Post-Colonial Policing
by Samir Gandesha

Widely regarded as the first film made in Black Africa, *Borom Sarret* (The Wagoner) by Ousmane Sembène provides a profound glimpse of immediate post-colonial reality. Made in 1963 upon the auteur's return from learning his craft at the Gorkii Studios in Moscow, it portrays the unfolding of a day in the life of a cart driver in Dakar, Senegal. Its formal minimalism enables *Borom Sarret* to reveal several layers of complexity. In the economical space of approximately 18 minutes, it discloses the structural violence established and consolidated through colonial class and gender relationships that live on, uncannily, in the post-independence period. It is a vivid and crystalline cinematic depiction of what Frantz Fanon had called just two years earlier in *Wretched of the Earth*, the "pitfalls of national consciousness" and the way in which precisely such an imaginary served to mask the real, which is to say ruthlessly exploitative relationships among citizens of newly "liberated" states. It provokes suspicion of the now ubiquitous idea, at least in the global north, that the abstraction of racial identification alone could ever be organizing principle of solidarity and therefore politics.

We follow the driver, and are privy to his interior monologue delivered by Sembène himself, while he transports a series of passengers and materials to their various destinations. The cart driver considers the exertions of an unemployed man futile and irritating; he is coldly unsympathetic to his plight. He is accosted by a severely crippled yet reasonably affable beggar who asks for money but and is even less solicitous and ignores him: "there are so many of them, they are like flies." Yet, the driver is more than happy to pay the well-fed and well-dressed griot or folk singer, who builds up the driver's ego ideal by his ingratiating and obsequious praise of the warrior-identity of his ancestors.

Then there's the solemn father whom the driver transports with the corpse of his infant child to the cemetery only to be turned away because his papers are not in order; he is, we learn, a "foreigner." The artificial borders of the "nation-state" constructed ex nihilo by the colonial powers continue to enact their violence, unremittingly, on the most vulnerable. The driver carefully places the corpse of the child on the ground and drives way, leaving the bereft father to suffer alone.

The narrative begins to tighten with the approach of a well-dressed and apparently wealthy African man who wishes to be taken to the formerly French quarter of Dakar—the Plateau; here, cart drivers require special permits. The man is moving to the Plateau, he tells the driver. The camera pans in the direction of the former European quarter to reveal a shockingly different cityscape. As the soundtrack shifts from the syncopated rhythms and xalam (lute) of traditional Senegalese music to 18th century European classical music, the sand and rock give way to paved streets, the horse-drawn carts to orderly modern automobile traffic. In a few short miles, we traverse centuries.

As soon as the driver nervously enters the Plateau, he is immediately confronted by a scowling police officer who promptly issues him a fine and confiscates his cart. As he is writing the ticket, the officer steps on the wagoner's medal, most likely for the driver's service in the French army. Meanwhile, the wealthy passenger absconds in an awaiting car. In this single gesture, the continuity of the corruptions of Empire is laid bare. Racial solidarity is revealed for the myth that it is. The police are there to protect the wealthy Blacks from poor Blacks, whose labour power is nonetheless required for the production of wealth; the inclusion of the worker is premised on their spatial exclusion. They are what Jacques Rancière calls "the part that has no part."

The driver returns home with his horse, devastated and bewildered. His wife rise, matter-of-factly gives him their infant child to look after, and promises that they would have food that evening and leaves. According to the Director of NYU's Institute of Afro-American Affairs, Manthia Diawara, the common interpretation—consistent with themes in Sembène's other films—is that she is off to participate in sex work and this was not to be disparaged but accepted as a legitimate form of labour; sex workers were to be accepted as proletarians and neither stigmatized nor condemned, as they were, of course, by the imams.

Today in the midst of the global uprising, amidst the Covid19 pandemic, against anti-Black and anti-Idigenous state violence, and the related re-emergence of fascism, *Borom Sarrett* can be seen to be, in Walter Benjamin's terms, blasted out of the continuum of history and shot through with "now time" (Jetztzeit). Such "now time" crystallizes in at least three ways.

First, as I have recently argued in my book *Spectres of Fascism* (Pluto, 2020), the return of fascism provokes a reconsideration of Aimé Césaire's theory of endocolonialism—fascism as the application of techniques of domination perfected in Europe's African and Asian colonies to the European context itself. The fascist imaginary was anchored to German and Italian colonial projects in Africa and the US Republic's genocidal westward expansion.

Second, at the same time, however, the brutalities of policing cannot be reduced to "White supremacy" alone, but must be also situated in class and gender relationships. The role of the police is to protect private property, which is to say the separation between the worker and the means of production. Separation from the means of production is the condition for the possibility of exploitation as workers must sell their labour power which is rendered abstract, temporally quantifiable and measurable. *Borom Sarrett* makes this explicit insofar as the wagoner is literally deprived of his own means of production at the moment that his cart is confiscated. The abstract violence of this gesture forces his wife—both means of production and worker in one—into the nexus of the sex industry in order to engage in socially reproductive labour.

Third, the police also, of course, maintain the specifically *spatial* separation common to virtually all African cities, that between the natives' quarters or the "Medina," on the one hand, and the settlers' quarters the "Plateau," on the other, which, as Sembène shows us, is taken over by the post-colonial African bourgeoisie.

Today, in the West, but especially North America, we see the intimate ties between fascism, on the one hand, and an increasingly militarized police apparatus. Here, we see the brutal over-policing of Black people in US and Canadian inner cities and Indigenous peoples in their own territories, in particular. What Fanon calls the “well-built town” of the settler anticipates the White “gated community” fortified by increasingly privatized and militarized police forces which function, for all intents and purposes, like armies of occupation in the precincts of the poor and indigent. A society of separation; a society of the post-colonial spectacle.