“The State Cannot Protect Us”
How Vigilance (Un)makes the State in Western Europe

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ABSTRACT: Informal policing has recently been on the rise in Europe: in several countries, “concerned citizens” have mobilized for the protection of their neighborhoods. This article examines the production and mobilization of vigilance in the negotiations around practices of informal policing in Italy and Germany and analyzes the relational way in which discourses and practices of vigilantism make and unmake the state. Grounded in research on practices of informal policing in Italy and Germany, the article argues that practices of vigilance manifested in informal policing are simultaneously and ambivalently state-(un)making practices. What is obtained in the process is an ambivalent regime of vigilance.

KEYWORDS: far right, informal policing, neighborhood patrols, neighborhood watch, state, regimes of vigilance, vigilantism

Over the past decade, the phenomenon of informal policing reemerged and expanded considerably in several European countries. Informal policing consists of various forms of organization of civilians for the purpose of crime prevention, which relies on the mobilization of vigilance against suspicious presence. The phenomenon often reemerges during times of social turmoil and transitional shifts, as was documented in many cases around the world (Abrahams 1998; Favarel-Garrigues and Gayer 2019; Kirsch and Gratz 2010; Pratten and Sen 2008).

In this article, I draw on ethnographic data and online material collected from 2014 to 2017 on a far-right neighborhood patrol in the eastern periphery of Rome, as well as on online material collected on informal policing in Germany in 2020 and 2021, to examine the ambivalent regime of vigilance that various forms of informal policing produce in a relational way. By calling for citizen vigilance, neighborhood patrols reproduce imaginaries of a state unable or unwilling to protect its citizens that draw upon representations of “failed” states. In response, state institutions shun forms of active patrolling while pushing forward more passive forms of informal policing such as neighborhood watch programs and other forms of civilian support that harness private vigilance for purposes of order maintenance. In the process, they produce vigilant but obedient citizens on whose eyes and ears the state relies for maintaining and reproducing a pacified social order with the police as benevolent protector at its core. Hence, such practices ambivalently and relationally make and unmake the state simultaneously. Violent forms of informal policing such as vigilantism have been conceptualized as relational objects of theorization that cannot be disconnected from the state (Abrahams 1998).

The article enters in dialogue with literature on the anthropology of the state (Abrams 1988; Gupta 1995; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Kapferer 2005; Laszczkowski and Reeves 2018; Step-
putat 2004; Thelen et al. 2018; Trouillot 2001) to analyze relationally how vigilance is mobilized in forms of informal policing in Germany and Italy, and the kind of boundary work that happens through negotiations of legitimacy around informal policing. The article’s contribution is threefold: first, to examine the recent reemergence of informal policing in Western Europe, where the phenomenon is less studied from an ethnographic perspective; second, to theorize vigilance as an object of anthropological study in what we called “regimes of vigilance” (Ivasiuc et al., this issue); and third, to show how negotiations around informal policing mobilize the vigilance of citizens in ambiguous ways that both make and unmake “the state” and its boundaries relationally.

I first sketch the forms that informal policing has taken in recent times in Europe, with a focus on Germany and Italy and an overview of the existing literature. Then, I analyze how vigilance is produced and mobilized relationally in practices of informal policing and negotiations around such practices. I show how the mobilization of citizen vigilance simultaneously makes and unmakes the state in ambivalent ways. Finally, I lay out some characteristics of the regime of vigilance produced by state and nonstate actors around forms of mobilization of citizens’ alertness.

**Times of Heightened Vigilance: The Rise of Informal Policing in Europe**

In the 1990s, with the fall of dictator regimes in Eastern Europe and increased media attention to immigration, informal policing went through a revival grounded in anti-immigrationism. Citizen mobilization for crime control expanded rapidly in Europe after the effects of the financial crisis of 2008 were felt. As the early 2010s were succeeded by the crisis of reception of refugees in Europe in 2015 and 2016, the mobilization of patrols and civilian defense groups multiplied rapidly. Patrols in eastern Germany, at the Polish border (Geiler 2021), and “refugee hunters” in Bulgaria (Ilieva, this issue) started to police national borders seen as problematically porous. In Hungary (Mireanu 2013, 2015; Póczik and Sárik 2019; Szombati 2018), Bulgaria (Stoynova and Dzhekova 2019), Slovakia, and the Czech Republic (Mareš and Milo 2019), far-right patrols blamed the Roma for crime, and in numerous cases they meted out violent retribution. Similarly, the Traveller (2L) community in Ireland was subjected to paramilitary vigilantism (Donnelly-Drummond 2014). In the Netherlands, between 2012 and 2016, the number of burgerwachten multiplied by five, reaching about seven hundred in 2016 (van de Griend 2016). In Northern Ireland, Neil Jarman (2008) analyzed paramilitary vigilantism born out of “the Troubles.” In Turkey, nationalism informed instances of vigilantism against political dissidents (Saglam 2021). In Europe more widely, migrants and minorities are protracted objects of vigilance (Bjørgo and Mareš 2019). In some cases, violence against minorities spurred their own protective mobilization, such as the Muslims in Germany (Hendrich 2017), the Alevis in Turkey (Yonucu 2018), and the Roma in East Central Europe (Mareš 2012).

