

Why People Hate Cops

an essay by Derrick Jensen

[Insurgent American](#) is happy to publish Derrick Jensen's latest reflection on the relationship between the people who work for the state: those of us who support it with obedience and taxes, and those who are employed by the state to exercise its "legal monopoly on violence."

I'm scared to write this essay, scared to have it published, scared it will be read by police officers or customs agents, scared that the next time I'm stopped for some traffic violation or the next time I try to cross a border, some police officer or customs agent will remember this article, and will make me pay for having written it.

I know what at least some police do to those they don't like. I know what at least some police do to those who question their authority. I know what at least some police do with the power they have over our lives. This is what makes me afraid.

#

Pretend you see a cop. Pretend you're doing nothing illegal. Pretend you don't need police protection. You're minding your own business, and BAM, you see a cop. What do you feel? Right then. In your gut. On a scale from minus five (fear or loathing) to zero (nothing) to plus five (warmth, comfort, safety).

For more than a decade I've asked hundreds or even thousands of people this question, and the long-term average is about minus three. The only profession I know that consistently rates worse is parking patrol, at a near unanimous minus five. Politicians and CEOs rate about the same as police. In the cases of politicians, CEOs, and parking patrol, the hostility is almost entirely loathing, and not much fear. In the case of police, it's both loathing and fear, in roughly equal measures.

This average doesn't come about merely because my friends are anti-authoritarian. I've asked people of all ages, all economic classes, all political and religious beliefs. Even many of the police I've asked don't have good feelings when they see police they don't know. Nearly all of the police I've talked to feel the same about FBI agents as normal people do about police officers.

In other words, this abysmal public perception of police officers doesn't come from a skewed sample. And if the people I've asked in any way resemble a cross-section of people in the United States and Canada, this means a good portion of the people in these two countries viscerally hate and/or fear the police.

Why is that? What are the personal and social implications?

Cop shows, politicians, corporate media, and many cops tell us more or less incessantly that the police are heroes here to protect us. We hear also that hatred or fear of police is misplaced, and that police are an easy target onto whom otherwise powerless people too often blame their misery. I just got a very intelligent email from a cop commenting on a sentence from my book *Endgame*. The sentence was "A primary purpose of the police is to enforce the delusions of those with lots of pieces of green paper." He wrote, "I agree for the most part. Yes, police are protecting the status quo, but they also protect poor people from gangs, thugs, and sociopaths who prey on people in lower socio-economic situations."

I responded, "I don't disagree with you. I think most of what individual policemen and policewomen do is exactly what you're saying. That's a hugely important function. And if that was all that police did I don't think we'd be

having this conversation.”

I continued, “I used to teach creative writing at Pelican Bay, which is a supermax. Some of my students were, I really think, okay guys who never caught a break. Some of them were okay guys who would be great neighbors if you kept them off drugs. But some of them, honestly, were sociopaths who need to be removed from society to protect others (I believe, as I say in *The Culture of Make Believe*, that there are things people can do that cause them to be removed from society—whether that removal is through segregating or killing them—but it’s also clear to me that the current system of so-called justice is deeply racist and classist: a not-very funny joke I tell in that book consists of two riddles: ‘Q: What do you get when you combine a long drug habit, a quick temper, and a gun? A: Two life terms for murder, earliest release date 2026. Now, Q: What do you get when you combine a large corporation, two nation states, 40 tons of poison, and at least 10,000 dead human beings? A: Retirement with full pay and benefits (Warren Anderson, CEO of Union Carbide, culpable for Bhopal’)). In no way do I romanticize ‘lawbreakers.’ Just as in other categories of people, some are good, some are mediocre, and some are scum. And to the degree that police or anyone else protect me or those I love from sociopaths, I’m grateful.

“But police also break strikes and protect politicians, CEOs, and WTO representatives who sell out the people (and who, even from a straight-up, patriotic, ninth-grade civics perspective, are arguably committing treason, and should be hanged for their crimes). Why are police never sent in to force capitalists to come to terms with strikers? That’s a huge problem (and not a rhetorical question). The sociopaths the police arrest are for the most part sociopaths with no power, and especially with no political power. The sociopaths who cause the most harm are almost never arrested, and are certainly never imprisoned or otherwise punished commensurate with the harm they cause, in great measure because these most dangerous sociopaths run governments and corporations, with the direct assistance of the police. That’s another huge problem (or more accurately the same huge problem, restated).”

