training will also aim to improve the competencies of the employees regarding motivation, effective communication, and teamwork, in addition to digital capacity building programmes (State Information Service, 2020). By 2022, more than 76,000 candidates for NC employee were trained (Ramadan, 2023).

Once moved to NC, employees will remain under consistent surveillance given that the governmental neighbourhood alone will have 15,000 cameras (Abd El Fattah,

2023), and their attendance will be specifically monitored (Zayed et al., 2023). Their private lives will be included as well. In 2021, the state issued a law requiring drug-free status as a condition for appointment, promotion, transfer, secondment and continuation in government jobs, through random drug testing (law 73/2021/Art. 3). In the case of a positive sample, the employee would be suspended for three months or until the final test results arrive. Also, the employee will be fired imminently (Art. 12/15). Thus, this inside-out surveillance system for the employees of the government maintains control of the state over the employees in their public and private lives.

4.3.4 *Efficiency and Sustainability*

Egypt's 4.0 cities approach efficiency and sustainability as ideas enshrined in their concept. However, on closer inspection, it is quite clear that they do not deliver on the promise of efficient and environmentally conscious creations, which is visible on both the grander and smaller scale. On the grander scale the city boasts many architectural achievements with close to no information about their environmental impacts and sustainability.

There are multiple other examples of NC's apparent grandeur and doubtful environmental consciousness. NC's Green River is symbolically supposed to resemble the Nile River, which will traverse through the heart of the capital and extend over 35 km (Sis. Gove, 2023 b). The river will be surrounded by the capital's central park, which is 10 km long and span over 440 hectares, making it twice the size of New York's Central Park and one of the biggest city parks in the world (State Information Service, 2023 b; Dar Al-Handasah, n.d.). The source of water for Green River is the recycled and processed water from the NC (Aqarmap, 2022), whereas the water for NC comes from the depleted Nile. This project comes at a time when the president himself stated that Egypt's water resources are facing existential threats due to the Ethiopian dam on the Nile (Khazan, 2025). Egypt is facing droughts and has a water security crisis (Sis. Gov, n.d.).

NC is also a home to the "Iconic Tower": the largest tower in Africa, of 385 metres, built at a cost of US\$3 billion. It was built by the China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC) (Egypt's Projects Map, n.d.). The Iconic Tower is so named because it is an icon of construction in Egypt in its modern history (IDSC, 2024). The tower is built out of environment-friendly materials (no further information on this), is earthquake-proof and has elements of French architecture style and ancient Egyptian symbols (IDSC, 2024). Overall, there will be 20 towers in the financial district over a space of 1.71 million square metres (Aqarmap, 2024).

Continuing the trend of the "bigger", NC will also have its own stadium, with 93,940 seats, making it the second biggest stadium in Africa (Vanguard News, 2024). Egypt already has the third and fifth largest stadiums in Africa: the Borg El Arab stadium has 86,000 seats and Cairo International stadium, 75,000 seats (Vanguard News, 2024). Ironically, between 2016 and 2021 a ban on football fans attending live games was in force until 6,000 spectators were allowed in. The number will increase to 10,000, then 20,000 and, finally, 30,000 (Nawar, 2024). Since 2021, any football fan who wanted to attend needed to have registered their personal data online before attending, which meant that every fan was monitored (El Basiouny, 2021).

In fact, a full Olympic City is being built in NC, with an indoor arena to seat 7,500, and another to seat 15,000 and a 5,000-seater swimming pool in addition to a 3,500-seater tennis complex and a 1,000-seater squash court (Jones, 2023). This project has been envisioned with an aim to make a bid for hosting the 2036 Olympics and in hopes to become the first African country to organize such an event (Hamed Atta, 2024).

Before the official launch of NC in 2019, El Fattah El Alim Mosque was built on 8,600 square metres close to NC gates and can accommodate 17,000 worshippers (State Information Service, 2023c). However, in 2022 even a bigger one opened its

gates: The Grand Mosque is a giant built on a 19,000 square metre space and is able to accommodate 107,000 worshipers, making it the second biggest mosque in Africa, with a hefty bill of 800 million EGP (James, 2023). The new capital also hosts the Cathedral of the Nativity of Christ, the biggest in the Middle East, which can accommodate more than 8,000 worshipers (Reuters, 2019). Finally, NC also has the tallest, internationally recorded flagpole, 201.9 metres high, located in the People's Square, which can host up to 10,000 people (Morsy, 2024).

All of the above is being created in the middle of the desert, where average temperatures in the warmer months of the year reach 50 degrees Celsius. The potential waste will truly be on a grand scale.

This obsession of the bigger, the taller and the greater does not match the concept of a smart city, where efficiency and sustainability are one of the main goals. It is worth a mention that Egypt's external debt in 2012 was US\$34 billion and gradually rose to US\$165 billion in 2023 (Shehata, 2024). Thus, we have a smart capital that keeps its intelligence to its residents who can afford to be there, while even the workers who operate the city cannot afford to live there. All these futuristic projects reflect an ancient tradition of building lavish citadels which oversee the poor population. This blending of future aspirations with the fundamental distrust of the ruled is one of the main features of the authoritarian smart cities.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

This contribution has contrasted the prevailing idea of a non-authoritarian smart city with the reality of Egypt's New Capital and examined how this case reshapes the understanding of the concept of an "authoritarian smart city". Our starting point was the normative concept of a smart city and its stated objective: improving the urban experience of individuals through technology-driven innovation. The challenge lies in the fact that this imaginary – and the legal frameworks supporting it – is largely derived from Western, democratic contexts. Understanding an authoritarian smart city, we argued, requires situating the analysis within an authoritarian setting where power holders deploy illiberal and authoritarian practices to maintain control.

While the normative goal of smart cities is efficiency and enhanced quality of life, authoritarian smart cities prioritize regime security and power consolidation. NC exemplifies this dynamic: it is not merely a city but an engineered authoritarian context. Although technological features such as AI-driven surveillance, sensors and data centres are present, they serve objectives far removed from inclusivity or sustainability of social smart city projects. Instead, they enable pervasive monitoring and intelligence gathering, reinforcing state control and diminishing accountability. The city's design and governance thus constitute authoritarian practices: physically and digitally distancing power from citizens and rendering oversight unattainable.

The branding of NC as "Al-Mustaqbal" (the future) or "Masr" (Egypt) reflects the regime's ambition to project grandeur rather than social progress. This vision

of modernity is exclusive, elitist and disconnected from the lived realities of citizens. Far from improving the quality of life, the authoritarian smart city reframes urban development as a tool for surveillance and social engineering, eroding privacy, autonomy and civic participation. These illiberal practices underscore the profound risks such cities pose to individual rights, challenging the normative promise of smart urbanism.

Ultimately, the conceptualization of an “authoritarian smart city” and calls for situated research may appear utopian when confronted with these realities. It is time to acknowledge that, under authoritarian conditions, smart city development can become yet another mechanism of control rather than a pathway to sustainability and inclusivity. Where such practices prevail, the promise of truly smart, citizen-centred cities remains unattainable. Following Gibson’s imaginary, we can argue that the smart authoritarian city is not there for its inhabitants but is a deliberately unsupervised and unaccountable playground for technology and authoritarianism itself.

The New Capital of Egypt case study illustrates how authoritarian smart cities can be analysed through a composite lens. Departing critically from the core features of smart cities, namely technological reliance and social purpose, we propose instead to add to the technological dimension of a smart city an authoritarian context, assessed through three elements: (1) objective: whether the city’s creation serves regime security rather than public welfare; (2) practices: whether governance reduces accountability (authoritarian practice) and restricts individual rights (illiberal practice); (3) integration of those practices through technology.

This framework enables comparative positioning of authoritarian smart cities relative to non-authoritarian contexts, offering a structured basis for academic inquiry.

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Data Profiling: Legal and Moral Implications of the Alignment of Present Police Patrol Actions with Individual Citizens' Historical Data Profiles

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Abstract

The data profiles of citizens encountered by Dutch police officers appear to play a significant role in their decision-making during patrol. Dutch police officers often make use of information recorded in police computer systems regarding previous encounters to determine whether or not to stop and check a person they encounter during patrol, especially in traffic situations. They also utilize this information to determine whether they will impose a fine on that person: if the records indicate a prior offence of a similar nature that is seen as a justification for imposing a fine, whereas first-time offenders or people who are not registered in the police database at all are often released with a warning. We call this phenomenon "data profiling." This article explores the phenomenon of data profiling, focusing on its legal and moral implications.

Keywords: data, information, patrol, police computer systems, profiling.

1 Introduction

The phenomenon of data profiling is not entirely new. Data (processed into information) has always played a role in policing (WRR, 2016). For previous research purposes, we conducted a literature review of empirical studies on the use of information in police patrol (Stol et al., 2025). We found that a substantial body of research has been published on the use and impact of information on police patrol. The majority of these studies focus on information derived from a particular type of information source, such as mobile information systems (Koper et al., 2015; Norman & Allen, 2005; Smits et al., 2014; Stol, 1996; Zahabi et al., 2020), Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) (Koper et al., 2013, 2022; Lum et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2011), Real Time Intelligence Centers (RTICs) (Kooijman, 2013), briefing (Scholtens et al., 2013) and data analytics systems (Khalfa & Hardyns, 2024; Santos & Taylor, 2014). In the last decade, considerable attention has been directed towards data processed into information using artificial intelligence. A significant number of studies have been published on the use of Big

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Data in policing (Joh, 2014; Ridgeway, 2018; Schuilenburg & Soudijn, 2021; Spithoven & Van de Pas, 2020; Terpstra & Salet, 2020), the use of algorithmic risk assessments in policing (Joh, 2022; Marciniak, 2022) and the use Big Data algorithms to forecast crime (*predictive policing*) (Bennett Moses & Chan, 2016; Berk & Bleich, 2013; Hardyns & Rummens, 2018; Perry et al., 2013; Saunders et al., 2016).

This article does not focus on information derived from a particular type of information source or on data processed into information using artificial intelligence. Rather, it concerns all data that can be related to individual citizens, such as addresses, personal identification numbers and licence plates, and all information that has been recorded in relation to these data in police databases that are accessible *during* patrol. To ensure the efficient retrieval of this information, there are applications available that link police databases together. An example of such an application is MEOS (*Mobiel Effectiever Op Straat*, or Mobile Effectiveness on the Street). In previous research, we found that police officers frequently utilized MEOS on their work-issued smartphones to search a variety of police databases for information about licence plates, licence plate holders and individuals with whom they had contact (Stol et al., 2025). When MEOS was introduced, the then Minister of Justice and Security stated in a letter¹ that it could provide the police with additional information in certain situations, allowing police officers to select the most suitable course of action. This suggests a degree of trust in technology, which has been termed “naive optimism” (Stol & Jansen, 2024, p. 242). However, the availability of information does not necessarily guarantee enhanced police work, as it is often challenging for police officers to translate information into a specific course of action, let alone one that is considered the most suitable (Stol et al., 2025). The subject of this article thus touches on the broader theme of how technology reshapes policing (Ackroyd et al., 1992; Brey, 2017; Landman, 2023), especially in relation to police discretion and decision-making (Feys, 2023).

This article draws on our study on police patrol and information use, which we conducted earlier with a grant from the Dutch Police and Science programme. This observational study was not originally designed to examine data profiling. Rather, we identified this phenomenon as a pattern that we did not anticipate after reviewing the reports of our observations comprehensively. The aim of this article is to explore the phenomenon of data profiling. The primary question we seek to address is what the legal and moral implications of this phenomenon are. Sub-questions are how data profiling can be defined, how it relates to ethnic profiling and what role it plays in police decision-making.