Informal policing operates under a plurality of forms contextually shaped by cultures of social control, narratives on the evolution of crime, nationalist or identity politics, histories and practices of statecraft, relationalities of citizenship, and the effects of local, regional, and global discourses and practices of (in)security (Bubandt 2005). The neighborhood watch model entails the self-organization of inhabitants of relatively small residential areas in networks mediated by technologies such as WhatsApp or Facebook. Such groups foster the vigilance of their members, encouraging them to warn each other and the police of unusual presence and suspicious practices. Neighborhood watch, as a form of “lateral” or “peer-to-peer surveillance” (Andrejevic 2005; Chan 2008; Reeves 2012) coproduces crime control through the mobilization of citizen
vigilance; in France, the neighborhood watch program prescribes vigilance through its very title: *Voisins Vigilants* (Purenné and Palerse 2016).

But this “participatory surveillance” is also a practice of regulating belonging (Monahan 2017): it relies on the vigilance of community members to police the boundaries of the group. Suspicion acts as a marker of nonbelonging that equates those recognized as “not from here” to potentially dangerous presence. Vigilance is not epiphenomenal to the construction of threat: suspicion and vigilance intrinsically connect to each other (Saglam 2021). Sometimes, neighborhood watch groups dissuade potential burglars by placing visible warning signs throughout the neighborhood. Such practices remind us of the performative and aesthetic character of security (Ghertner et al. 2020; Grassiani and Diphoorn 2019) and that the security spectacle involves the visual and material dimensions simultaneously (Ivasiuc 2019; Mireanu 2013). The public discussions around citizen participation in lateral surveillance emerge as controversies around the perceived boundaries between the state and its citizens, as well as around the quality of democratic life when such practices risk to produce a “nation of informers” and degenerate in vigilante violence (Marx 1989, 2013).

A more active form of informal policing is undertaken by patrolling groups. Such groups have recently proliferated in several European countries as initiatives aimed at preventing crime in urban areas or undocumented migration in border zones. Some of these groups may embrace violence and (para)militarism openly. This is the case, for example, of the Soldiers of Odin, who emerged in Finland in 2016 to support and create a “culture of security” against immigrants perceived as criminal (Aharoni and Féron 2020). Then, the group spread transnationally (Kotonen 2019). Other groups such as the C14 (*Sich*) and the Right Sector in Ukraine emerged as violent nationalist paramilitaries in conflict zones stemming from histories of entrenched ethnic and political divides; some of them, like the Azov Battalion, have been co-opted and armed by the state, but their base encompasses civilian structures such as nongovernmental organizations or political parties (Zabyelina 2019). In Greece, the far-right Golden Dawn and the state had historically intersecting common goals in their repression of leftist or anarchist groups and the control of migrants (Dalakoglou 2013). These cases are important to mention because the relationship between such actors and the state is ambivalent and complex. In other cases, the social order they coproduce with the state is moral and gendered (Sen 2019). Also, such cases show the wide range of factors contributing to shaping these groups in context-dependent ways.

Sometimes, boundaries between the three forms of informal policing discussed above are blurred and permeable: neighborhood watch groups may shift toward violence (Meisner 2016; Perthus and Belina 2017). The infamous murder of Treyvon Martin by George Zimmerman, the coordinator of the local neighborhood watch in Sanford, Florida, is a case in point. The following subsections give a brief, contextualizing overview of the reemergence of neighborhood patrol groups in Germany and Italy, as well as of the ways in which the literature—however rarely ethnographic in its approach—discussed their rise.

**Germany**

*Bürgerwehren* (civilian defense groups) are reminiscent of fascist patrols active in the 1920s against left-wing activists (Bust-Bartels 2021; Quent 2016a), but their longer history dates even further back than the twentieth century. The 1990s witnessed a growth of the number of Bürgerwehren (Hitzler 1993), but most were short-lived, and popular opinion did not see the involvement of citizens in matters of security with good eyes: in a survey from 1998 in Lower Saxony, 71 percent of respondents declared to be against the involvement of citizens in any form of security provision (Wurtzbacher 2003: 93).
The contemporary multiplication of neighborhood patrols started in the wake of the so-called “migration crisis” of 2015 and 2016. The events of New Year’s Eve 2016 are often mentioned as a “watershed moment,” when more than five hundred women lodged complaints about sexual harassment and assault near the main railway station in Cologne. The perpetrators were identified and framed in the press as overwhelmingly men of North African origins, which sparked a European-wide wave of anti-immigrationism. In terms of the legal framework, Bürgerwehren avail themselves of the right of any citizen (Jedermannsrecht) to neutralize and detain a person caught in flagrante until the arrival of the police (§127 in the Code of Criminal Procedure), as well as other provisions in the Civil Law for situations of emergency, self-defense, and self-help law (Selbsthilferecht) (Hoffmann 2019: 84).