I continued, “I’ve known and been friends with really good policemen and policewomen. I was good friends with a parole officer in Spokane, who always said the big difference between him and the people whose parole he oversaw was that he grew up before he got caught doing stupid shit.

“My problem is not with police protecting individuals from harm by anti-social types. My problem is with police who blindly support the status quo, and who protect corporations which are killing the planet, killing communities, killing all of us. Why aren’t CEOs arrested? Why aren’t CEOs executed for murder? It is insane and despicable that they are not. That is my problem with police.

“And of course that doesn’t just apply to the police. I also object to writers who blindly support the status quo: I hate them, I really do, especially as a writer myself. I object to scientists who blindly support the status quo. I object to technicians who blindly support the status quo. I object to judges who blindly support the status quo. And so on.”

He also wrote, “Perhaps besides instigating and enabling an oppressive system one of the primary purposes of police is to serve as scapegoats, something to waste your energy on hating while the true perpetrators of misery continue to spread a corrosive civilization unscathed.”

He’s got a point. Cops have far less power than CEOs and politicians, and by themselves cause far less damage. But they’re still functionally separate parts of the same machine, ultimately serving the same ends. And part of the reason that cops are often more openly hated than CEOs and politicians is that police more visibly and directly have power over us than do CEOs and politicians—CEOs and politicians don’t normally walk around with guns, tasers, and nightsticks telling us what we may and may not do. Another way to say this is that CEOs and politicians wreak their damage indirectly, from a distance. CEOs and politicians don’t generally have the power to personally beat or arrest you. CEOs and politicians almost never harm you personally. Even the CEOs of the most polluting companies don’t personally poison you: they merely run these corporations,

and then the activities of these corporations poison the air you breathe, the water you drink, the food you eat. And ultimately these activities poison you. But the CEOs don't poison you directly (much like a shotcaller for a criminal organization—or rather, for a different sort of criminal organization—who never bloodies his own hands, no matter how many deaths he orders). Instead CEOs pay politicians to pass laws making it legal for these corporations to poison the air, the water, the food, and you. Then when those being poisoned protest, police are sent to protect those who are poisoning us all. Given that CEOs and politicians hide behind the police—yet another way to say this is that the police do their dirty work; and yet one more way to say this is that police are the public face for the whole structure of state repression, but not where the real power lies—it's no wonder that cops sometimes feel scapegoated for the activities of those they protect. I'm not, of course, saying that cops share no culpability; they could choose to not protect (but instead to bring to justice) the large-scale sociopaths who are poisoning us (and them, for that matter), but they do not do this.

I ended my response to his letter with: “The question becomes: if you and I agree on at least some of who are the true perpetrators of misery, what do we do about that? How do we work together?”

I never heard back, which in a sense didn't surprise me: his note felt more like a defense of police with an acknowledgment of the obvious (that they support the status quo) than a real effort to reach out to form an alliance to stop the “true perpetrators of misery.”

All of this political analysis is important, but it neither explains nor deeply explores the visceral response of so many people to the police. Sure, I can philosophically hate them for protecting capitalists and for bashing the heads of protesters, and sure, I can philosophically hate them for what my (mainly but not exclusively non-white) friends have told me about how they've been treated, but none of it explains why my stomach knots up when I see a cop.

Now, finally, I have an answer. It's a testament to the color of my skin that it took me this long to understand why I feel the way I do. I've known many African-Americans, Chicanos and Chicanas, Filipinos, Vietnamese, and so on who merely because of the color of their skin learned this lesson far more dramatically and painfully than I. I've known many very financially poor people who have learned this lesson more quickly and at greater loss than I. But I learned it. I finally learned it.