In the following sections, we will first define data profiling, describe its background and explain its relation to ethnic profiling. We will then provide a brief overview of the systematic social observation method that was used for the study from which the observations discussed in this article stem. Subsequently, we will analyse our results and explore the role of data profiling in police decision-making during patrol. In the final section of this article, we will discuss the legal and moral implications of this phenomenon. We will conclude that these primarily revolve

1 TK, 2012-2013, 29.628, nr. 391, 6 May 2013.

around three values: privacy, fairness and equality, which are important from both a legal and a moral perspective. Finally, we call for more research on data profiling.

2 Data Profiling: Background and Definition

It is a well-established fact that certain background information about individual citizens can influence how police officers view and approach them. For instance, the police officer and anthropologist Young (1991) demonstrated that acquaintances of the police (whom police officers refer to as “prigs”) are approached differently from “good citizens” (people with no previous contact with the police). What is different today is that a large part of this information is digitized (Ferguson, 2022).

The police have embraced the use of digital technology in their work (Landman, 2023). This does not mean that police officers use only information from their computer systems in their work. For example, how a person appears to police officers is not recorded in these systems, but it does remain in the officers’ memory and such “soft” information can play a role in subsequent encounters with that person (Feys, 2023). However, the storage of many other pieces of information has transitioned from the individual’s memory to a computer system, thereby conferring accessibility to the information to any individual who possesses the necessary credentials to access the database. In addition, the process of gaining access has become significantly more straightforward. Digitalization has fundamentally transformed the process of information retrieval. This transformation is characterized by the automation, continuity, speed and breadth of the digital search process, which surpasses the capabilities of human-led analogue searches. The datasets searched are voluminous, enabling retrospective analysis and unveiling of intimate details about identity, associations and activities far beyond what analogue tools ever captured (Ferguson, 2022). Notably, police officers are no longer required to contact the control room to obtain information; rather, they can access such data on their smartphones while performing their duties (Stol et al., 2025). Furthermore, there has been an increasing interconnection of data sources (Landman, 2023). Contrary to earlier stand-alone devices, contemporary systems are characterized by their scalability and interoperability, which facilitates upgrades and integration with other data streams (Ferguson, 2022). Applications that link large databases together, such as the MEOS application discussed in the introduction, ensure the efficient retrieval of information. As a result, the police are collecting more and more data and are increasingly able to process it effectively and efficiently in the context of performing their police duties (Landman, 2023).

It is against this background that the phenomenon of data profiling emerges. It can be described as follows. In consequence of the aforementioned developments, police officers are now capable of effortlessly and swiftly requesting a wide range of information regarding individuals, motor vehicles and addresses with which they are engaged during their duties. In addition, police officers also record information about these individuals, motor vehicles and addresses in police computer systems. While this may appear to be a straightforward record-keeping exercise, it is

important to recognize its broader implications. The aforementioned information is stored in these systems and can be accessed in the event of any subsequent encounter between the police and the individual to whom it relates for a period of at least one year.² There appears to be no data segmentation. Police officers are permitted to record and request any data they deem necessary “for the purpose of performing daily police duties.”³ This encompasses a wide range of data, including observations made, inspection records, fines issued and warnings given. Concerning the latter, it is important to note that unofficial warnings, which have not been documented, cannot be traced back. Only warnings that are documented in the system (hereafter, “official warnings”) can be retrieved during a subsequent encounter between the police and the individual to whom the warning was given and can, therefore, influence the course of the interaction (Stol et al., 2025). This leads to an important point.

The significance of data profiling is not merely about police officers recording and accessing data during patrols; rather, it is more about the influence of that information on the subsequent interactions between police officers and individuals. An inevitable part of policing is police discretion. It allows police officers to make decisions on a case-by-case basis and determine how and whether to enforce the law. A considerable body of empirical research has been conducted to understand police discretion in practice and the factors that influence individual police officers’ decisions (Feys, 2023). We wish to argue that data profiling plays a role in police decision-making, for the recording of information that can be related to individuals in police computer systems establishes a new police cultural tendency. This cultural tendency, in its simplest form, can be articulated as follows: once information about individuals is entered into the police system, these individuals are more likely to undergo further scrutiny, incur fines and subsequently be re-registered during police patrols, thereby establishing a cycle. Consequently, data profiling can be defined as the alignment of present police patrol actions with individual citizens’ historical data profiles. This implies that individuals without police records can expect less intensive police involvement compared to those with previous records (Stol et al., 2025).

3 The Relation Between Data Profiling and Ethnic Profiling

A related phenomenon that has been more widely discussed than data profiling is ethnic profiling. A recent systematic literature review focused on the Dutch context (Van Meeteren et al., 2023) did not identify a prevalent definition of “ethnic profiling.” Instead, the review concluded that “different groups – academics, NGO

2 Art. 8 (1) of the Dutch Police Data Act (*Wet Politiegegevens*). After this period, the information is stored for a period of five years, after which it is removed, though not deleted (Art. 8 (6) of the Dutch Police Data Act). The duration for which Dutch police are permitted to retain removed information before it is deleted is currently under discussion (Raad van State, Voorlichting over verlenging bewaartermijn politiegegevens, W16.24.00313/II, 25 October 2024, available in Dutch only). At this moment the term is set at five years (Art. 14 (1) of the Dutch Police Data Act).

3 Art. 8 (1) of the Dutch Police Data Act.

representatives, and practitioners – have different perspectives on what constitutes ethnic profiling” (Van Meeteren et al., 2023). In a recent case⁴ concerning the Dutch Military Police (*Koninklijke Marechaussee*), Dutch judges characterized ethnic profiling as the utilization of criteria indicative of a specific origin, such as skin colour or race, for the purpose of selection for police checks. The judges indicated that ethnicity may only be used as a selection criterion if there are particularly compelling reasons for doing so. In the absence of such reasons, the utilization of criteria indicative of a specific origin for the purpose of selection for police checks is considered discriminatory. In consideration of the established jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, they established that this is the case if the characteristic derived from race or ethnicity is decisive to the extent that the person concerned would not have been selected for inspection if, all other circumstances being equal, that characteristic had not been present.⁵

Van Meeteren et al. (2023) found that ethnic profiling occurs in various forms of police work, particularly in the context of traffic enforcement and street policing. In contexts such as the issuance of traffic fines, where discretion plays a significant role, indications of ethnic profiling appear more pronounced than in other settings, such as arrests (Van Meeteren et al., 2023). Research results from a recent study into the overrepresentation of young people of non-Western origin in the judicial system (Bezemer & Leerkes, 2021) suggest that young people of non-Western origin face a significantly higher probability of suspicion and subsequent registration as suspects compared to native Dutch youth. This phenomenon, which is two to three times more prevalent, cannot be attributed to differences in criminal behaviour or demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. Young people of Moroccan and Antillean descent, in particular, are more often known to the police than would be expected based on patterns of self-reported criminal behaviour (Bezemer & Leerkes, 2021).

The findings of our systematic social observation study reveal that police officers are aware of ethnic profiling and endeavour to avoid it. First, they try to prevent the occurrence of ethnic profiling by disclosing the specific behaviours that have prompted them to stop the person concerned. Furthermore, the decision to impose a fine is frequently made prior to the initiation of the interaction, thereby ensuring that the decision to issue a fine is not influenced by the course of the interaction. In instances where an individual provides a valid justification for the behaviour in question however, the imposition of a fine may be reconsidered (Stol et al., 2025).

Data profiling is not the same as ethnic profiling. However, the potential pitfall of data profiling is that it may repeat ethnic profiling. While data may appear to be neutral, this is not the case. The process of data collection is inherently subject to human decision-making, which can introduce irregularities and biases into the datasets. These irregularities and biases have the potential to have a negative impact on certain groups in society, including ethnic groups (Kool et al., 2015; WRR, 2016). For example, Van Meeteren et al. (2023) posit that excessive police

4 Gerechtshof Den Haag, 14 February 2023, ECLI:NL:GHDHA:2023:173.

5 Gerechtshof Den Haag, 14 February 2023, ECLI:NL:GHDHA:2023:173, § 8.20.

patrols in neighbourhoods with high concentrations of ethnic minorities can, at times, result in ethnic profiling. Data on police checks involving ethnic profiling are then entered into police computer systems. Since data profiling means that people who appear in police systems are more likely to be checked or fined again, ethnic profiling can be repeated in this way.

4 Research Design, Methods and Data

This contribution derives from our longitudinal study, initiated in 1991, which examines police patrol work and the use of information (Stol et al., 2025). The study was conducted across three periods: 1992-1993, 2001-2005 and 2022-2024. The present contribution draws on data collected during the most recent phase. In this phase, police patrol work was studied within police teams located in Amsterdam, Groningen and Wageningen. The next section provides further details on the three teams.

Police patrol work was examined through systematic social observation (SSO) (Mastrofski et al., 2010; McCluskey et al., 2023; Reiss, 1971), a method in which researchers accompanied police officers during approximately 20 patrol shifts. The essence of SSO lies in the researcher systematically recording observations according to a clearly articulated procedure that can be replicated by others. This procedure is documented in an observation protocol, which includes a codebook comprising a set of variables used to code all “events” in SPSS. The codebook effectively functions as the instrument that structures and directs the observations and field notes. As Mastrofski et al. note, “the instrument takes the form of a questionnaire, in this case, directed to the observer” (2010, p. 231).

“Police patrol work” in this study refers to the activities carried out by two uniformed police officers in a marked police car who carry out general patrol (not directed to one topic such as monitoring the nightlife) and at the same time are available for the command and control room to receive and respond to citizen calls. Observations include all police activities while “on the street,” which is defined as any location outside the officers’ own police station. Thus, actions undertaken in private residences, buildings or, for example, a police detention facility are also included. Furthermore, the police officers must be acting in their professional capacity (private errands fall outside the scope of observation).

An *event* is defined as any encounter between an officer and a citizen, as well as any citizen-initiated report communicated to officers that does not subsequently lead to an encounter on the street. An encounter occurs when there is verbal or non-verbal interaction between an officer and a citizen. Simply raising a hand in greeting or acknowledging an acquaintance with a single word (e.g. saying “morning” to a street vendor) does not qualify as an encounter. However, the exchange of a few words (“Everything okay?” – “Yep.” – “See you.”) or providing a non-verbal cue as a corrective response to a traffic violation does qualify. As a rule, an encounter during police patrol work involves an interaction in which both officer and citizen are physically present on the street. Nonetheless, an encounter

may also occur via telephone or digital communication, provided that the officer is on the street, while the citizen may be at home or elsewhere (Stol et al., 2025).

The researcher takes notes directly in the field – usually in the back of the police car – using pen and paper and subsequently expands these notes into a fieldwork report in Word as soon as possible after the shift. In this report, the researcher documents each event as well as any observations deemed relevant to the central theme of “police patrol work and information use” such as the briefing, along with other notable observations. In addition, the researcher records each event in SPSS using the aforementioned set of variables (the *questionnaire directed to the observer*). Each event therefore results both in a narrative account in the fieldwork report and in a corresponding SPSS record consisting of approximately 80 variables, such as the nature of the event, whether information systems were consulted, and the manner in which the police officers handled the event. Viewed in this way, SSO represents a combination of qualitative research (the fieldwork report) and quantitative research (the SPSS dataset).

The observations were conducted by multiple researchers (Stol et al., 2025). The protocol and, especially, the structured scoring system (the set of variables) assist the researchers in consistently recording the same characteristics for the same topics. Moreover, Stol has been involved in all observations since 1991 and, in the recent observations, briefed the other researchers on the methodology and reviewed their fieldwork reports and SPSS coding for consistency.

In each observation (Amsterdam, Groningen, Wageningen), the researcher accompanied the police officers on the usual irregular shifts, ensuring that a variety of officers were observed. In total, 566 events were recorded. Table 1 presents the distribution of these events (“events”) across the three locations, as well as the number of shifts (“shifts”) observed by the researchers and the total hours spent on the street with the police officers (“hours”).