There are no official statistics on the number of Bürgerwehren in Germany. Anika Hoffmann (2019) counted 326 self-defining Bürgerwehren on Facebook and documented their steady growth (in numbers as well as membership) between 2016 and 2018. However, groups with an online presence are not necessarily also active in the urban (or border) space: they may have been founded to pressure the state into undertaking action to ensure the security of citizens, and as such fulfill a performative function (see also Bust-Bartels 2021; Quent 2016a, 2016b).

The (mostly German language) scholarly literature on contemporary Bürgerwehren, in particular from an ethnographic perspective, is scarce. Contemporary Bürgerwehren are analyzed as violent manifestation and embodiment of the far right (Quent 2015, 2016a, 2016b) or as a political tool for mobilization of the populist, anti-immigrant far right (Koehler 2019). Matthias Quent (2016a, 2016b) emphasizes the performative function of such groups as the “staging” (Inszenierung) of a provocation towards the state, while simultaneously underlining the potential of far-right Bürgerwehren for political terrorism, inasmuch as they approve of the use of violence and form networks that can be further mobilized. Bürgerwehren act from a subjective position of powerlessness facing a state that they deem unable to protect its own citizens amid growing chaos and anomie (2016b: 85). They act to restore a sense of ideological coherence grounded in national homogeneity and to maintain privileges. Quent is also concerned with the relationship between the state and Bürgerwehren, which is one of the criteria of the typology he constructs (88–89). This element is also central to the typology developed by Thomas Schmidt-Lux (2013), who differentiates between groups that act in replacement of the state, others that act to surpass the state, and a last category of formations that acts against the state. In this typological approach, however, the distinction between state and nonstate is taken for granted, and gray zones between the constructed categories, as well as their relationality, remain unexplored.

Anika Hoffmann (2019) analyzes Bürgerwehren as a form of social control mobilized against deviance, which may become deviant itself. She underlines the paradox of growing fear of criminality when crime statistics show a declining trend and places the analysis in a criminological perspective that focuses on the social construction of the category of crime and its meanings. Hoffmann emphasizes the changes in the subjective perception of security that followed the privatization of security and responsibilization of the individual under conditions of neoliberalism. The role of neoliberal ideologies of citizen responsibilization in her analysis echoes Ronald Hitzler’s (1993, 1994) earlier work. Noting the multiplication of security concerns and practices among civilians, Hitzler subsumed them under the label of “new security movement” already in the early 1990s.

Finally, in her recent ethnographic work, Nina Bust-Bartels (2021) approaches Bürgerwehren through the conceptual lens of securitization theory and analyzes them as nonstate securitization actors that react to subjective perceptions of insecurity, as well as to protect particular constructions of fragile masculinity. Her ethnographic case studies shed light on the motiva-
tions of Bürgerwehr members to mobilize, as well as on the effects of patrolling in the public space.

**Italy**

The evolution of neighborhood patrolling in Italy mirrors the developments in Germany. In the 1920s, protofascist groups patrolled the territory and violently apprehended political opponents. These ronde supported the ascent of Mussolini’s regime in the 1930s and then progressively disappeared until the 1990s (Scalia 2012). Then, the ronde padane reappeared, this time in a call for vigilance directed against immigrants.

The security law of 2009 regulated “voluntary observers” (osservatori volontari), as a form of participatory security (sicurezza partecipata), where citizens mobilize to patrol their territory in support of the “forces of order.” The initiative was initially criticized as reminiscent of the fascist ronde (Scalia 2012). While patrols were still virtually absent following the adoption of the security laws, the phenomenon has multiplied in recent years, in particular since late 2016 to early 2017 (Ivasiuc 2018), and new groups continue to emerge as I write.

As in the German case, ethnographically informed literature on the Italian ronde is scarce. Although some authors have analyzed the phenomenon of vigilantism in Italy exclusively as far-right mobilization against immigrants (Castelli Gattinara 2019), not all ronde have such political allegiances, and placing the focus exclusively on far-right anti-immigrationist attitudes is a reductionist approach that obscures other analytic dimensions.

During research on the securitization of the Roma in Italy, I encountered a neighborhood patrol that mobilized in 2013 against property-related crimes. When I met the group in November 2014, interviewed the leader, and accompanied them on night patrols around the neighborhood, the phenomenon was still rare in Italy. Over the span of six months since my first contact with the group, the leader managed to mobilize two other groups in neighboring areas. I have written extensively on the group, analyzing the centrality of visuality in their discourses and practices (Ivasiuc 2015, 2019), as well as the moralities undergirding their mobilization (Ivasiuc 2018), and the materiality of patrolling practices securitizing the home (Ivasiuc 2020).