Oh sure, I've encountered asshole cops on power trips before. I don't know anyone who hasn't. Like the time I rolled through a stop sign at a lonely country intersection in the middle of the night, with only one set of headlights visible in any direction, and those just barely, only to have that car follow me for miles and finally flash red and blue lights and give me a ticket. Or the guards at the prison who yelled at me just like they yelled at prisoners (and like I'm guessing they yell at their wives and children). Or the airport security officer who stuck her hand down my pants, and when I complained told me that if I really wanted to I could tell it to the nearby cops—clearly her friends—and go ahead and miss my flight. Or dozens of other stories like that. I've known people who've been beaten or killed by cops. Worse (if possible), I know very few people who don't have story after story of police using their power to intimidate, humiliate, terrorize, threaten, or beat them.

Here is my most recent story, a story in many ways not extreme at all. But for me, this is the moment when I finally understood why so many people hate cops.

#

First the background. I was returning from Canada. The trip had been terrible in almost every way, starting with my flight out of Crescent City, which was delayed long enough that I missed my connection. Twenty-three hours later I finally arrived in Montreal. Unfortunately, my luggage never did.

That night I gave a talk. The audience was great (except one guy in the third row who kept shouting incomprehensible things like “Do you know Guy?” and “Talk about Africa”: after a few of these comments I started looking around to see if Eva Marie Saint was squirming uncomfortably next to James Mason and Martin

Landau), and including Q and A we talked for four and a quarter hours.

At eleven the next morning I returned to the airport, to fly to Toronto for my next event. Unfortunately the crew failed to show, and so the flight was delayed. No matter, I thought, we've got plenty of time. The plane eventually took off, but as we began our descent we had to turn back to Montreal, because in the time it had taken the crew to arrive a storm had moved in.

Had they canceled the flight before take-off, I could have rented a car. But it was too late for that, which meant not only did I not get to do that talk, but I also obviously was not going to get paid for it.

I tried to fly home. No. Partway? No. Every flight to anywhere was sold out. I got a flight at 6:45 the next morning that, with several connections, would get me home. I got to the airport at 3:30 to find five hundred people ahead of me in line. Air Canada had only three stations open: one for the plebes and two for the ten people with business-class tickets. Finally my turn came, and I ran as fast as I could to customs, then security, then the plane. I made it. They were about to push back, but then canceled the flight because of snow. I returned through customs, called the airline, and found there was nothing available out of Montreal for three days. I asked if there were flights out of Toronto, and she booked me on one that night.

I rented a car—\$400 one-way!—and arrived six hours early for my flight. This was good, because there were five hundred more people in line.

Several hours later, I got my boarding pass, and proceeded to customs.

This is when my trip to Canada took a bad turn.

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I got pulled aside for a random check. The customs agent started rummaging through my backpack. No big deal, right? In the words of those who rationalize the Panopticon as well as any and all state repression: If I've got nothing to hide, I've got nothing to fear. Right? Right? The agent pulled my wallet from my backpack. Once again, no big deal. I kept repeating this to myself—This is no big deal, no big deal—in the hope that I might believe it. She pulled out my roll of toilet paper, and asked why I had that. I told her I have Crohn's disease, an incurable, progressive disease that causes more or less incessant diarrhea, among many other health problems. She nodded sympathetically, then asked me to pull my dirty socks and underwear from my backpack (Where else was I supposed to put them? I'd been wearing the same clothes for several days, but had purchased some socks and underwear).

Then she found a small ziplock baggie of pills. The baggie had a faint label on it. She asked what those pills were.

That's when I made my big mistake. I told a cop the truth (perhaps because I was sleep-deprived, perhaps because I'm too slow-witted to make up a convincing lie on the spot, perhaps because I'm fundamentally honest and expect the same from those around me): "I don't know."

"Where did you get them?"

"I don't remember." Truly, if I'd have remembered where I got them, I'd have remembered what they were.

The agent freaked out. She called other agents, who also freaked out. They collectively called their supervisor, who almost immediately started yelling at me: "You did something really stupid."

"I didn't do anything at all."

Still shouting: "You're going down for a long time."

“For what?”

“You’re facing prison for smuggling heroin or cocaine.”

Of course I knew it wasn’t heroin or cocaine. I’ve never even seen heroin or cocaine.

But wait! Maybe. . . . Maybe the decision to search me wasn’t so random as I thought. What if they chose me because of my politics? What if the agent had used sleight of hand to slip this baggie into my backpack? What if someone snuck it into my pack when I was doing the talk? What if I’ve known people to whom this sort of thing has happened.