Table 1 *Number of shifts observed (“shifts”), number of hours spent with the officers on the street (“hours”) and number of observed events (“events”)*

2022-2024			
	Shifts	Hours	Events
Amsterdam	19	96	194
Groningen	19	88	220
Wageningen	21	77	152
Total	59	261	566

4.1 Research Setting (Amsterdam, Groningen and Wageningen)

In Amsterdam, the study focused on the Zuid De Pijp police team. This team’s operational area borders the city centre and includes the Rivierenbuurt district, which is primarily residential and contains a large convention centre (RAI complex), as well as the De Pijp district, characterized by small households and many bars

and (small) restaurants. The operational area covers 3.7 km² and has a population density of 17,500 inhabitants per km².

In Groningen, the study focused on the Groningen-Noord police team. The team's operational area encompasses the northern part of the city centre, several adjacent parts of the city, and a large rural area with a few villages. The operational area covers 72 km² and has a population density of 1,300 inhabitants per km².

In Wageningen, the study focused on the Veluwe Vallei Zuid police team. The operational area includes the small university city of Wageningen and the more rural town of Renkum, which is surrounded by natural and cultural landscapes. The area of this police team covers 76 km² and has a population density of 900 inhabitants per km².

All three cities – Amsterdam, Groningen and Wageningen – are university towns; however, only in Wageningen does the university fall within the study area. Although population densities differ across these areas, they are all above the Dutch national average of 500 inhabitants per km². During the observations, police officers primarily patrolled the busier sections of their respective areas. Consequently, the observed police work predominantly took place in urban settings, among streets and buildings.

4.2 Case Selection for This Article

The longitudinal study from which our observations are drawn focuses on information use, with particular attention to the effects of digitalization on police patrol work. Consequently, the study was not originally designed specifically to examine the phenomenon of “data profiling.” The codebook of the observation protocol therefore does not include a variable such as “Was data profiling involved in this event? (0 = no, 1 = yes).” Because the method (SSO) incorporates both qualitative and quantitative elements, there is scope for recording observations beyond the predefined variables. Repeated observations can thus reveal patterns in police patrol work that were not anticipated.

In addition to being absent from the codebook, the term “data profiling” does not appear in the fieldwork reports. Only after reviewing the reports comprehensively did we identify a pattern. We then selected from the fieldwork reports those events in which the data obtained by police officers from police information systems about a person with whom they were interacting in the field noticeably influenced how they acted towards that individual. “Noticeably” here means that the notes indicate that the officers made it clear – typically in remarks to each other – that such a connection existed. For example, a motorist drives on a tram track and receives no more than a soft warning, not a fine. The officer handling the event later remarks in the car: “That was an upstanding citizen; he was completely absent in our systems.” In the research report about our observational study on police patrol and information use, we explicitly labelled 12 events as data profiling. For these events, we have translated the notes from our observational research from Dutch into English and included them in the appendix.

Because “data profiling” was not part of the codebook, it was not an explicit focus during the observations. It is therefore possible that some instances of data profiling were missed or that different manifestations of the phenomenon were

not recognized. The existence of the phenomenon, however, was confirmed by police officers. We repeatedly presented police officers with the following case. “At night during your patrol, you see two cars driving. You check the license plates in the MEOS application. You find no irregularities with the first car, and DUI (driving under the influence) is registered for the second car. Which of the two cars do you stop for a check?” Invariably, the firm answer is: “The second one, of course.” To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, further research is required. The contribution of our study lies in its description of the mechanism based on observations in police practice, thereby providing a foundation for subsequent research on this phenomenon.

5 Results: The Role of Data Profiling in Police Decision-Making During Patrol

The phenomenon of data profiling occurs in police decision-making during patrol. Based on a scoping review of literature on police decision-making, Feys (2023) concludes that factors affecting police decision-making exist at five different levels: police officer characteristics, civilian characteristics, organizational characteristics, situational characteristics and neighbourhood characteristics. For this article, it is particularly relevant that Feys (2023) notes that, at the level of civilian characteristics, “being known to the police” is a factor. At the level of situational characteristics, the frequency with which police officers are confronted with particular persons and (other) information also affects their decisions (Feys, 2023). What we mean by data profiling is that the aforementioned information can be accessed in police computer systems during patrols and plays a role in a specific area of police decision-making, namely whether to check a person or fine a person who has committed an offence, mainly in relation to traffic.

We observed several instances where people were checked because information consulted in police computer systems showed that the vehicle they were travelling in had previously been involved in traffic offences. We provide two examples. During their surveillance round, police officers entered the licence plate number of a passing car into the police computer system. The system indicated that the vehicle’s owner had previously been fined for DUI. The officers then decided to stop the car and request that the driver perform a breathalyser test (Example 11). On another occasion, police officers received an ANPR (Automatic Number Plate Recognition) notification on their smartphones. This was regarding a rental car which was possibly being driven by someone with a suspended licence. According to the ANPR information, the car was travelling on the nearby motorway. The police officers waited for the car, and when they saw it passing, they pulled it over and checked the driver’s licence and the IDs of the passengers (Example 10).

More often, we observed that a fine was issued when police officers found information about previous offences in the police computer systems. We provide three examples. Police officers saw a scooter run a red light. The driver was not wearing a helmet. When the scooter stopped, the officers asked for the driver’s licence and scanned it into the system. The driver received a fine for running a red

light and for not wearing a helmet. Back in the car one of the police officers said: “he is an acquaintance of ours, he appears a lot” (Example 6). On another occasion, police officers saw a car enter a closed zone. When they checked the licence plate number in the computer system, they found that it had many previous registrations. The officers wrote a ticket for entering the closed zone (Example 7). In a subsequent instance, police officers encountered another vehicle that entered a closed zone. The driver was issued a fine. Once back at the patrol car, one of the police officers remarked that the system indicated that the driver had previous encounters with law enforcement. The police officer stated, “Then you know what kind of person you are dealing with” (Example 8).

In contrast, we frequently observed that no fine was issued to individuals who had committed an offence without a prior record of similar offences. We provide five examples. Police officers drove on a priority road when a car did not give them, and other road users, the right of way. They stopped the car. The computer system indicated that the driver had not committed any previous traffic offences. He received an (unofficial) warning. One of the police officers stated: “[E]veryone can make a mistake sometimes, it happens to me too” (Example 1). On another occasion, police officers saw a young woman biking with her cell phone in her hand.⁶ The police officers did not find any information on the woman in the police computer systems. They left it at an (unofficial) warning (Example 2). On yet another occasion, police officers thought they saw a scooter running a red light but were not 100 percent sure. The driver received an (unofficial) warning. One of the officers said, “He didn’t have anything crazy on his record either” (Example 3). We observed something similar in the following example. A car was driving where it is not allowed. The police officers stopped the car. The driver received an (unofficial) warning. Back in the car, one of the officers said, “That was an honourable citizen, he didn’t have a single fine on his record.” The other officer said, “You could have given him the first one.” “Nope,” the officer replied (Example 5). The final example illustrates that data profiling can be a deliberate strategy. Police officers saw a car pass a no-entry sign three times. The car also drove across the bike lane. They stopped the car. The driver received an (unofficial) warning. One of the officers said:

If I haven’t decided on a fine yet, I’ll look at the information in the system. She had no records except for reports where she was the reporting party. If she had been previously fined for entering a closed zone, that would have been a reason for me to issue a fine. (Example 4)

6 Discussion: Legal and Moral Implications of Data Profiling

Data profiling in police decision-making during patrol gives rise to legal and moral issues. First of all, it raises privacy concerns. Privacy is an important human right

6 As of 1 July 2019, cycling with a mobile phone in your hand is prohibited in the Netherlands. This ban was created to increase traffic safety.

that is enshrined in Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and protected by European privacy legislation. Note that within the context of policing, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)⁷ is not applicable; however, its criminal justice equivalent⁸ is. Privacy is also an important moral value, especially in the context of information technology (Floridi, 2005). Data profiling puts tension on a principle that helps to protect privacy, namely data minimization. In the criminal justice context, data minimization entails that personal data shall be “adequate, relevant and not excessive in relation to the purposes for which they are processed.”⁹ This interpretation of the principle of data minimization is much less strict than the one found in the GDPR (de Hert & Sajfert, 2021), which requires that the processing of personal data is “limited to what is necessary in relation to the purposes for which they are processed.”¹⁰

Dutch police officers have access to police information, including personal data, only to the extent necessary for the performance of their duties.¹¹ There are supervision and control measures in place to prevent misuse.¹² However, there are no mechanisms in place to limit police officers’ interaction with data they have legally justified access to. The following observation illustrates that this can lead to such frequent interaction with personal data that it could be considered excessive. In the last paragraph we noted that police officers stopped and checked a car after they received an ANPR notification (Example 10). When the police officers looked up more information on the car, they established that the licence plate of the vehicle in question had been requested on 38 occasions and that the vehicle itself had been checked on 12 occasions within a span of 12 weeks. One police officer then remarked to the other that it seemed like they were “teasing” the driver of the vehicle. The other officer replied that “the car must be in the ANPR database for a reason.” Together, they decided to stop and check the car again. This was the only instance in which we observed police officers recognizing and acknowledging information on the frequency with which a vehicle has been stopped. Despite the information that it had been previously stopped and checked on numerous occasions, the police officers decided to stop the vehicle again and documented the stop in the police computer system.

The latter underscores a significant issue. Police officers not only have access to information contained in police computer systems but also generate information

7 REGULATION (EU) 2016/679 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation).

8 DIRECTIVE (EU) 2016/680 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data by competent authorities for the purposes of the prevention, investigation, detection or prosecution of criminal offences or the execution of criminal penalties, and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Council Framework Decision 2008/977/JHA. In the Netherlands this directive has been implemented into the Police Data Act (*Wet Politiegegevens*).

9 Art. 4 (1) c EU Directive 2016/680.

10 Art. 5 (1) c GDPR.

11 Art. 6a (2) Dutch Police Data Act.

12 For instance, Art. 32a of the Dutch Police Data Act imposes the requirement for logging.

by making notes in those systems. The following observation, which has not been discussed previously, shows that this can lead to the addition of information whose relevance may be disputed. We observed that police officers stopped a young male driver for exceeding the speed limit. When they accessed the police computer system, they found two mentions of stalking and an “appointment on location” (a point of attention or an indication of how police officers should act that has been noted in the computer system). This event was not on location and had nothing to do with stalking, but the officers decided that they should make a note about this stop as well (Example 9).

Data profiling also gives rise to issues with respect to fairness, which is an important value from both a legal point of view, considering, for example, the right to a fair trial as enshrined in Article 6 ECHR, and a moral point of view (Rawls, 1958). In the context of data profiling, a particular consequence of this value is of significance: procedural fairness, which can be defined as the fairness of the processes by which police officers make decisions and exercise their authority (Cram, 2024; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). It has two key dimensions, namely fair decision-making and respectful interactions. The application of procedural fairness by police officers during interactions with citizens contributes to the strengthening of police legitimacy (Cram, 2024). Data profiling leads to a notable pattern. Individuals not registered within police computer systems have an above-average chance of evading registration. Examples 1-5 describe instances in which police officers decided not to impose a fine on an individual, on the grounds that the individual in question did not have prior registrations in the police computer system, or at least not for the specific offence under consideration. Conversely, individuals with prior registrations are more likely to incur new fines, which results in re-registrations. Examples 6-8 describe instances where law enforcement officials decided to impose a fine on an individual (at least to a certain degree) due to the presence of prior registrations in the police computer system. The question arises as to whether that is fair decision-making.