Comparing informal policing in Hungary and Italy, Manuel Mireanu (2015) focuses on the role of the vigilante-like group City Angels in the securitization of urban space around the Central Station in Milan. Mireanu (2020) explores the gentrification—security nexus through the practices of City Angels as grassroots security actor that combines solidarity and help with a securitizing approach with coercive overtones. Their practices aid the state and real estate actors in the exclusion of those deemed undesirable, paving the way to the gentrification of the neighborhood.²

The literature on German and Italian patrols tends to construe them, for the most part, as nonstate actors challenging the state. However, a growing body of anthropological literature points to the inadequacy of the binary distinction between state and nonstate on one hand, and of a view of the state as unitary entity with coherent and unambiguous agency on the other (Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Rose 1999; Taussig 1992). Congruent to these approaches, I understand the state to consist of both institutions and practices, and the imaginaries around them (Abrams 1988) that are (re)produced relationally. Behind the appearance of a retreating state lie hidden processes through which the state (re)makes itself both as a set of representations, and as power-exerting institutional mechanism (Kapferer 2005). Relational approaches to the anthropology of the state have been undertaken in the field of social welfare, showing how the gap between imaginaries of the state and its practices can be bridged (Thelen et al. 2018). My aim is to show how informal policing is another fruitful point of entry to a relational analysis of the state, and I will flesh out the theoretical affordances of this approach in the last section.
Deployments of Vigilance as State (Un)making

Policing is unavoidably linked to the state, both empirically, and conceptually (Garland 1996; Loader and Walker 2007). Groups undertaking informal policing frame their initiatives as “active” and “responsible” citizenship (Johnston 1992), deriving a legitimacy grounded in neoliberal depoliticizing vocabularies that prescribe the quality of relations between the state and its citizens as a harmonious teamwork. However, groups undertaking neighborhood patrolling reproduce and circulate the idea that the state is no longer able or willing to defend its citizens. Thinking the current multiplication of this discourse and the accompanying practices of informal policing as a sign of the retreat of the state has insufficient analytical purchase. This section focuses on the relational mobilization of vigilance in informal policing initiatives undertaken by citizens without the support of the state on one hand, and in neighborhood watch programs that are supported and promoted by the state on the other.

Italy: “Watch out! Controllo del Vicinato is active here”

It is not a coincidence that in Italian, vigilanza tends to refer to “surveillance” rather than “vigilance.” Vigili urbani is an old name of the local police, still informally in use among Italians and pointing back to the times of ancient Rome. Etymologically and conceptually, vigilance stands at the core of surveillance.

The visual dimension is omnipresent. Recently mobilized neighborhood patrols describe themselves as “the eyes that the forces of order cannot have” (Amabile 2019), “acting like sentinels with eyes always attentive” (Bulian 2017). The members of patrols rely on visual metaphors to explain their practices and to describe how they watch over as “an extra eye in the neighborhood.” They “scour” the territory looking for clues:

We are observers . . . Our eye tries to observe suspicious things, like people who . . . do something illegal. When we are certain of it, we alert the forces of order. In short, if you see someone who jumps over the fence to get into a condominium, it's already an alarm. . . When I make these trips I cooperate with the authorities, like any citizen should. If they witness a crime . . . they have to report it to the authorities; they can't look the other way because that would be an uncivil act. (Interview with the leader of the patrol in Ponte di Nona, November 2015)

Note the personification of “the eye,” as if the group were reduced to a sensory organ at the service of the authorities. More rarely, the auditive register is mobilized, too: they must be vigilant to cries of help coming from the privacy of the home. The act of looking away while witnessing crime is contrasted with the vigilance of the patrol and morally framed as “uncivil.”

The group ignores the law on voluntary surveillance by using vehicles and not wearing vests that signal them as such. They also recurrently announce on social media that exasperated people will inevitably “take things in their own hands” to protect themselves against criminals. In the Fall of 2019, they announced that “important events will take place” in an area that should be avoided by residents on a particular date, and that what they were about to do was “for the good of our Territory.” Although they insist that the main difference between ronde and what they do is that they do not carry weapons, in June 2019 the leader contributed to a discussion on Facebook about “Gypsy crime” by posting the image of a gun resting on a worn-out keyboard next to bullets, accompanied by the message: “I would have a quick solution, but the laws don't allow it.” On a spring night in May 2015, during a patrol, eight members of the group discussed in front of me, practically an outsider, the possibility to catch a thief and “teach them a lesson.”
The leader explained to me that lynching is entirely within the realm of possibilities, and that he could easily mobilize two to three thousand people and burn down the campo nomadi of Salone (Ivasiuc 2022).

However, they seek cooperation with the police and the Carabinieri. In fact, the special police unit stationed in the neighborhood knows the group well and appreciates its support. When the new mayor of Rome announced in 2017 the plan to close this police precinct, the group mobilized in protest and stopped the plan (Ivasiuc 2020). Yet, their support to the state is ambivalent at best: on the group’s Facebook page, praise for fascism is recurrent, and the leader confessed to me that he really hopes for a military coup: the only possible solution to save Italy from crime, corruption, and disorder ruling everywhere.