I started to get scared.

The movie reference that kept coming to me was Midnight Express.

The agents left to test the pills. Lots more cops arrived. They began Interrogation 101, saying things like, “Why do you have an American passport if you’re a Canadian citizen?”

“I’m not a Canadian citizen.”

“Then why did you tell the other agent that that you are?”

“I didn’t.”

“He says you did. He wouldn’t lie. Why did you?”

“I didn’t.”

“Are you calling him a liar?”

“I’m saying I never said that.”

“Where do you live?” she asked, holding my driver’s license and passport in her hand.

I had to tell her my address three or four times.

She turned on my computer, looked at documents, emails, photographs. She asked trick questions. She asked when was my last time in Canada. I told her the year before. She looked more on my computer, said, “Who’s this person? Did you meet him in Toronto last month?”

“I wasn’t in Toronto last month.”

“Then where did you meet him?”

“Maine.”

“Maine, United States; or Maine, Canada?”

I never even knew there was a Maine, Canada.

And on and on.

Yet another cop arrived. She led me to an interrogation room. She was nice, not like the other cops. She didn’t yell at me. She told me that everyone else was quite concerned about the pills, but that she wasn’t worried at all. She said she was sure that with my help we’d be able to clear things up very quickly. And the best way to clear things up, she said, is to cooperate.

I said sure.

She said, “And the best place to start is for you to try to see this from our perspective.”

Her voice was soft, inviting.

She said, kindly, gently, “You have some unidentified pills. . . .”

I saw it. I saw it from their perspective. Yes. I was unshaven, disheveled. I had some pills in a baggie. When I looked at it their way, it did seem pretty suspicious. I wished I knew what the pills were, so I could just tell her, and she could clear this all up. She seemed nice enough that even if the pills were illegal, I'm sure she'd help me minimize the damage. Talking to her made the whole thing seem so easy. I just needed to do my part.

She said, “They've determined that the pills weren't narcotics.”

She was kind enough to tell me how they did the test. One agent put some on his finger (and no, they don't taste it like in the movies), then watched to see if it melted. Evidently narcotics melt with the moisture of your skin.

She hadn't needed to tell me any of that: she was clearly on my side. She asked where I got the pills.

This gave me an idea. I told her that sometimes I carry pills for my mom, and sometimes my mom gives me some of her painkillers or sleeping pills. I suggested she call my mom. She might know what they were.

She made the call.

I was glad. This woman seemed nice, but that supervisor still scared me. Now someone would know where I was, and if my mom didn't hear from me again soon I knew she had phone numbers of people in Toronto she could call to get me an attorney. Or if I disappeared altogether at least she would know where I was last seen.

I feel weird including that last sentence, but the current political climate makes it a very real concern. It also makes me glad I'm not of Middle Eastern descent, or it would be of even greater concern.

I heard only the Toronto end of the conversation. The policewoman began by reassuring my mom that I was fine—wasn't that nice of her?—but that I was in custody at customs because of some unidentified medicine. She asked if my mom had given me any tablets.

“They were capsules,” I said.

She waved me off, said into the phone, “Did you give him any blue tablets?”

“They were white capsules.”

She frowned at me, mouthed I know.

Why was she trying to trick my mom?

The cop wrote down all the pills my mom has. Nothing matched.

Evidently my mom asked what this was all about, because the policewoman said, “We were concerned at first that it might be heroin or cocaine, but now we know it's not.”

Something on the other end.

Then she said, “Now we're concerned it might be anthrax.”

More on the other end.

The policewoman: "Anthrax is nothing to laugh at, Mrs. Jensen."

They spoke a while longer. At one point the policewoman said that none of this would have happened had the pills been in a normal bottle. It occurred to me that the only drug or anthrax smugglers they must catch are the ones too stupid to put the pills in regulation bottles, and too stupid to have backstories concocted as to what the pills are.

She got off the phone. We were no closer to figuring out what was going on than before the call. Except that someone now knew where I was.

She said to me, again and again, "Can't you see this from our perspective?" This was her soft, inviting mantra. She started asking me if I had various medical conditions.

I said yes to the ones I have, and no to the ones I don't. When I told her I have Crohn's, she said she has relatives with that, and that I didn't need to explain it.