However, it is important to note three significant caveats in this regard. First, police officers do not always verify whether an individual is registered in the police computer system. The following example from our observation study of police patrol work and information use illustrates this. Police officers encountered a woman riding a cargo bike with a young child in the front. The woman in question was using her smartphone while crossing the sidewalk and ignoring a red traffic light. The police officers followed her. Subsequently, they approached her and demanded that she stopped. An unofficial warning was issued. The computer system was not consulted (Stol et al., 2025). This example demonstrates that policing continues to exhibit an element of unpredictability that is inherently human. This observation does not disprove the existence of data profiling; rather, it demonstrates that policing remains dependent on human input, at least to a certain degree.

Second, it is not the case that police officers never issue fines to individuals not yet registered in their database. This can be illustrated by the following example from the aforementioned study. Two police officers observed a cyclist running a red light while preoccupied with her smartphone. A subsequent search of the police

computer system revealed no record of the individual in question. Despite this, the police officers proceeded with the issuance of a fine. One of them remarked that “once must be the first time” (Stol et al., 2025). It is, however, important to note that this incident did involve a serious traffic offence, although this offence is less severe than the one discussed before, which involved a young child, and no fine followed there.

Third, it is important to note that the issuance of a warning does not necessarily imply that the recipient is not registered; official warnings are also documented in the police computer system. The issuance of an official warning has been a possibility for some time; however, it was during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic that this instrument gained significant prominence in the Netherlands. The reason for this prominence was the introduction of substantial fines for individuals found to be in violation of the measures that had been implemented with the aim of preventing the transmission of the virus. Initially, the imposition of these fines also resulted in a criminal record, but this was later changed. At the time, many police officers believed that the imposition of such fines would be disproportionate unless individuals exhibited a pattern of non-compliance with the established measures. Consequently, they frequently opted to document an official warning within the system as opposed to imposing a fine (Stol et al., 2023).

Finally, data profiling raises issues not only regarding the values of privacy and fairness but also regarding the value of equality, a core value in political, legal and moral philosophy (Kymlicka, 2001). That is because data profiling may lead to *inequality* as it gives rise to intensified policing of a specific group, namely those individuals who have been previously registered. This could conflict with the prohibition of discrimination, which legally protects the value of equality and is laid down, for example, in Article 14 of the ECHR. For instance, this would be the case if data profiling were to repeat ethnic profiling. In this context, it is important to consider whether police officers utilize data as a primary factor in decision-making or merely as a means of legitimizing their decisions. In both cases, there is a risk that data profiling will reinforce existing biases. This is due to the common misperception that data is neutral. The collection of data is predicated on human decisions, which can create irregularities and biases in datasets. These biases may have negative effects on certain groups in society. As mentioned earlier, increased police patrols in specific neighbourhoods result in a greater number of observations, thereby generating more data concerning the residents of those neighbourhoods in police computer systems. Neighbourhoods frequently possess a distinctive characteristic. For instance, there may be a higher-than-average number of individuals receiving state assistance, or, under the influence of segregation, a high concentration of people belonging to the same ethnic group. Consequently, datasets may contain a higher-than-average percentage of data on individuals who share a specific profile or ethnic origin (Van Meeteren et al., 2023).

A substantial body of literature has emerged on this topic in the context of crime prediction (Joh, 2022; Saunders et al., 2016 and for the Dutch context specifically: Amnesty International, 2020; Çapkurt & Schuurmans, 2021) and recidivism (Braverman et al., 2016; Sachoulidou, 2023, and for the Dutch context specifically: Kulk & Van Deursen, 2020; Van Dijk, 2020, 2022). A fundamental

distinction between crime or recidivism prediction and data profiling lies in the utilization of algorithms. Algorithms have the capacity to create ethnic profiles in an invisible manner, primarily due to the opaque nature of their functionality, a phenomenon often referred to as the black box problem. The process of data profiling is typically executed by human operators. However, if they are unaware of the biases inherent in the datasets, they too may unknowingly encounter an ethnic profile and respond as if it were an objective reality.

7 Conclusion

This article is about data profiling. We encountered this phenomenon during an SSO study of police patrol work and information use, and we analysed it in this article.

Data profiling can be defined as the alignment of present police patrol actions to individual citizens' historical data profiles. It means that individuals without police records can expect less intensive police involvement compared to those with previous records. The phenomenon of data profiling thus occurs in a specific domain of police decision-making, namely the determination of whether to check a person or to impose a fine on an individual who has committed an offence. This phenomenon manifests predominantly in the context of traffic. It is sparked by the digitization of police work, which enables police officers to collect more and more data and process them effectively and efficiently in the context of performing their police duties.

In this article we reflect on data profiling from both a legal and a moral perspective. The legal and moral implications of data profiling revolve around three values: privacy, fairness and equality. Data profiling raises privacy concerns because police computer systems store a wide variety of data about individuals, thereby creating increasingly comprehensive data profiles about them. This may constitute a violation of the principle of data minimization. Furthermore, the amount of data contained in police computer systems is not fairly distributed among citizens. Individuals who are not included in the police database have an above-average chance of remaining out of the system. Those who have been previously registered are more likely to be re-registered. That is because individuals who have previously received checks or fines are more likely to receive subsequent checks or fines (and thus registrations). This can affect the procedural fairness of the processes by which police officers make decisions. It also raises questions about equality as it results in the intensified policing of a specific group, namely those individuals who have been previously registered. If this group contains a higher-than-average percentage of individuals who share a specific ethnic origin, data profiling may repeat ethnic profiling.

We wish to argue that further research is needed on data profiling. For example, the question arises as to whether police officers could be made more conscious of the amount and type of information they seek and store in police computer systems in order to protect privacy. The frequency with which they request information relating to citizens is likely attributable to two factors: the ease with which such

information can be obtained through smartphone applications and the absence of any mechanisms in place to limit its use. In comparison with the pre-digital era, when information was obtained through the control room, the accessibility of this information has increased exponentially. This prompts the question of whether a warning mechanism should be implemented in police computer systems. One option would be a clearly visible notification that, for instance, a licence plate has been requested multiple times within a specified period.

However, research into data profiling should not focus solely on how issues can be tackled in practice. Instead, it should also address more fundamental questions, such as the specific role that this phenomenon plays in police decision-making and its implications for the broader theme of how technology reshapes policing. Furthermore, more research is necessary to explore the ethical and legal values that are under pressure due to data profiling. It is important to ascertain whether there are other values at stake that have not been discussed in this article. It is equally important to determine how the pressure on these values can be reduced.

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Appendix: English Translations of Observation Notes Regarding Instances of Data Profiling

[Example 1]

Police officers drive on a priority road when a car does not give them, and other road users, the right of way. The officers stop the car. The driver has his navigation on. He tells that he did not understand the navigation directions and was, as a result, not paying attention to the traffic. One of the officers requests his driver's licence and scans it. The computer system indicates that the driver has not committed any previous traffic offences. Therefore, the officer decides to only give him an (unofficial) warning. The officer states: "everyone can make a mistake sometimes, it happens to me too."

[Example 2]

From their car, police officers see a cyclist approaching on a bike path. The cyclist has her cell phone in her hand and is preoccupied with it, apparently not seeing the police car because she drives past while still engaged with her phone. The officer behind the wheel turns the car around, drives behind her, and pulls up next to her. The officer in the passenger seat rolls down the window and asks her to pull over into a cove a little further down the road. She does. She seems a decent young woman, a college student, a little shy. The officer asks for her ID and receives it. The officer searches for her police records. The other officer checks the fine amount for cycling while holding a cell phone.¹³ It turns out to be 149 euros. The police officers do not find any police information on the woman. Nothing at all. They explain to her that it is police policy to take stricter action against holding cell phones while cycling. But since the woman has not previously come into contact with the police, and since the fine is a "hefty" 149 euros, they leave it at an (unofficial) warning. They also advise the woman to mount a cell phone holder on her handlebars. The woman says she won't cycle with her cell phone in hand again.

[Example 3]

Police officers think they see a scooter running a red light but are not 100 percent sure. They make the driver stop and scan his driver's licence into the system. They give him an (unofficial) warning. One of the officers says, "He didn't have anything crazy on his record either."

[Example 4]

Police officers see a car pass a no-entry sign three times. The car also drives across the bike lane. They stop the car. The driver says she is unfamiliar with the area and took a wrong turn. The officers scan her licence into the system. She gets an (unofficial) warning. One of the officers says, "If I haven't decided on a fine yet, I'll look at the information in the system. She had no records except for reports where she was the reporting party. If she had been previously fined for entering a closed zone, that would have been a reason for me to issue a fine."

13 As of 1 July 2019, cycling with a mobile phone in your hand is prohibited in the Netherlands. This ban was created to increase traffic safety.

[Example 5]

A car is driving where it is not allowed. The police officers stop the car. "Sorry, we're not familiar with this place," says the driver. One of the officers asks for his driver's licence, scans it into the system and gives an (unofficial) warning. Back in the car, the officer says, "That was an honourable citizen, he didn't have a single fine on his record." The other officer says, "You could have given him the first one." "Nope," the officer replies.

[Example 6]

Police officers see a scooter running a red light. The driver does not wear a helmet. The scooter turns right, and so do the police officers. The scooter stops and the driver approaches the officers. They ask for his driver's licence and scan it into the system. The driver says he is on his way to take a test. "What kind of test?" asks one of the officers. "Citizenship," says the man. The officer says he gets a fine for running a red light and driving without a helmet. Back in the car the officer says: "He is an acquaintance of ours, he appears a lot." The officer says it in a way that suggests it was time for (another) fine.

[Example 7]

A car enters a closed zone. Police officers check the licence plate in the computer system. Many previous registrations come up, including for nitrous oxide. They give the car a stop sign. One of the officers asks for the driver's licence and scans it into the system. The other officer looks through the rear window of the car with his flashlight to look for nitrous oxide. The police officers write a ticket for entering the closed zone.

[Example 8]

Police officers are on the lookout for a white Mercedes based on a report. They see such a car entering a closed zone, but this one has a different licence plate number. They stop the car. One of the officers inputs the licence plate number into the police computer system. The officer issues a fine for entering the closed zone. The other officer quickly checks the condition of the tyres, but it is difficult to assess because the car is low. Back in the patrol car, the officer tells that the system indicated that the driver had previous encounters with the police. The officer says: "Then you know what kind of person you are dealing with."

[Example 9]

Police officers see a car driving too fast. One of the officers looks up the licence plate number in the computer system but does not find details. The officers stop the car. The driver has to take a breath alcohol test. It is negative. The driver is a young man who says that he definitely did not drink because he is on his way back from his internship and that drinking at work is not allowed. Back in the car one of the officers checks the computer system again and finds two mentions of stalking, just three days ago, and an "appointment on location" (a point of attention or an indication of how police officers should act, that has been noted in the computer system). This event is not "on location" and has nothing to do with stalking, but the officers decide that they should record this stop as well.

[Example 10]

It is late afternoon. Police officers receive an ANPR (Automatic Number Plate Recognition) notification on their smartphones. It is about a car possibly being driven by someone with a suspended licence. The car in question is a black Golf registered in the name of a rental company. According to the ANPR information, it is travelling on the motorway. The officers wait on a ramp on the hard shoulder of the motorway to watch the passing cars. One of the officers suggests that the car may have gone the other way, onto

another motorway. The other officer looks up more information on the black Golf. The computer system shows that the licence plate has been requested 38 times and that the car has been checked 12 times in 12 weeks. The officer says that “that seems like teasing” [the driver of the vehicle]. The other officer replies: “but it’s in ANPR for a reason, isn’t it?” The black Golf does not pass, and the police officers enter the motorway to continue down the road. Then one of them suddenly sees the black Golf passing. They pull up behind it and run a stop sign. The black Golf pulls off the highway and into a parking lot.