Examples such as this neighborhood patrol are frequently discussed in the press. Not always openly motivated by far-right sympathies, the core concern of such groups seems to be crime prevention. Inevitably, the reader comments accompanying such articles deplore the absence of the state and its inability or unwillingness to protect its citizens from crimes committed by a horde of uncivilized immigrants:

The ronde are the sign of the rising discontent of citizens toward this government, unable to manage with common sense the phenomenon of immigration, which has taken on the traits of an invasion of savage clandestines. Incapable and guilty of dragging the country in a social conflict. (alkhuwarizmi, 24 July 2017)

Now we should demand the abolition of the taxes on public security, which this inept State is no longer capable of guaranteeing. (Giorgio Colomba, 24 July 2017)

It seems that South of the Latium nobody got the idea of organizing ronde . . . Apparently there is no criminality in the South . . . YOU GOT IT RIGHT. In the South there isn’t a single street or neighborhood that isn’t GOVERNED by a mafia / camorra family. The mafia can do what the state DOESN’T WANT to do. And the proof that “DOESN’T WANT” is not an exaggeration are the initiatives that are systematically taken AGAINST the forces of order when they carry out their functions with “a little bit of energy.” ROTTEN COMMUNIST/ MAFIOSO STATE. (i-taglianibravagente, 24 July 2017)

The practices of ronde and comments such as these reproduce the state as failed even while their initiators portend to be a mere continuation of the state’s vigilance. Not surprisingly, this makes the authorities at times somewhat nervous. Consider this quote from the Prefect of Rome: “I am allergic to ronde. It is a sort of commingling of roles. In a democratic State, citizens delegate the use of force to the institutions” (Santucci 2015).

Instead of ronde, the authorities actively promote and support the adoption of the program Controllo del Vicinato (CdV) (literally, “control of the neighborhood”). Following the model of the North American neighborhood watch, the program aims at fostering the alertness of citizens in residential areas while domesticating it and placing it unambiguously at the service of the state. CdV is a response to the reemergence of the ronde: the promotion of the program and its subsequent adoption all over Italy intensified in parallel to the multiplication of the ronde. In 2017, Lodovica Bulian (2017) mentions the presence of more than 3,000 neighborhood watch groups all over the country, with 734 groups organized in Lombardy alone.

In Rome, one of the first neighborhood committees to consider the adoption of the program in 2015 was in a southwestern periphery of Rome situated beyond the ring road. Members explained:

– The CdV is a system where, first of all, the neighbors don’t need to take pistols, guns, and all of that, nor to make ronde. There are no ronde. The CdV is a system that doesn’t provoke any
The groups display a yellow sticker with the message “Watch out! Controllo del Vicinato is active here.” The program’s logo depicts a silhouetted family, in the middle of which a uniformed police officer, with his right arm on the shoulder of a man, and his left arm behind a woman holding a baby, assumes a protective but firmly grounded posture (Figure 1). The family, with the officer’s silhouette in the middle, is part of a fence around a summarily depicted house on the background.

CdV is organized through a nongovernmental association. The description on the Facebook profile of the organization reads: “An idea borrowed from the Anglo-Saxon Neighborhood Watch—a way to feel safer among one’s neighbors and in one’s Communities—a model useful for the residential areas of our Country to create security, attention, and social cohesion” (ACdV 2022a). Whoever wishes to organize a CdV group must register with the association and request the association’s permission to use the logo on signs displayed in the neighborhood. On an almost daily basis, the association’s Facebook page posts information on events taking place all over the country, announcing that yet another neighborhood has joined the network.

CdV is promoted by the commander of a provincial Carabinieri precinct, who intends to fully dedicate himself to the program after his retirement (interview with Francesco Cacetta, August 2015). A criminologist by training, Francesco Cacetta wrote a book on the program and gifted it to me when we met for an interview in the summer of 2015. The book explains the basics of traditional criminological theories such as “broken windows” and lays out the workings of CdV and practical tips on how to operate the program. Framed as “security at zero cost” (sicurezza a costo zero), the principles of the program reverberate with neoliberal ideas of the efficient use of resources and of the mobilization of people through schemes of “active citizenship.” CdV figures as a means for citizens to rediscover their lost “civic sense” while strengthening their community and their trust in the authorities (Cacetta 2015: 35). When discussing the superiority of CdV to the ronde, Cacetta emphasizes firstly the inefficiency of the ronde, fleeting and grounded in delegating the responsibility for one’s security to someone else rather than taking accountability...
and coproducing one's own security. Instead, CdV promotes the model of a community where members watch out for one another.

**Germany: Wachsamer Nachbar and “the Culture of Looking Closely”**

In Germany, Bürgerwehren are more clearly connected to the far right and more often provoke adversity in the media and a strong response from authorities. For instance, in October 2021, a group of youths from the neo-Nazi group Der III. Weg (The Third Way) organized an action to push back refugees at the German-Polish border coming through Belarus and claimed to have arrested and handed over to the authorities around 30 men (Geiler 2021). The police not only denied that it cooperates with the movement or that it took part in the action but reacted firmly, reiterating that any such activities, deemed “horrid” (schauerlich), are illegal and will be prosecuted. According to a representative of the police, the creation of a Bürgerwehr equates the declaration of a state of emergency and has the aim only to foster “hysteria and fear” (Schmidt-Lux 2018: 140).