Then she began listing drugs, saying about each one, "If that's all it is, just tell us. It will be okay."

I wanted to tell her it was one of those drugs. Then everything would be fine. But I didn't want to lie. I also noticed that some of the drugs she mentioned were illegal. I began to wonder if she were trying to trick me, as she'd tried to trick my mom.

She kept pushing, however softly.

I stuck to my story, because it was true.

As I said yet again that I didn't know where I got the pills, she rolled her eyes at me.

I said, "That's not helpful. I'm being honest with you, and it doesn't help for you to make gestures like that."

Her response was interesting: "I'm trying to help you remember, and if rolling my eyes makes you angry enough to remember, then I'm going to do that."

That was the point her good cop routine fell apart for me. She was admitting that she was consciously manipulating me (although I don't believe to help me remember, but rather to get me to admit to something illegal).

Finally I said, "Why don't you read the label on the baggie and see what it says?"

"It has a label?"

She left the room. Finally she came back. She asked, "What conditions does your mother have?"

I listed them.

She left again.

After five minutes she came back, said, "The label says 'Generic Bextra'. We looked it up on the internet and it's used for arthritis. Do you know anyone with arthritis?"

"I've got bad arthritis."

"Why didn't you tell us this before?"

"When I started to explain what Crohn's disease is, you stopped me. My arthritis is a side-effect of Crohn's,

and since you know the disease, I figured you'd know about the arthritis."

She rolled her eyes again, shook her head, and said to the other cops who had gathered, "Let him go."

The supervisor—the one who yelled at me—was nowhere to be seen. Someone went to pass the bad news to him that his drug bust was a bust. The good cop suggested I get rid of the pills—which I now vaguely remembered as having been given to me by a friend months before; and I also remembered that they hadn't helped me so I'd forgotten about them—so nobody else gets mad at me for them. At that point they could have been made of gold and diamonds and I would have flushed them down the toilet.

Another cop came up to me and said, "You're lucky this happened in this country. In some countries they'd have locked you up and done the test in a year."

I thought, but of course didn't say, "In some countries they might believe someone when he says he doesn't know what the pills are, and in some countries they might actually read the label, and then ask if he has arthritis." Had I said this, I would now be sitting in a jail in Toronto.

Someone found the supervisor, talked to him, came back, said, "We can't release him. He needs to be interrogated more."

So I sat there waiting. A customs agents who'd been nice—honestly nice, not good cop nice: she'd come up to me early on and whispered when no one was looking, "Don't worry about it. It's not going to be a big deal"—came back in the room, and said to someone, "Why is he still here?" They said something I didn't hear, and she said, "I'm going to go talk to him." She left the room to find the supervisor. Finally she returned, and this time wouldn't look at me.

Still I sat.

Finally a bunch of other cops came in. They started talking, occasionally looking at me. They continued to chat and laugh for another half hour, until they decided that their power trip had gone on long enough: they couldn't of course, just let me leave when they found out they'd been wrong: they had to keep me there another hour so they could win. They sauntered over to me (corncobs up their butts) and told me I could go. I made my flight by about five minutes.

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On the flight I started to get angry. I can't blame them for wanting to figure out what the pills were, but they could have done so respectfully. They could have read the label. They could have done the narcotics test without yelling at me, without intimidating me, without manipulating me, without lying to me. But they immediately presumed I was guilty, and worse, presumed it's okay to manipulate someone they presume is guilty.

And that's what they do.

This leads to the reason I got so angry that night on the plane. It has to do with the good cop's mantra: can't you see this from our perspective?

While of course that phrase can be used sincerely, it is also the mantra of all abusers, all exploiters. In order for any oppressive or exploitative situation to sustain over the long term, it's imperative that oppressors get the oppressed to see things from the oppressor's (warped) perspective. Sure, oppressors—including individual bullies, abusers, capitalists, the civilized, most males within a patriarchy, or any other oppressors—can and do simply use violence to take whatever it is to which they feel entitled, and sure, the threat of violence always underlies oppressors' every action (had a normal person started yelling at me because I couldn't identify a baggie of pills in my backpack, I would have briefly stared in disbelief before walking away shaking my head: of course had I done that in this circumstance the cops would have physically assaulted me to hold me in place),

but oppression always flows more smoothly when the oppressed police themselves, or even better, agree with the oppressors and need no policing at all. It's as Steven Biko said, "The most powerful tool in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed."