There are three people in the car: two men in the front and a woman in the back. The driver is a Dutchman of colour, the passenger is a Belgian of colour, and the woman in the back has a Bulgarian passport.¹⁴ The rear window of the car has been taped with black tape in the seam. The driver says that Carglass [A Dutch automotive glass repair and replacement company] fixed it that way. One of the police officers scans the driver’s licences of the driver and the passenger in the front seat and takes a picture of the Greek ID card of the passenger in the backseat because it cannot be scanned. The other police officer talks to the driver. He says that he rented the car. His driver’s licence is OK, and the computer system does not give any details. The officer asks if the driver has a rental agreement. He does not have one. “Maybe in the trunk?” tries the officer. (The officer later explained that he would have liked to look in the trunk but did not see a way to do so). The driver calls the rental company and asks if they can send a picture of the rental agreement, which they do. The officer looks at the rental agreement on the driver’s smartphone and does not see irregularities. The driver starts to talk about ethnic profiling. The officer says that it is a pity that this is how the situation appears to him and explains that it was not visible from behind who was in the car and that there was an ANPR notification on the licence plate, that someone would regularly drive this car with a suspended licence. The officer advises against renting this car again. The police officers seem to have the feeling that something is wrong but fail to substantiate this with evidence. One of them records information about the check in the computer system and says that is “just to make a note.”

[Example 11]

It is after midnight. Police officers check the licence plate of a passing car. The registered owner has an Article 8 offence (DUI offence) on his record. The officers decide to pull the driver over for an alcohol check. They let him perform a breathalyser test. It is negative.

[Example 12]

A police officer sees a shared scooter with a driver not wearing a helmet and stops the scooter. The police officer asks for a driver’s licence and scans it into MEOS. The driver, a young man aged 25-30, does not immediately understand why he is being checked. The police officer points out the helmet requirement. The driver is surprised because there was no helmet with the scooter. The police officer says it is under the seat. The police officer says that the driver is no longer allowed to drive and asks where he is going. “To [upscale office area].” The police officer replies, “That’s only a ten-minute walk.” The police officer tells the driver that he will get away with a warning “because he has never had any problems before.”

14 In order to avoid recognition, the nationalities of the individuals involved have been changed.

Who Do I Know?

Cosa Nostra as an Informal Policing Force in a Sicilian City

Vincenzo Scalia*

Abstract

A cu'canusciu? – that is, “Who do I know?” – is the question many residents of a Sicilian city ask themselves when they are victimized by street crimes. The question about acquaintances concerns the possibility (for the victim) of approaching a member of Cosa Nostra to regain possession of private belongings such as cars and motorbikes, or, in the case of burglary, stolen jewels and other objects. Such a question also concerns those who want to avoid robberies or vandalism – for example, shopkeepers – and many other potential victims of street crimes. This article will discuss the role of Cosa Nostra as an informal but de facto policing actor within the urban context of the city I analysed. Following the path drawn by Norberto Bobbio, who defined the mafia as a vicarious extra-legal power, I will analyse how Cosa Nostra operates in the maintenance of public order, in particular in the control of street crime activities. Besides this, the ambiguous nature of nation-states in Europe, often originating in the enactment of extortive practices, will be considered.

Keywords: Criminology, Organized crime investigations, Police studies, Police-community relations, Policing policy, Sicily, Mafia, Policing, Public Value, State.

1 Introduction

A cu'canusciu? – that is, “Who do I know?” – is the question many residents of a Sicilian city ask themselves when they are victimized by street crimes. The question about acquaintances concerns the possibility (for the victim) of approaching a member of Cosa Nostra to regain possession of private belongings such as cars and motorbikes, or, in the case of burglary, stolen jewels and other objects. Such a question also concerns those who want to avoid robberies or vandalism – for example, shopkeepers – and many other potential victims of street crimes.

Unlike other contexts, especially in Northern Europe, where victims consider it normal to go directly to the police to report the damage they suffered, this is not the case of the city I will discuss. Many inhabitants of the Sicilian capital, despite many years of anti-mafia awareness (Santino, 2017), still deem Cosa Nostra a more efficient and effective actor than the police in dealing both with the prevention and

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with the repression of street crimes, due to the firm control of the territory by the criminal organization.

Such a widespread attitude concerns not only the marginal, roughest areas of the city but also the most affluent districts. Moreover, people do not perceive it as a legitimization of Cosa Nostra's power, but rather as functional behaviour aimed at solving a specific, temporary problem. The overwhelming majority of those who benefit from the help of Cosa Nostra continue to declare themselves pro-legality, perhaps by displaying pictures of the anti-mafia magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, who were bombed to death by Cosa Nostra in 1992 (Lodato, 2020).

Another aspect to be discussed concerns the attitude of the police towards this phenomenon. Rather than investigating it and prosecuting those citizens who dodge legality and turn to the mafia for help, officers presume that victims of street crimes will never ask them to solve their problems. The explanation for this attitude is that the police partly consider this behaviour by citizens as a *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1998), or as the manifestation of incorporated categories; they partly see Cosa Nostra as a sort of "partner," helping them keep street crime under control. The short-term aim of governing street crimes overshadows the long-term purpose of promoting, enhancing and legitimizing legality – that is, the prosecution of crime under the law and by legitimate State forces.

This article will discuss the role of Cosa Nostra as an informal but *de facto* policing actor within the metropolitan context of the city analysed here. Following the path drawn by Norberto Bobbio (1993), who defined the mafia as a vicarious extra-legal power, I will analyse how Cosa Nostra operates in the maintenance of public order, in particular in the control of street crime activities. In addition, the ambiguous nature of nation-states in Europe, often originating in the enactment of extortive practices (Tilly, 1982), will also be considered. After explaining the role of Cosa Nostra as an industry of violent protection (Catanzaro, 1987; Franchetti, 1876), I will outline the importance of the relational context in which the Sicilian mafia operates as a powerful lever to create public value (Bennington & Moore, 2014). To discuss this aspect more in depth, I will draw on my fieldwork conducted by interviewing police officers, citizens, economic actors and activists who operated in the analysed Sicilian city in 2025.

I will outline how the role of Cosa Nostra develops in two directions: the first is the despondent attitude of police forces, who accept the fact that citizens do not report to them the street crimes they are victims of. The second concerns the attitude of citizens, who, on the one hand, deem the State inefficient and, on the other, do not consider the negative role Cosa Nostra plays within Sicilian society. While they continue to be respectful of Falcone and Borsellino, they think Cosa Nostra helps in some situations, making a peculiar distinction between the bombing of magistrates and the daily dealing with "petty" aspects of daily life. By doing so, they neglect that the Sicilian mafia, while hampering the development of shared public values, wields its power through the use of violence and intimidation. This latter aspect raises the issue of administrative evil (Adams & Balfour, 2014), insofar as the efficiency and effectiveness of Cosa Nostra in managing public order overshadows, for the actors involved, the ethical issues concerning the fact that the

mafia is a criminal organization. Such attitudes, while solving in the short term the problems related to getting back one's own car or motorbike, create consent for the mafia that makes its reproduction and thriving in politics and society possible, thus leaving Sicily mired in intimidation and abuse.

I will conclude by arguing for the necessity of developing public value that makes it possible to overturn the cynical drift of administrative evil. This change is possible through the empowerment of activists operating in the anti-mafia domain, as well as through active political support. It is, however, important to consider how neoliberal changes might affect the public and create new openings for the power of Cosa Nostra, in the maintenance of public order also.

2 The Political Nature of Cosa Nostra: A Blurring Border with the State?

The academic discussion on organized crime, and more specifically on the Sicilian Cosa Nostra, has not shed clear light on the "political" role the criminal organization plays. This confusion is due partly to doubts some authors have about the role politics plays in shaping the Sicilian mafia, and partly because those scholars who have focused on the political role of the organization do not agree on its peculiarities. I am not referring to politics pertaining to the aspects of democratic legitimacy. My point is that Cosa Nostra plays a political role, as its paramilitary structure, its hierarchical organization, and that its relational resources (Santino, 2017) allow the control of a territory both through the use of force and by the creation of a certain degree of consent (Gramsci, 1973; Weber, 1971).

Diego Gambetta (1992) has influenced the analysis of the Sicilian mafia and, more broadly, of organized crime, with his definition of Cosa Nostra as an industry of private protection. His analysis, based on rational choice theory, has thus made possible the exclusion of the political aspects of organized crime activities. Many authors (Santino, 2005) have outlined the flaws in Gambetta's analysis, as his interpretation of the mafia relies on poor empirical material, while also reproducing some of the stereotypes about Sicily.

The weak side of Gambetta's analysis, in particular, concerns its insistence on private protection as a performance Cosa Nostra would provide under the regulation of the demand-supply mechanism underpinning the market economy. By this token, the actors who demand protection would do so spontaneously, thus making legitimate the request for payment issued by the *Mafioso*. Raimondo Catanzaro (1987) has emphasized the fact that Cosa Nostra protects from itself, as it forces actors to require its protection through the use of violence. Those actors who seek protection from the mafia have been intimidated and victimized by Cosa Nostra, either directly or indirectly. For this reason, Raimondo Catanzaro argues that Cosa Nostra is an industry of violent protection. Protection is not demanded but imposed on either single or collective actors through the use of violence, as well as by controlling the territory. The paramilitary organization of Cosa Nostra, as well as its social capital of strong and weak ties (Coleman, 1988), allows its members to both patrol and control the territory.

This latter aspect tells us more about the political nature of Cosa Nostra. Violence could not be enough if not coupled with a network of both close-knit and functional relations that legitimize the role of the mafia as a key actor regulating social and economic relations. The Sicilian mafia relies not only on its paramilitary force and organization but also on relationships and knowledge of the territory. Such singular know-how has often been exploited by the Italian State to its advantage, in order to both repress social movements (Renda, 1977; Santino, 2005) and keep crime rates low (Benigno, 2016). Although there has never been a formal agreement between Italian governments and Cosa Nostra that recognized the pivotal role the criminal organization has been playing as order keeper, its role as an extra-legal actor (Bobbio, 1993) has been widely recognized across 160 years of Italian history.

Unlike what Eric Hobsbawm (1962) argued, Cosa Nostra is not a degeneration of a primitive rebel group, but rather developed out of a combination of formal and informal aspects related to the administration of latifundia (Franchetti, 1876; Lupo, 2000; Santino, 2005). The rentiers of absentee landlords' estates could not have thrived without the network of vigilantes, foremen and administrators that coalesced to create Cosa Nostra. When the Savoy-ruled Kingdom of Sardinia annexed Sicily, attempts to get rid of this power structure were made but proved unsuccessful. Consequently, after the bloodshed of 1862 and 1866, when social protests in Sicily were repressed by the central government, it became more convenient to acknowledge that it was possible to rule Sicily by proxy, with the help of Cosa Nostra.

As the building of nation-states is the outcome of conflicts between organized paramilitary gangs (Tilly, 1982) and as tax-levying can be considered a sort of legalized extortion that the winners impose over the losers, the Italian State has chosen to find a *modus vivendi* with a potential competitor, trying to create some forms of coexistence. My point is that three different patterns of relations between the Italian State and Cosa Nostra have existed in these 160 years: coexistence, cooperation and conflict.

The first pattern is that of coexistence. At this stage, the two actors are aware of each other's existence and try not to interfere with one another's activities. For example, the Mafioso let the police investigate those serious crimes that do not involve any member of the organization; on the other hand, police forces let Cosa Nostra run their business and patrol the territory, insofar as these activities do not cause public disorder. This is one of the reasons why wars are rare and related to changing power relations inside the organization (Chinnici & Santino, 1989). The less public attention is drawn, the more successful the activities of the organization will be. Within the context of coexistence, the State will not have to deploy its apparatus to ascertain the crimes committed, and public opinion will not demand a fully-fledged repressive action.