Besides single initiatives in larger cities that are usually connected to the far-right scene, the Schutzzonen (zones of protection) is a network of autonomous groups initiated by the far-right National Democratic Party. In 2021, 58 such groups were active all over the country (Bust-Bartels 2021: 215). The party set up in 2018 a website that encourages people to organize their own Schutzzonen (Peter 2018). The website provides a step-by-step guide for setting up patrols and sells, among other products stamped with the logo of the Schutzzonen, pepper spray, vests, signs, and stickers through the site's shop. The Schutzzone Facebook page has a pinned message:

When in the Sylvester night of 2015/16 the civil society experienced . . . the fatal consequences of the opening of borders, the government's reaction to the subsequent strong protests was not to close the borders, kick out illegals, and combat the causes of violence and degeneration. No, instead of this, during the next Sylvester celebration it set up special spaces for women and children, who could retreat to a protected zone when the threat escalated, so they could spend the next hours in safety. This space was called Schutzzone [protection zone]. Due to this curious situation, citizens, patriots, and nationalists have gathered together in a security campaign, to instill . . . the thought that not only the state, but we also are responsible for the security of every individual. WE have to see to it [Sorge tragen] that our children don't get abducted, our women don't get raped, and our grandparents don't get beaten up. Our entire country and our community must become again an entire zone of protection for us Germans! As long as the state does not change the basic conditions that have made these Schutzzonen necessary in the first place, we must get involved within our (legal) possibilities, to provide ourselves for justice and order. (Facebook, 22 March 2020)

Sometimes, the object of attention is material. Alerted to it, the group in Freital searched, for instance, for poison bait left for dogs in the Weißeritz area: “We systematically put trees and bushes under the magnifying glass,” warning dog owners to “always walk around with open eyes and awake senses.” Other times, the posts impart advice about accident risks; in July 2021, a post on the Schutzzone Sachsenland Facebook page presented the poster of a woman swimming under the message “Summer, sun, open your eyes,” quoting recent statistics on drownings. More often than not, though, the objects of vigilance of the Schutzzone groups are the usual suspects: immigrants, crime, tricksters. Here, too, Roma are targeted as potential criminals. Consider this message by one of the groups in Berlin:

Our boys from the capital were on their way again . . . They kept an eye out for illegal shell game players, pickpockets, and other tricksters, who pull money out of the pockets of natives,
and in special tourists . . . mostly quite literally . . . The main railway station was also one of our targets. Here, we used appropriate body language to make it clear to a group of Gypsies [eine #Zigeunerbande] that their shenanigans are not welcome. (Facebook, June 2019)

The Döbeln group, near Dresden, is particularly active. In November 2020, they posted: “We keep our eyes and ears open. We are here for you at this time too.” Sometimes, the objects of their vigilance are particular places:

Here, at the main train station, burglaries, harassment, and assaults happen often. In recent times the station is also being used as a place for partying and sleeping. One can see more and more dark-skinned people in this area! Whether by car or by foot, we work according to the principle of the neighborhood watch, so it cannot hurt to keep looking closely. (Facebook, October 2020)

Asked about the meaning of their initiative and how it is useful, a member of the group explains:

There is nothing bad per se about a Bürgerwehr, it depends on what it does. But showing presence can never be a bad thing, when one is ready to offer help. Much is prevented through sheer presence. And, of course, there is another way [in which a Bürgerwehr is useful], a somewhat conniving way: wherever we walk as Schutzzone, the police also look closer, because they receive orders from politicians to look closer. And then the police are automatically where we would like them to be. (ZDF 2020)

Articles and social media posts about Bürgerwehren elicit laments about the incapacity of the state to protect its citizens. Self-branded as “the eyes and ears of the police,” Schutzzonen see the police as an institution bankrupted by politicians (Facebook, November 2018). The narrative of state failure (Staatsversagen) figures prominently in reader comments: “A state that is incapable of protecting its borders, its women and its children has failed”; “when the state fails, self-defense is necessary” (Facebook, October 2019).

The state clearly defends its monopoly of violence. In Döbeln, the police stopped the patrol in October 2019 and initiated an investigation on grounds of unauthorized assumption of authority while wearing a uniform (Focus 2019). However, the immixtion of citizens in police work is not unheard of in Germany. Citizen participation in the provision of security was still perceived with suspicion in the early 2000s and reduced to a fringe “hysterical need for order” accompanied by a certain “pleasure in watching” (Freude am Observieren) (Wurtzbacher 2003: 93). But in several German lands, the police are assisted by a Sicherheitswacht (security watch) or Freiwilliger Polizeidienst (volunteer police service). Introduced in the late 1990s and early 2000s, these initiatives aim at involving citizens in support of police tasks.

Another initiative that is actively promoted by the German police is the neighborhood watch program Wachsamer Nachbar (watchful neighbor). Very similar to the Italian example, it seeks to foster watchfulness. The logo of the program is more sober than the Italian one (Figure 2), but it also centers on the police, with the motto “We want you to live in security. Your Police” (Wir wollen, dass Sie sicher leben. Ihre Polizei) placing the police in close proximity to the citizens (“your police”). Next to this text, a circle with two hues of blue, resembling the iris of an eye with a pupil in the center, reminds of the centrality of

Figure 2. The logo of the Wachsamer Nachbar program. Source: Keinbruch (2022).
sight in neighborhood watch but also of the watchfulness of the police itself, with the words *Ihre Polizei* written underneath the logo.