And that's why I got so pissed off. Because the truth is that unless you're really paranoid and hostile and abusive, the situation at customs looked like what it was: someone who had spent 48 of the last 90 hours in airports; someone who was sleep-deprived; someone with an incurable, progressive disease who has to take more pills than he can keep straight; someone who simply got confused.

The truth is that the perspective the police wanted me to take on—the perspective they themselves evidently had—is really fucked up. Combine their paranoid, hostile perspective with the fact that they do not mind intentionally, consciously manipulating those with whom they come into contact—indeed, they are trained to intentionally, consciously manipulate those with whom they come into contact—and combine all of that with the fact that they have guns and we generally do not, and combine that with the fact that they have the full power of the state behind them to use those guns in ways that would cause the rest of us to be killed or imprisoned forever, and it becomes pretty damn clear why so many people hate cops: it's not very fun to have someone hold power over you, especially when that person quite possibly does not have your best interests at heart, when that person has been trained to manipulate you, when that person can detain you or worse over misunderstandings, when that person, in larger cases, can destroy your life.

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It's a month later. I've shared my story with a number of friends, shared with them my realizations about the oppressed taking on the oppressors' perspective, shared with them my understanding about why so many people hate cops.

My friends make appropriately disgusted sounds at appropriate moments in the story. They tell me that my experience and analysis matches their own. And most important, they tell me stories from their own lives of why they hate the police.

A deaf woman tells me that someone attempting to harass her called a suicide hotline pretending to be her. A fully-armored SWAT team burst into her home and held her at gunpoint (Feeling a little depressed? A little down? How's this for a pick-me-up: have a bunch of angry cops point guns at you. Just what the doctor ordered). She said to me: "If hearing people have it hard communicating with cops, imagine how hard it is for someone who is Deaf. This immense cop—he's probably six feet five inches—demanded to know if I lipread. I signed 'I am Deaf, please write.' He yelled at me again, as though the louder he yelled the better I'd understand. I gestured wait and turned around to get paper and pen. They all lurched forward simultaneously yelling NO! and pointing the rifles in my face. I almost peed in my pants with fright and shock. Again the idiot barked lipread? Lipread? Finally one of them whipped out a pen, and we could communicate. They grilled me as to whether I wanted to commit suicide. I told them no. They didn't believe me. As if they know better than I whether I'm suicidal. Finally I convinced them that someone had made a harassing call about me, and do you know how they responded? They started to laugh at me. When they were done laughing they gestured that I could go back to my evening. They left, giving me no apology, no explanation, nothing."

Another friend says, "Two people I've known have been killed by cops. One was a promising artist named Jim. We participated together in an anti-war art show, and he made the music for my student film. He was so excited about his first solo art exhibit. He was beaten to death by an off-duty cop when he got into an argument about traffic. The other was a Puerto Rican gang leader in Florida named Carlos. I was working with him to organize an anti-police-brutality event in his neighborhood when he was shot by a cop who'd terrorized his family for years: the cop had chained Carlos's father to a radiator and raped his mother while Carlos, a child then, hid in the bathroom. That same cop continued to patrol their neighborhood—and continued to terrorize their family—in all the years until he killed Carlos. Both of those men—Jim and Carlos—had difficult lives but were using their anger and political consciousness to fight back, and then they were murdered."

A third friend tells me, “We’re having another scandal right now in Junction City, just like the one in Eugene a few years ago where the two cops raped more than twenty women. In that case, if you recall, Eugene hired an ‘independent’ firm (and paid so much money it seemed more a bribe than a bill) to do an analysis and make up a formal report. The findings were—no big surprise—that the department had acted appropriately by not investigating the allegations of so many women (as well as female officers) for so long because the charges were—I shit you not—so ‘unbelievable’ it was determined they simply couldn’t be valid.”

“What’s happening in Junction City?”

“A friend’s daughter is the key witness. She’s a female officer, which means maybe ‘whistleblower’ is the correct term. She’s been harassed and threatened by the other officers, even the ones who didn’t rape anyone. It’s another cop rape spree. I swear, I’m more likely to get raped if I call the cops than if I leave my doors unlocked.”