The second pattern is that of cooperation. The State and Cosa Nostra, within this context, share either an interest or an aim and work together, either formally or informally, to reach their goal. In 1947, when 11 peasants, communist militants, were killed while celebrating May Day and the victory of the left in the first Sicilian elections, shots were fired both by the Italian police and by Cosa Nostra members,

as well as by the notorious Giuliano gang (Casarrubea, 2002). In this case, both actors shared the anti-communist stance that made them cooperate to maintain the existing power relations. The role Cosa Nostra played in helping the Allied landing in Sicily is still controversial, as historians have not yet found enough evidence in one direction or the other (Gaja, 1994; Lupo, 2024). It is certain, though, that the first administration appointed after the Nazi-fascists were chased out of Sicily was ruled by members of the mafia. Such anti-communist convergence between the State and the mafia might have sparked other forms of cooperation, like the lenient prosecution of the *Mafioso* (the first sentence by an Italian court that explicitly convicts members of organized crime dates to 1992). Another type of informal cooperation is that of controlling the territory so as to keep street crimes under control. The State can draw the advantage of saving resources, while Cosa Nostra will increase its reputation as an organization capable of keeping order and mediating between conflicts. This aspect will be discussed in depth in the following pages.

The final pattern is that of conflict. It is a pattern that develops in relation to the issue of legitimacy (Weber, 1971). For example, organized crime in Italy became a problem of national relevance only in 1982, when Cosa Nostra killed the *prefetto* (Crime Commissioner) of Palermo, Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa, who had earned a reputation as the main planner and enforcer of the anti-terrorist policies that had led to the defeat of the Red Brigades. The death of such a popular public officer enraged the Italian public, who demanded a reaction the State could not deny in order not to risk undermining its legitimacy. It was after the killing of Dalla Chiesa that the Italian Parliament passed both a bill that introduced the crime of Mafia Association in the penal law and another that introduced the confiscation of the *Mafioso's* assets. Cosa Nostra reacted by killing other magistrates and police officers, provoking a harsher reaction by the government, which reached its peak in 1986, when the main bosses were put on trial. Organized crime had invaded the sphere of legitimacy every state relies on, thus provoking a reaction.

Such dynamics, as normal as they could appear if limited to the domain of power relations, leave aside a crucial issue of contemporary democracies, that of ethics. I am not referring to the ethical state moulded like a totalitarian political entity (Arendt, 1999), but to that core of shared common values and aims that make up the fabric of democratic states. The respect for life, liberty, individual property, equality and difference of opinions clashes with the pattern of values the *Mafioso* promote and reproduce, as well as being deemed crucial for the correct functioning of contemporary society (Habermas, 1992). Threat, intimidation and arbitrary suppression of human lives are opposite to the pattern of democratic values. They promote and reproduce privileges, abuses and injustice, and obstruct the creation of public value, which is the end goal of creating an informal, educated and empowered public, capable of taking responsibility for difficult and painful decisions about common interests (Bennington & Moore, 2014). A disempowered, de-responsibilized community falls into the acceptance of administrative evil (Adams & Balfour, 2014), that is, a functional approach oriented towards efficiency and effectiveness that rules out ethics in favour of specific interests.

In the following sections, I will outline the overlap between administrative evil and lack of public values that allows the mafia to maintain its central role in the management of public order in this Sicilian city. Through interviews with privileged witnesses, such as police officers, citizens, shopkeepers and anti-mafia activists, the dimensions of cynicism, despondency, unawareness and opposition will be explored. The first category encompasses the attitude of those who see a “positive” role of Cosa Nostra in ruling the territory. Despondency indicates those who would like to do away with the predominance of the mafia but think it is impossible to make a change. Those who are unaware act in such a way as to distinguish between a good mafia, which solves public order problems, and a bad mafia, which kills and bombs magistrates alive. Opponents argue that the control of the territory by Cosa Nostra is a negative aspect of daily life in the city we discuss and mobilize to overturn the trend.

An important clarification is necessary: all the participants, in their views, might have a certain degree of cynicism and despondency, insofar as they describe and analyse the context. On the one hand, all of them agree that it would be necessary to do away with the mafia, while, on the other hand, not all of them think that it is possible to make a radical change. There is a split between the way it is and the way it should be, a conflict that shows how the role of Cosa Nostra in the maintenance of public order is not regarded as the best way to deal with these matters but rather as a sort of necessary evil to cope with. In the conclusion, I will argue that, despite a long-time acceptance of Cosa Nostra’s extra-legal rule of the territory, reality is fluid and dynamic and that although changes have occurred over the last thirty years, a massive effort is still necessary if we want to build public value and defeat the mafia.

3 Methodology

This work relies on the material collected during research I conducted in the Sicilian city I analysed in March 2025. I had the chance to exploit both my knowledge of territorial dynamics and my personal relationships to develop a qualitative research (Schwartz, 1987), based on in-depth interviews. Ten people agreed to participate in the research: two recently retired police officers, two citizens, two shopkeepers, two activists of the anti-mafia movement, a local journalist covering street crime matters and a trade union activist. I chose this group of people because, in addition to living in the city we analyse in this work and having a thorough knowledge of the social dynamics taking place there, some of them have worked in the creation of public value, while others have been victimized either by Cosa Nostra – being forced to demand violent protection – or by street criminals, prompting them to ask the mafia for help. All the participants provided a broad perspective on the phenomenon that is discussed in the following sections.

Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling strategy. Their selection was based both on their knowledge of the local context under analysis and on their direct experience with the mafia, thus providing in-depth insight into the research topic. Retired police officers were selected for two reasons. First, they

possess long-term knowledge of the ways in which Cosa Nostra operates, allowing for an account spanning a wide time frame and enabling them to outline transformations that have occurred over time. Second, interviewing active-duty police officers would not only have provided a more limited understanding of past dynamics but would also have required authorization from their superiors, potentially delaying the research process.

Before each interview was conducted, the participants were provided with a consent form guaranteeing their anonymity, which all agreed to sign. Interviews lasted approximately one hour, during which both Italian and Sicilian were alternately used.

I acknowledge a methodological limitation concerning crime rates. Although it would have been important to include data showing trends in street crime over previous years, it was not possible to obtain such figures, as doing so would have required submitting a formal request that would have delayed the research. I intend to address this limitation in future research.

4 Cynicism or Despondency? It Works

The idea that a victim of a crime must ask the mafia, rather than the police, to solve their problems is quite common in the city I analyse:

If your car or scooter is stolen, or burglars break into your flat and take something important to you, it is just pointless to go to the police. They don't know what to do or how to do it. You ask yourself the question you probably have heard since you were born: A cu'canusciu? (Who do I know?). A question that might be uncomfortable, because you don't know who you will be dealing with. But a positive answer to the question will spare you many troubles, such as having to buy a new car or scooter you are still paying for. [Journalist]

When asked why the police are supposed to be so ineffective, an ex-police officer explains:

Because nobody trusts us. Neither the victims, who may be disappointed by previous experiences of friends or relatives, nor other citizens. You start investigating, but who helps you? They are scared of the police, and in the districts street criminals come from, there is a sort of solidarity. They stole or burgled because they have no money and need to survive. So we just step aside. They just don't want us around, and it's less trouble and less hassle for us. [Policeman 1]

These two participants describe a reality that everyone takes for granted in order to reach positive outcomes: for victims, there are higher chances of recovering their stolen belongings; for police forces, one might find a paradox. Not investigating property crimes has two advantages: first, it spares stress from performing unusual activities. Second, it preserves the relationship between police forces and the

community. It seems that citizens – particularly those from the context the offenders come from – side with the latter rather than with the law. If police forces abstain from investigating and prosecuting property offenders, the risk of strained relations with the community is lower. Moreover, they are less at risk of becoming victims of Mafioso retaliation.

A similar view is shared by a shopkeeper, whose family shoe shop has been located in the city centre of the analysed city for almost a century:

This is what this city is like. If you want to work, you have to deal with these people; otherwise, there is no chance of survival, both physically and economically. My nephews have started running a business by themselves, and I strongly recommended they get to know someone. [Shopkeeper 1]

A citizen recounts what happened to him a few years ago:

I had built a house to live in. A week after I moved there, the house started being vandalized. It was the beginning of a month of nightmares. They punctured the wheels of my wife's car and sent, via mail, the chopped head of a goat. Until I bumped accidentally into a friend who told me: 'Who do you know there? That is the zone where zu Pippinu (imaginary name of the boss) rules. I can arrange a meeting with him if you like.' Two days later, I met zu Pippinu, who asked me why I didn't take care of my garden! He suggested I hire a gardener; he knew one he could recommend. Of course, I took up his suggestion, and all the vandalization and threats ceased. This is what this city is like! Things will never change around here! [Citizen 1]

Another citizen tells a similar story, in a more positive tone, also explaining the extent of the network and the way it works, as well as the rituals:

I usually go to work with a scooter. It's handy and simpler to park than a car. I usually park it under the block of flats I live in. One year ago I stepped out of the door and ... my scooter wasn't there. I had to catch a bus, then I asked myself: A cu'canusciu? I thought maybe my barber could help me. He knows everyone. I went in and asked. He suggested I go to that bar ... Bar X, you know where it is. The usual place where zu Nardu (imaginary name for a Mafioso) hangs out. I found him there, told him my barber had sent me, and invited him to a coffee. He replied: 'Come again tomorrow and I'll let you know.' The day after, he explained to me that a young guy, unemployed, with an ill mother, had stolen my scooter. If I paid 500 euros, I could have my scooter back. I didn't think twice and bought zu Nardu another coffee. A new scooter would have cost me 10 times as much. 500 euros and two coffees are nothing compared to that. I had my scooter back, and now I park it again under my flat. Ok, it's the mafia. But it works. [Citizen 2]

Privileged witnesses seem partly cynical, partly despondent. On the one hand, Cosa Nostra has been running this activity of de facto policing for centuries, and

people are used to dealing with such a scenario. On the other hand, all of them are aware that they are living under unusual conditions, as in one of the largest Italian cities, after all the dramatic events of the 1980s and 1990s, there should not be an informal police operating through intimidation and violence. The point is that none of the participants think that something can be done to turn the tide and make the rule of law prevail over the informal law of the It seems we are facing a disempowered community, which refuses to take up the responsibility of making uncomfortable decisions – that is the opposite of what public value should be. But are they cynical or despondent?

Another way to see it is that we are in a condition of perverted public value, or, as other authors argue (La Spina, 2005), social capital works in such a way as to produce and reproduce private interest at the expense of public goods. Fear caused by the intimidatory power of Cosa Nostra must be considered an element that discourages the production of public value. The community of the city whose case I discuss, after being forced by the mafia to withdraw into the private sphere, develops alternative survival strategies based on the idea that coping with the mafia is necessary if one wants to feel safe. A politician remembers what the situation was like between 1986 and 1987, when the bosses of Cosa Nostra were put on trial (AA.VV, 1991):

Until the mid-1980s, pickpocketing was the most serious street crime committed in this city – on the buses or at food markets. Robberies occurred in the roughest areas of the city, where most people avoided going. Ok, it was also because this city in the 1980s had no nightlife – the fear of being killed or witnessing homicide discouraged it – but street crimes were quite rare compared to other big cities. Then, since 1986, you started hearing about people being threatened with knives in the centre.

An ex-police officer endorses this scenario:

We hadn't dealt with much street crime until 1986. Then reports soared. Old ladies were pickpocketed as soon as they stepped out of the supermarket, students threatened with guns and forced to give away their sunglasses. Violent confrontations rose dramatically. I remember two groups of young people from well-off backgrounds – the ones we call baby gangs now. It was 1987. I was working at San Lorenzo at the time: they chased each other for a month with guns in their pockets! For a girlfriend, a member of one of the groups had stolen from another of the rival group! We had reports from neighbours about shootouts and fights, and could not believe it. It wouldn't have happened two years before. [Policeman 2]

Cosa Nostra was devoid of its bosses, thus slackening its grasp on the territory, as it was more difficult to patrol areas, check for uncomfortable situations and deal with them accordingly. Moreover, there was a subtle message the organization wanted the public to know: if the mafia is put on trial, the city will be increasingly unsafe. Since organized crime had become a leading topic in public discussion, and

an effort to delegitimize the mafia and enhance the values of legality was underway, Cosa Nostra tried to re-establish its hegemony within the social fabric of the city I am analysing.

