

# Rabble Recognition

Ruben Pater, May 2018

The following message was posted in the chat group of my studio building; ‘I saw a guy, he tried to get in, I can describe him, he really looked like a trouble-maker. Large guy, bald, a face like a crook, about 40 years old, he wore jogging pants and a beige bomber jacket (no not a hipster). Definitely not from our building’. The person described here was not apprehended, however his physical description as a suspect was the only trace left of the incident.

The Dutch word used for describing a person’s description is *signalement*, which has the same root as ‘signal’. Identifying odd behaviour through visual signs is something we do unconsciously all the time. Sensory perceptions tell us if something is out of the ordinary. This becomes evident from the many metaphors used for suspect behaviour, often using smelly or dark metaphors. We see something is ‘fishy’, something ‘feels wrong’, something is ‘off’, ‘shady’, or ‘sketchy’. Someone who looks ‘like she/he does not belong here’.

Visually identifying criminality was a scientific field in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Led by the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, it was believed criminality was inherited and potential criminals could be identified by physical anomalies. Lombroso believed these physical traits were a Darwinist reversion to a subhuman or primitive kind of human (see image 1). We still rely on visual identification of suspect behaviour, albeit much less overt. This ‘gut feeling’ is a necessary skill in policing by which suspicious behaviour can be visually identified. Whether it is done using surveillance camera’s or by police officers themselves, identifying suspicion is still a highly visual skill.

## Pigs and Scum

While Lombroso was studying genetic criminality, another scientific theory emerged during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The *miasma* theory stated that diseases like cholera and the plague were caused by a bad air called ‘miasma’,<sup>1</sup> which was thought to be exhaled by the poor through their insanitary living conditions and lack of cleanliness. The poor themselves were considered to be the filth and disease itself. It is no coincidence that words like scum, scruff, dirt, and trash are still used as synonyms for the poor or homeless. The police as we know it today originated at that same time. In 1829 the Metropolitan Police was formed by Sir Robert Peel for the City of London, the first modern police force. At that time London was quickly becoming the largest city in the world, attracting impoverished people from the countryside to feed its rapid industrialization. The stories of Charles Dickens (see image 2) depicted the horrible conditions of the working poor, the *rabble*, barely surviving while the capitalist class amassed great fortunes.

Early theories on policing established the relation between poverty and crime. In *The Fabrication of Social Order*, Mark Neocleous retraces the history of criminology to show how policing was never about fighting crime but about maintaining the social order; arresting vagrants, prostitutes, and drunkards and forcing them to do labour in work houses. The poor were seen as the source of crime which needed to be managed and controlled. Patrick Colquhoun, the founder of the Thames River Police wrote: ‘from indigence is to be traced the great Origin and the Progress of Crimes’. It was during this time in 19<sup>th</sup> century foul-smelling London that ‘pig’ became a nickname for police<sup>1</sup>. Like pigs on a farm get rid of the garbage, the police prided themselves on getting rid of the scum of the streets.

## Broken Windows

The theory that poverty and crime are related and even hereditary, has been haunting criminology ever since. In 1982 the two scientists James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling developed the *Broken Windows theory* which has been very influential. It stated that once a window of an abandoned house or car is broken, soon more windows will be broken, leading to squatting, fires, and ultimately violent crime. The theory suggests that if the broken window would instead be immediately fixed and litter cleaned up, people would keep a sense of community and larger crimes could be prevented from happening. New York city Police used this theory in the 1980s to instate a zero-tolerance policy for small offenses like fare evasion, public drinking, and vandalism, leading to furthering the criminalization of poverty.

In *The End of Policing*, Alex Vitale points out that the broken windows theory cannot be disconnected from the simultaneous rise of neoliberalism, which proposed to end poverty by privatization, market deregulation and tax cuts for the highest incomes, while at the same time cutting welfare and community aid. Vitale also shows how the mentor of James Wilson—who co-wrote the Broken Windows Theory—argued that the urban poor could not be helped by government assistance. If you would provide public facilities or libraries, they would get destroyed because of the destructive nature of its inhabitants, implied by the authors to belong to ethnic minorities.<sup>2</sup> As late as 1994 scientists tried hard to statistically prove the relation of criminal behaviour and race in ‘The Bell Curve’, written by Charles Murray and Richard J. Herrnstein. Using flawed statistical analysis, they argued that blacks were on average less intelligent than whites. Herrnstein also wrote *Crime and Human Nature* together with James Wilson which stated that IQ and body type were determinants for crime.<sup>2</sup>

### **Hoodies and Hoodlums**

Just before George Zimmerman killed the 17-year old Trayvon Martin in Miami Gardens, Florida, the emergency phone operator asked Zimmerman to describe the situation. ‘There is a real suspicious guy’ Zimmerman replied. ‘This guy looks like he’s up to no good’, and when asked to describe the person he said; ‘A dark hoodie, like a grey hoodie’.<sup>3</sup> Martin went to out to buy a pack of Skittles and was then shot to death by Zimmerman. Some considered the wearing of the hoodie itself a justification for suspicion. Fox News commentator Geraldo Rivera said: ‘The hoodie is as much responsible for Trayvon Martin’s death as George Zimmerman was’. The hoodie that Martin wore became a symbol for killing of black people for looking suspicious (see image 3). The outrage inspired a ‘Million Hoodie March’ in New York city in March of 2012 with the tagline ‘black ≠ suspicious’ and hundreds of protesters wearing hoodies.<sup>4</sup>

The hoodie originated in Medieval times when monks wore them as part of their habit (see image 4). Hooded capes were later worn by outdoor workers in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The hooded sweatshirt as we now know it was first used in upstate New York in the 1930s by labourers to keep warm in winter. From the 1970s to the 1990s the hoodie was synonymous with those trying to conceal their identity, such as graffiti culture and criminal activity. In 1996 a sketch with a hoodie by Jeanne Boylan led to the capture of Ted Kaczynski, known as ‘the Unabomber’ (see image 5). Only later the hooded sweatshirt was used outside of sports or work wear. Today one of the richest people in the world, Mark Zuckerberg, always wears a hooded sweater.

### **Poser Profiling**

In the Netherlands politicians have often spoken out in favour of profiling criminals based on the colour of their skin or the clothes they wear. The right-wing populist politician Geert Wilders and his PVV party continue to refer to ‘Moroccan street scum’ as a group that needs policing. Recently this culminated to a new measure in Rotterdam that allow police to undress youth if they wear clothes or watches that the police find are too expensive for them.<sup>5</sup> In what is called *de patseraanpak* (the poser-approach), the police visually identifies a persons’ identity and the particular clothing they are wearing. If those subjected to control cannot prove they have paid for the items clothing the police may confiscate the items (see image 6).

What is obvious in this example are the selective parameters by which the police carry out patrols, which are not intended to fight crime, rather to punish and police certain groups in society. After all the police controls city neighbourhoods with a high percentage of immigrants and minorities, and not the