A fourth friend says he has a good friend whose brother is training to be a cop. “As you might imagine,” he says, “my friend and his brother often disagree. The surprising thing is that his brother used to be more ‘liberal’ in his views, but after he began the indoctrination to be a cop, his views became much more severe and legalistic. For example, before, he might occasionally smoke marijuana, but now he berates anyone who doesn’t agree that marijuana is 100 percent evil and that anyone who smokes it should receive a long prison sentence.”

He continues, “My friend’s brother wanted to be a cop for altruistic reasons, but once you start the training there’s only one way to think and act. The One Cop Way. So, you have this impressionable young man confronted with men he wishes to be like. They in turn exploit both his ego and insecurities and create another clone.”

Story after story after story they come in.

I talk to yet another friend, who also has stories of her own. I tell her about the One Cop Way.

She says, “I used to think that the police are basically a big gang—the most violent gang around, certainly.”

I respond, “I know in the United States, between four and six people die every day because they encounter police. That’s through beatings, shootings, high speed chases, and medical neglect in jails and prisons.”

She continues, “But I’m not sure that’s what I think anymore.”

“Oh?”

“Now I think they’re a cult.”

“Cult?” I’m not sure I’m ready to go that far.

She says, “Think about the One Cop Way. And think about some of the major characteristics of cults.”

We’re on the phone. I hear her shuffling through some papers.

She says, “It’s interesting you bring this up right now. I’ve just been writing an essay on cults, and I hadn’t thought to talk about the police, but now I will.” More shuffling, and then she says, “Ah, my list of characteristics, modified from one I found on the Internet. Ready?”

I nod, but of course she can’t see that.

She says, “The group displays excessively zealous and unquestioning commitment to its leader and regards his belief system, ideology, and practices as the Truth, as law.”

I interrupt: "Who is the leader?"

"That's one of the brilliant things about this particular cult: not only is the word of the leader seen as law, but the leader is not even a person, the leader is the law itself, or I suppose we should say the capital L Law. But the real point is that what any cop says, that becomes the law, merely by the cop saying it."

I start to object.

She says, "The cop says you're smuggling: you're treated as a smuggler. How much were your words worth in that exchange?"

I don't say anything.

She says, "Questioning, doubt, and dissent are discouraged or even punished."

We don't need to talk about that one. We all know about the infamous police code of silence. We know what happens to people like Serpico, to people like the whistleblower in Junction City.

She says, "Next, the group is elitist, claiming a special, exalted status for itself, its leaders, and members. Do we need to talk about that one?"

I don't say anything.

She says, "The group has a polarized us-versus-them mentality, which can cause conflict with the larger society."

"Jesus," I say.

"No," she says. "They don't need Jesus. They're already cops. That's good enough, close enough to being a god right there."

Silence.

She continues, "The leader is not accountable."

I respond, "That one is true for all cops."

She says, "The group teaches or implies that its ends justify whatever means it deems necessary. This may result in members participating in behaviors or activities they would have considered reprehensible or unethical before joining the group."

I say, "Like manipulating people they don't know."

She responds, "Like killing people."

I take a deep breath, say, "That's really it, isn't it?"

She doesn't say anything for a very long time. At last she says, "But I think in some ways your question—why do so many people hate the police—is much simpler than either you or I are saying."

"How so?"

"I think a lot of people hate the police because the police hate us first."

"I don't understand."

"Think about the stories you just told me. Think about how the cops treated you. Think about their perspective on you that they kept trying to get you to see? What is it about that perspective? What are they feeling toward

you? Think about all the cop shows you see. What do the cops feel toward those they encounter? Contempt, at best. More likely hatred. Think about the looks on cops' faces when they walk up to give you a ticket. Think about all the stories you have ever heard about the police. Yes, we all have a good story here or there involving police treating us well, but think about your experience and the experiences of those you know. What do all of those stories have in common? Think about the question you asked: why do so many people hate the police? I think the answer is staring us in the face, especially when it is cops who are doing the staring. I think a lot of people hate the police because the police hate us first."

I think a moment, and sadly, find I cannot disagree.