Another aspect to highlight concerns a paradox: when the mafia does not provide public safety, the public turns to the police. It is a functional, utilitarian approach, based on the demand for a performance by those actors who can provide security. This attitude still survives, since Cosa Nostra is still active and its services are still requested, and deemed better than those provided by police forces. This way of behaving suggests that cynicism is more relevant than despondency, and repeating that things do not change is quite an instrumental claim, aimed at postponing or even rejecting any effort to create public value. Such behaviour is enacted using the strategies of administrative evil, in particular moral inversion (Adams & Balfour, 2014), through language. The lack of trust described by the police officer, and the statement that it is impossible to live and work in the city I have been analysing in this work without coping with Cosa Nostra, are more than a description of reality and are not dictated only by fear. They serve more as a justification of social order, aimed at its preservation (Adams & Balfour, 2014), since under the technical and rational aspects related to providing security, the mafia proves efficient and effective. Despite its bosses having been put on trial and awarded harsh sentences, no serious attempt to create public value, thus filling the vacuum caused by judicial actions, has been made. Consequently, Cosa Nostra, even if weakened in its international illegal trafficking and political relations, has always managed to rebuild its organizational structure and reaffirm its control of the territory.

A technical rationality seems to prevail both among former police officers and, especially, among the public. There is not, however, a uniform feeling or attitude about the way to approach the issue of security. Public awareness about Cosa Nostra and its negative role has been growing in recent years, although there is still a long way to go to expel the mafia from the local social fabric. In the next section, we will deal with unawareness and opposition.

5 It's Not the Same Thing ... Between Unawareness and Opposition

The survival of Cosa Nostra's cultural and political hegemony in the city I have analysed might surprise those who believed that anti-mafia public consciousness had grown after the 1992 bombings and the subsequent mass indignation, which sparked public demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of people (Ginsborg, 1998). Portraits and murals of Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino are spread across the city, and the enforcement of special detention measures against Mafiosi, such as the 41-bis regime (Scalia, 2023), is quite popular among the public.

Those were incredible days. We police officers protested in the cathedral against the President of the Republic, the Ministry of Interior and the Chief of Italian Police. And people were with us, cheering at our protest and helping us hold up

banners and insult such important persons. Sometimes I wonder if they were more angry with politicians than on our side. [Ex-Police Officer 2]

This is a complex city, hard to understand. Do you remember the 1993 local elections? L.O. was elected mayor with a landslide 75% of the votes. Four months later, there was a rightward shift, with Berlusconi gaining an overwhelming majority. And then in 2001, in the whole of Sicily, 100% of MPs elected were Berlusconi's MPs – 61-0, they said. Some of the elected were part of Mafioso networks. Almost everybody, though, praises Falcone and Borsellino in schools, at work, in public demonstrations. Hypocrisy? Cynicism? I would say it's a lack of political conscience. Or maybe it just has to grow. But how long will it take to grow completely? [Former Communist MP]

Both participants highlight different aspects, yet share a political dimension, albeit analysed differently. Whereas the ex-police officer views the 1992 demonstrations as a protest against politicians – so that the support of police by demonstrators could be considered instrumental and temporary – the ex-MP emphasizes the need for political awareness that could lead to the production of public value. Both aspects are related: spontaneous mass mobilizations are inspired by fear, indignation and rage, whereas the development of a more articulated political awareness requires a longer path. Moreover, the process by which public consciousness grows does not necessarily exclude the instrumental, rational, utilitarian aspects of action. Finally, the *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1998) – those incorporated categories that orient both the understanding of reality and public behaviour – continues to structure daily practices (Schütz, 1982). The patrol of the territory by Cosa Nostra is thus accepted as routine.

Unawareness plays a central role in these dynamics. This relates to the concept of *unaware evil* as explained by Adams and Balfour (2014), that is, behaviour based on compartmentalization and diffused responsibilities, preventing the growth of public awareness. As a shopkeeper argues:

It's not Totò Riina I go to talk to if I want the robbery I was a victim of sorted. Riina is in jail, along with his pals. There will be no more bombings. Probably they wear a gun, they say threatening sentences, but it's not the same thing as bombing and killing around ... c'mon, that time is over, fortunately. [Shopkeeper 2]

These answers might mislead the reader to think of a warped, contradictory attitude: on the one hand, they support the arrest and conviction of mafia bosses, while, on the other hand, they find it convenient to allow Cosa Nostra to act as an informal police force. This, however, is a matter of language (Adams & Balfour, 2014), the use of linguistic and cognitive artefacts to operate a moral inversion, making administrative evil appear as a matter of fact. In this case, moral inversion is developed by distinguishing between a *bad mafia* that kills and bombs and a *good mafia* that solves conflicts in the urban context I am discussing.

This long-standing attitude draws on an old *habitus*, as the former Communist MP recalls:

Do you remember 40 years ago? You talked to people about the , and they replied: ‘This new is cruel, cynical and ruthless. It is not like the old : once, the Mafioso never killed children and helped the poor.’ They forgot all the oppression of the latifundia, as well as the fact that the new stemmed from the old mafia. [Ex-Communist MP]

There is also an element related to securitarianism (Garland, 2003) – the overemphasis on individual security – and the consequent growth of moral panic (Cohen, 1971). As an anti-mafia activist explains:

The explosion of the bomb in Via D’Amelio – when magistrate P.B. was killed – was heard across the city. People were scared and wondered: what if myself, my husband or my son were near the explosion? Same story with killings. A bullet, if shot wrongly, can kill someone walking nearby. Moreover, throughout the 1980s, people were forced to stay home after 9 pm because of a sort of Mafioso curfew. They wanted all this to end. And they think now that, since the Corleonesi are in jail, all this is over – and indeed, it is. But they don’t realize that if they ask help from the , they can fuel a new generation of ruthless Mafiosi. [Anti-Mafia Activist]

The scenario described suggests a kind of *inverted securitarianism*: a demand for security that diverges from traditional concerns. While in major European and American cities, street crimes worry the public (Simon, 2007), the public of this city makes a selective distinction. Police forces and magistrates are expected to repress crimes deemed most threatening, such as homicides, bombings and shootouts, whereas street crimes are considered manageable – even though these are often dealt with via intermediaries who are themselves Mafiosi.

This attitude can be partially explained by the historical violence of the mafia, coupled with a widely held belief that there is a *bad* and a *good* mafia:

Bombs? This is a past story. They cut the nails of the most heinous beasts; now this city is a safe city again. Had it not been for the Corleonesi, things would have run smoothly. Fortunately, they were caught and sentenced for ruining people and Sicily’s image. [Citizen 1]

Mafia? Mafia is everywhere. Look at Milan or America. But they’ve always picked on us in Sicily. Do you think those who run small businesses are able to prepare a bomb or kill someone in cold blood? Come on! It takes a good deal of imagination. This city is safe again; this is what matters. The Corleonesi are out of the way. [Citizen 2]

Both citizens illustrate a common reasoning: first, they distinguish the Corleonesi from the rest of Cosa Nostra. The problem is not the mafia itself but the existence of a particularly ruthless faction that has been prosecuted. Second, a technical-rational approach prevails: security is paramount, and what matters is that, thanks in part to Cosa Nostra, the goal has been achieved. Third, they attempt to avoid confronting the larger issue.

This combination of cynicism, victimism and incorporated categories (Adams & Balfour, 2014) enables the organization of administrative evil and its legitimization. The distinction between a good and a bad mafia, though false, serves as an ideological tool for those who turn a blind eye to Cosa Nostra's ongoing presence and central role in the urban context I am discussing in this article.

Yet these findings should not suggest total pessimism. As an activist notes:

Consider that we started late. 43 years ago, when Dalla Chiesa was killed, the mayor of this city denied that organised crime existed. Now it's impossible to become mayor if you don't declare yourself for the rule of law and against the mafia. [Activist 1]

Many civil society organizations have recently supported citizens and entrepreneurs willing to report extortions, also providing legal assistance, and their initiatives have been successful.

Maybe we should find a way to create an association to discourage citizens from seeking Mafioso help. I am sure we will work something out. [Activist 2]

Reports to the police have increased in recent years, attributed to school programmes promoting respect for the law and to the weakening of Cosa Nostra.

It's a matter of time. [Ex-Police Officer 1]

Optimism characterizes these privileged witnesses. While improvements within the city are evident, Cosa Nostra continues to provide informal policing services appreciated by a significant part of the population. Social change rarely follows a linear path – but time is on our side.

6 Conclusions

This work has focused on the way Cosa Nostra in a Sicilian city continues to provide informal policing through its territorial control, both because of its paramilitary organization and because of the citizens' acceptance of the status quo, as well as the despondent attitude of police forces. I have outlined how the reproduction of this hegemonic role is possible due to the lack of public value, as individual interests prevail over collectively shared ideas of the public good. Throughout the article, I have tried to stress that it is important, for a police force to work both efficiently and effectively, that a shared network of values within society supports its work. The lack of such a consensual dimension creates a gap between the State and society and makes the latter accept the intermediation of informal, illegal paramilitary structures to ensure the enforcement of public order. The assessment and consideration of paramilitary groups that provide policing functions constitute an important aspect for police scholars to consider.

The paramilitary organization of Cosa Nostra differs from that found in other contexts. In Northern Ireland, for example, the IRA's control of the territory is a consequence of political conflict, much like the case of taxi associations in South Africa. Other experiences, such as the Brazilian paramilitary squads controlling the favelas, operate as underground parallel power structures, more deeply rooted in the social inequalities that characterize Brazil. Cosa Nostra functions as a de facto political and economic power, mediating between Sicilian politics, the economy and society, while maintaining close ties with the upper ranks of Sicilian social structures.

I have also shown how the deficit of public value produces ideological justifications that operate through narrative and thought structures, legitimizing administrative evil by distinguishing a good mafia from a bad . On the other hand, some participants noted that anti-mafia public awareness is a recent phenomenon that has grown in recent years. This allows a cautiously optimistic conclusion, though with some caveats.

First, as explained, Cosa Nostra developed alongside modern capitalism and thrived under unequal social relations and deep economic inequalities. Defeating the mafia is possible only if Sicily achieves economic development – a goal currently difficult to attain. Moreover, public expenditure cuts leave room for the growth of private security groups and vigilantism. Cosa Nostra can leverage its paramilitary structure, territorial control and network of consent rooted in deep social relations. It would be easy for Mafiosi to offer their services and for private actors to exploit them. The provision of police services by the mafia as a private actor could be facilitated by its material, symbolic and relational capital, consolidated over time. This, in turn, reinforces the grassroots embeddedness of Cosa Nostra in society and contributes to the consolidation of its position within politics and the economy. The privatization of a strategic public service such as policing would therefore strengthen the mafia's grip over Sicilian society.