In the material published online or in press articles on the program, we find the same leitmotiv of watchfulness. The brochure of the program begins:

Neighbors are more than the people next door. Neighbors know each other, speak with each other, and take care of each other. Because anyone can end up in a situation in which he [sic] must rely on other people’s support. Neighbors can also help each other by protecting each other from criminality. Simply by being more alert for everything that happens in your house or neighborhood. This is not about snooping or spying but about your responsibility for the well-being of your neighbors. The police cannot be everywhere, but a neighbor is mostly close by. An intact community does not emerge by itself.

The first section of the brochure revolves around watchfulness and is titled “Always being alert.” “When you keep your eyes and ears open, burglars, thieves, or tricksters will attract your attention,” the text continues. Further: “Control creates security. Pay attention to important points to save yourself a lot of trouble,” followed by a list of objects and situations deserving one’s watchfulness to prevent crime: doors, locks, windows, unknown people loitering around the house. At the end of the brochure, we learn that “Attention pays off” and are encouraged to fill out a form addressed to the local police, presumably to ask for more information.

In the 1990s, Ronald Hitzler (1996) analyzed the security-related discourse of the German authorities, when the state appealed increasingly to its citizens to develop “a culture of looking closely” (*eine Kultur des Hinsehens*) as antidote to the perceived “unculture of looking away” (*Unkultur des Wegschauens*). The “culture of looking closely” is grounded in the value of civic courage (*Zivilcourage*), which encourages civilians to react to instances of violence they witness and act in defense of victims. The discourse emphasizing the need for a culture of vigilance is often mobilized by representatives of state authorities when debating claims for the need of Bürgerwehren. Bavarian Minister of Internal Affairs Joachim Herrmann (2009), for instance, claimed that “civic courage and a culture of looking closer strengthen feelings of security,” in contrast to the workings of Bürgerwehren. Notable is also the contrast between the culture of looking closely and the “unculture” of looking away; this reminds of the moralizing discourses of the Italian group, whose leader emphasized that the act of looking away is “uncivil.”

**Informal Policing in Europe: An Ambiguous Regime of Vigilance**

The introduction to this special section defines “regimes of vigilance” as “assemblages of practices and discourses that center on the mobilization of watchfulness to particular—often political—means, through hints and clues negotiated and read as signifiers of danger, embedded in specific materialities and mediated sensorially in specific ways” (Ivasiuc et al., this issue). This section will lay out the characteristics of the regime(s) of vigilance produced by practices of informal policing in the two contexts compared, showing the ambivalence at its core.

The relationship between state institutions and groups enacting forms of informal policing has often been discussed in terms that underline the “fringe” or “frontier” aspect of informal policing (Abrahams 1995). The argument is that such practices emerge in the “margins of the state” (Das and Poole 2004), where the state apparatus is scarcely present, corrupted, or inefficient, and citizens are forced to “take things into their own hands.” However, anthropologists have shown ethnographically how other factors than the perceived absence or ineffectiveness of the state are paramount in the emergence of practices of vigilantism and in the forms they come
to inhabit (Kirsch and Gratz 2010). Rather than emphasizing global factors contributing to the multiplication of practices of informal policing—such as the neoliberal retraction of the state, growing inequality and economic instability, or the growth of private policing, the multiplication of security initiatives, and the blurring of boundaries between the public and private provision of security (Diphoorn and Grassiani 2019; Johnston 1992), such accounts underline the importance of local articulations of these and other factors conducive to practices of informal policing that require closer ethnographic scrutiny. Returning to the issue of the margins, in the case of neighborhood watch programs we are witnessing the efforts of authorities in two European countries to disseminate a hegemonic form of citizen vigilance which removes citizen crime control from the “fringes” of legality that more active and violent forms of informal policing like the ronde or Bürgerwehren inhabit and promote.

Taking informal policing as a heuristic lens to conceptualize the state uncovers the blurs at the boundaries around (expectations of) who and what the state is. Analytically, the state consists of its idea and the social imaginaries produced around it on one hand, and its institutions, as mechanisms of governance on the other (Abrams 1988; Gupta 1995); both are agentive in their own way. Practices of informal policing such as ronde and Bürgerwehren produce, reproduce, and circulate the idea of the state as an incapable protector in need of support from—or replacement by—its citizens. Such claims have the perlocutionary function of conjuring precisely that which they affirm (Saglam 2021), and to give impetus—and ultimately agency—to a discourse of state incapacity that is not inconsequential: it normalizes vigilante-like attitudes and practices, as well as distrust of the government. In this sense, with every statement to this effect they make the state as a “failed state.” But in the same move, they also delegitimize the state precisely by portraying it as incapable of protection—and in this sense they unmake it. These practices of (un)making the state show the processuality of the state and the value of a relational approach where negotiations around boundary work are central (Thelen et al. 2018).