Thus, economic development must necessarily be accompanied by the growth of public value. While economic development may occur, it should entail an improvement in basic living conditions so as to reduce the gap caused by social inequalities, thereby facilitating the creation of close-knit social relations that make it easier for a shared web of values to emerge and be reinforced. Even if economic growth occurs, cultivating public value remains the key task; otherwise, more and more people will continue asking: *A cu'canusciu?*

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BOOK REVIEW

Book review: Plural Policing, Security and the COVID Crisis: Comparative European Perspectives

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Book review: Plural Policing, Security and the COVID Crisis: Comparative European Perspectives (Edited by Monica Den Boer, Eric Bervoets & Linda Hak)

Who does not remember the COVID-19 pandemic and the unusual measures introduced to fight it: not being able to go to work or school but constantly working from home, being quarantined if you were infected by the virus, social distancing and facemasks to prevent the virus from spreading, bans of assemblies and curfews, and at its most severe: complete lockdowns. The pandemic had a significant impact on our social lives and restricted most people to the confinement of their homes. This, however, was not the case for the police as police officers were a main actor in enforcing the regulations imposed during the pandemic. Without proper guidance, they had to respond to breaches of the abovementioned rules. The impact on police work and, more broadly, on crime, was unseen. Reflecting on this impact is of the utmost importance to get a grip on how the pandemic unfolded and how governments responded to this crisis. Although a lot has been published by now on the COVID-19 pandemic, *Plural Policing, Security and the COVID Crisis: Comparative European Perspectives*, edited by Monica Den Boer, Eric Bervoets and Linda Hak, combines perspectives from different European countries to reflect on the (policing of the) COVID-19 crisis and is – precisely because of its comparative approach between countries – an addition to the literature on this topic.

The book consists of six chapters: an introduction written by the editors, and five chapters related to different (sets of) countries: the Netherlands (written by Eric Bervoets, Jolijn Broekhuizen, Henk Ferwerda and Wouter Landman); Spain, France and Greece (written by Christian Mouhanna, Anastassia Tsoukala and Gemma Ubasart-González); Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia (written by Branko Lobnikar, László Christian, József Balla, Ádám Kalmár, Irena Cajner Mraović, Krunoslav Borovec and Andrej Sotlar); Germany (written by Hartmut Aden); and the United Kingdom (written by Saskia Hufnagel, Rudi Fortson, Clive Walker and Megan O'Neill). The individual chapters present interesting insights into how these countries approached the pandemic. Why precisely these countries were included is, however, rather unclear. Although some authors briefly try to explain why comparing specific countries is interesting, they do not do so convincingly. In chapter four, for instance, it is argued that *'These former socialist countries,*

considering all the diversity of this geographical area, can be taken as an example to study the development of (plural) policing in Central and Eastern Europe' (p. 108). But why then are Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia good examples to study? Why not include other countries as well? You would expect the volume editors to reflect on this in the introduction, but an argumentation is absent. The editors mention that authors from different European countries and regions are brought together to compare patterns and trends on policing and security during the pandemic, but they do not explain why and how these countries were chosen and why they are good examples for the broader European context. Such an argumentation is necessary to fully grasp the importance of the book and the inclusion of these specific countries as examples.

Regardless of the unclarity about the selection of countries included in the book, the book does a great job of demonstrating the similar difficulties many of these countries have experienced. Unsurprisingly, most (if not all) countries were unprepared for a crisis of this scale. In Germany, for instance, this ill-preparedness resulted in disruptions of supply chains and a lack of medical equipment. Most countries also lacked essential information on effective measures to prevent the spread of the virus and how to police the pandemic. The lack of reliable and up-to-date information challenged the coordination of the fight against the pandemic. In the Netherlands, the CoroPol Monitor was developed to collect international open source data (e.g. news items and research reports) that allowed to predict crime trends and was useful to inform police practices. Based on the CoroPol Monitor, different trends and patterns in types of crime were found: decreases in domestic burglaries, shoplifting and theft, a strong increase in various forms of cybercrime, and the opportunities to monetise crime targeting scarce goods such as medical items, (illegal) medicines, food and hygiene products. Pandemic-related fraud also came to the fore (e.g. about facemasks and other protective medical equipment). It was furthermore found that the adaptive capacity of organised crime was rather strong as drug trafficking, for instance, was not hindered by the pandemic in the Netherlands.

As many authors in this book explain, the pandemic was approached from a security perspective. As a means of securing society, some countries introduced a state of alarm (e.g. Spain) or state of health emergency (e.g. France). France had initially underestimated the seriousness of the pandemic, but later resorted to very harsh measures that restricted civil liberties. The French parliament passed a law creating a state of health emergency that gave the government '*exceptional powers to make decisions in all areas, ranging from economic measures to civil liberties*' (p. 78). In Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia, parliaments passed special legislation to respond to the pandemic, including the allocation of new powers and tasks to the police. In the United Kingdom (UK), the Coronavirus Act 2020 was passed, which had only been subjected to brief parliamentary debates. Germany never declared a state of emergency as the German constitution does not allow to declare a state of emergency during a pandemic. Greece also never declared a state of emergency, but also restricted civil rights and liberties. Regardless of the specific situation in each country, what is clear throughout the book is that numerous laws and regulations were introduced that restricted people's private lives and had an enormous impact

on their privacy. Several behaviours were criminalised; behaviours that were not illegal before the pandemic. And many of these measures had been imposed without proper parliamentary or public debate. This was, however, not the case in all countries. In Slovenia, for instance, the Constitutional Court did often refer the government to the legislative procedure in the Parliament. A proposal about the tracking of citizens in quarantine through the locations of their mobile devices (and entering their homes without a court order) was not accepted, and was modified after negative reactions from the public, among others. In Germany, too, attention was given to citizens' right to privacy and data protection in relation to the data collected by contact tracing apps, limiting the use of such data for policing purposes. As such, countries differed in how they approached regulating the pandemic, where some countries introduced (restrictive) regulations rather quickly and without proper discussion, whereas other countries did (try to) follow the normal legislative procedure to police the pandemic.

A worrying trend during the pandemic was the lack of coordination that prevailed in most countries.¹ Police agencies were assigned the task of enforcing the rules, but they were given a lot of discretion to decide who to target and which rules to prioritise and enforce (and thus also which regulations *not* to enforce), and *how* to enforce them. The French police forces resorted to street controls and surveillance measures. In the Netherlands, citizens were usually given a warning first, and were only fined if they still failed to comply with the rules. In the UK, the '4 Es' framework was announced: Engagement, Explanation and Encouragement to comply with the law as main responses, Enforcement by means of coercive powers and charges as a last resort. Overall, according to the authors of chapter six, the UK tried to avoid the over-enforcement of vague rules and focused on an early vaccination roll-out, thereby focusing more on the protection of citizens than punishing those citizens that did not comply with the regulations – regulations that were not always clear and could be interpreted differently. The authors explain: *'In the sphere of policing, an inadequate legislative framework may increase the risk of arbitrary and inconsistent application of the law and consequent legal challenges. If, for example, definitions included in the law are unclear, it is more difficult for law enforcement officers to enforce prohibitions with consistency.'* (p. 162). In some countries, the great amount of discretion resulted in instances of police mistreatment (e.g. Spain) and abuses (e.g. France), the unlawful use of force and police brutality (Greece). An interesting example comes from the UK, where some police forces used drones to monitor gatherings taking place outside. One police force used such drone surveillance, which resulted in 'lockdown shaming' of those individuals that were filmed by the drones during outside gatherings.

Although many citizens were (initially) willing to obey the – unclear, rapidly changing and sometimes odd – anti-COVID-19 measures, several countries experienced resistance toward the pandemic regulations at some point. In Greece, the initially broad consensus among citizens decreased during the second national lockdown. In the Netherlands, there was a resistant minority that became quite

1 An exception is Croatia, which established a temporary National Corona Police Headquarters, responsible for the coordination and implementation of police measures and activities.

difficult for the police to handle. Especially Dutch adolescents had difficulties accepting the measures because they felt like the impact on their health was rather small. Different countries report demonstrations against pandemic containment measures (e.g. Croatia, Slovenia), high degrees of distrust (e.g. France) and a decline in trust in the police (e.g. Slovenia). Still, there were also countries where trust in the police initially increased (e.g. the Netherlands) and demonstrations against the COVID-19 regulations were almost non-existent (e.g. Hungary). In Spain, the support for the measures was rather high and citizen dissatisfaction relatively low. This demonstrates that citizens' reactions to the measures differed extensively, which made it difficult for governments to anticipate the (dis)trust certain measures may evoke for the police and the broader government. This might also depend on the duration of the pandemic situation, as acceptance of the rules generally seemed to decline after a while.

Throughout the book, different actors are discussed that play a certain part in policing the pandemic. Some main examples – besides the police – are private security officers and citizens themselves. The latter are believed to perform 'self-policing' by complying with the rules, for instance by wearing facemasks, adhering to social distancing rules and working from home whenever possible. Nevertheless, all chapters clearly clarify the essential role of the public police in policing the pandemic by enforcing the COVID-19 regulations. As the Dutch authors in chapter two conclude: *'Our data show that the actual implementation was much less "plural" than expected during the initial stages of the pandemic.'* (p. 59). As police officers did not always know how to enforce the law and could not identify and control all potential breaches of the measures, *plural policing* is necessary to efficiently tackle crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the public police should be just one of the actors involved in approaching (future) pandemics or other crises situations.

As is clear from the discussion above, the book introduces very relevant insights into the policing of the pandemic. Unfortunately, there is no concluding chapter that brings together the insights of the different chapters and reflects on the broader trends. This is a major drawback considering the comparative approach of the book. In the introduction, it is stated that *'this book makes it possible to learn from one another and to share lessons, principally to be better prepared for a new pandemic that will loom on our horizon'* (p.2), but such learning would be facilitated if the editors of the book made a thorough comparison of the similarities and differences between the countries included in the book. Brief reflections are provided in the introduction, but these are insufficient for a comparative book as this one.

The lack of a conclusion and unclear selection of countries were already mentioned, but more generally, an important disadvantage is that the precise aim of the book is unclear. The introductory chapter sets the scene, and clarifies that the main focus of the book is to explore how policing and security have been affected by the pandemic, but this is a rather broad aim and does not clearly specify what the book is about. What adds to the confusion about the precise aim of the book is that the authors mention that the comparison was performed on the basis of common central questions, but what these questions are is nowhere mentioned

explicitly. The writing project was also supported by two interactive online workshops for all authors, but what these workshops entailed and how they were organised remains unclear. In summary, the main aim of the book is not completely clear and should have been explicit from the outset of the book.

Perhaps as a result of this, all chapters have a somewhat different focus. Chapter two, for instance, greatly focuses on crime trends during the pandemic, based on the CoroPol Monitor. Such crime trends are hardly discussed in the following chapters. In chapter three, the regional elections in Spain are discussed, as well as an interesting part on how the Greek government gave twenty million euros to media outlets to broadcast specific public health messages. This resulted in controversy when it was found that critical media outlets were excluded or given only a (disproportionately) small share of the advertising. Money had even been given to non-existing news websites. Although these parts are interesting to understand how the government reacted to the pandemic, they are all rather specific to the country in question. Therefore, the common thread between the chapters is sometimes unclear, as the general topic – (plural) policing of the pandemic – is approached differently by the authors. Combined with the lack of clarity about the general aim of the book in the introduction, it is difficult for the reader to fully understand the importance of the book, and why and how it was developed.

Despite the aforementioned drawbacks, the book *Plural Policing, Security and the COVID Crisis: Comparative European Perspectives* discusses a highly relevant (and at the point of publishing under-researched) topic and provides lots of insights on how different countries approached the situation in the beginning stages of the pandemic. The pandemic presented countries with a peculiar situation that challenged policing and public health more generally in unique ways. Studying the approach of the COVID-19 pandemic provides essential insights for both scientific research and practice. An update of the book, with research on how policing evolved during the pandemic, how police officers applied their discretion, the impact of the governments' responses on citizens' trust in the police and in the government more broadly, and lessons learned, would be of added value. Should such a book be considered, the comparative approach could be better implemented, focusing on detailed comparisons between (rigorously selected) countries. Overall, this book provides essential insights into the policing of the COVID-19 pandemic, but a lot remains to be studied in relation to the unique circumstances with which public and private actors were confronted when policing this pandemic.