As a riposte to these forms of informal policing, state authorities actively promote neighborhood watch programs. Through the centrality of the police in the concept of both programs, events that aim at their extension are public rituals of state-making (see also Lewis, this issue). Such public rituals recreate and prescribe a model of society (Stepputat 2004) while acting to harness citizens’ watchfulness to recenter the state in a frictionless relationship with its citizens. Moreover, particularly in the Italian case where the logo of the program depicts a nuclear family in front of a fenced house, with a police officer in its middle, CdV works to reinforce heterosexual and reproductory normativities while re-embedding the police amid a vigilant but obedient citizenry that acts within the parameters dictated by a state portrayed as protective and benevolent. However, the boundaries between state and nonstate are blurred when the police as institution is primarily depicted as “ours” (Germany) and placed visually as a protective presence in the middle of the family (Italy). This blurring of boundaries serves not only to bring the state “back” amid the citizenry and combat the narrative of its unwillingness or incompetence to protect, but also to obscure social conflict around issues of class, race, and gender through the homogenization of a putative community of vigilant citizens with happy, propertied, and protected lives. Through the centrality of traditional criminological models such as the broken windows theory in these programs, the primacy of property and the materiality of middle-classness are produced as norm and as object worthy of protection. Neighborhood watch becomes a mechanism through which social boundaries are reproduced and reinforced, and the Others of race and class are expelled from a putatively homogeneous community. In the subtext, the police reaffirm their support for a social order consisting of homogeneous, heterosexual, propertied citizens welcoming of the police in their midst, and pitted, implicitly, against dissimilar outsiders.
Neighborhood watch programs also harness watchfulness as a means to build community. In this sense, the concept of “caring security” (sorgende Sicherheit) (Folkers and Langenohl 2020) constitutes a productive lens through which the ambiguity of watching is emphasized. Vigilance entails caring for by watching over, and “securing” and “protecting” are not only prerogatives of the state—something powerfully reminded by the posture of the police officer’s silhouette on the CdV logo but also by the way the woman carries her baby and the suggestion that such vulnerabilities need a powerful, male, and uniformed protection. Caring security aims at the production of a sort of ontological security expressed in feelings of safety and trust (Folkers and Langenohl 2020: 3–4). The harmony suggested in the imagery of neighbors caring for one another contrasts the violence and dangerousness associated with the unbridled ronde and Bürgerwehren, and the state’s crackdown of such initiatives, especially in Germany. Yet, at the core of both forms of informal policing is vigilance toward outsiders.

While neighborhood patrols challenge the state, state institutions advocate for channeling citizen vigilance through neighborhood watch schemes as an extension of the state’s own power. The contemporary extension of neighborhood watch as desirable form of security coproduction signals the relational production of governing through vigilance: a way of governing that normalizes general suspicion of outsiders and the primacy of property protection. Drawing on criminological concepts such as the broken windows theory that function as a regime of truth, while superposing to it an affective register of proximity, trust, and protection, the state speaks both to the minds and to the hearts of the citizens it is calling on to lend it their vigilance. In exchange for their watchfulness, they receive the promise of protection. Governing through vigilance depoliticizes the social order and masks the power hierarchies, struggles, and relationships that produce subjects to be policed as suspects and removed from the spaces of the white middle class, while turning the police into a caringly protective figure.

Lastly, the particularity of studying informal policing in Western Europe is that notions of “failed” states usually applied in postcolonial contexts in mainstream social and political science theories (Cox 2017) inhabit an emic position in the discourses of those who mobilize for forms of informal policing that challenge the monopoly of violence of the state. The regime of vigilance produced relationally around informal policing rests on the mobilization of narratives through which another set of negotiations takes place: if for the proponents of ronde or Bürgerwehren the state is a “failed,” inefficient, and corrupt state closer to the “uncivilized,” “third-world” governments, then authorities in Germany and Italy react by framing vigilante practices as lawless, undignified acts that do not pertain to a “civilized” and orderly Europe where the rule of law is sovereign. In such negotiations of civilizedness, alertness is mobilized at yet another level: “decent,” “concerned” citizens bear responsibility to watch out that we do not turn into them. Claiming the incompetence of the state and the failure of its vigilance reduces the perceived distance between “civilized” Europeans and the very people that ronde and Bürgerwehren want to keep at bay: the uncivilized Other, who—so the narrative goes—is on the move precisely because the “failed” state of the postcolony is incapable of ensuring the most basic material and security needs.

**Conclusion**

Practices of vigilance manifested in informal policing are simultaneously and ambivalently state-(un)making practices. Vigilant citizens delegitimize the state by portraying it as incapable of protection—and in this sense they *unmake* the state, “importing” from the imaginaries of the Global South a “failed” state. In response, state institutions actively participate in the exten-
sion and propagation of neighborhood watch programs as a less threatening form of vigilance in which the state is put back amid its citizens as a benevolent and protective authority. In the process, state control is being replaced in capillary ways through the “governmentalities of watchfulness” (Goldstein 2010) that the police actively promote through neighborhood watch schemes. While the resulting regime of vigilance is ambiguous, it ends up serving the policing and reproduction of a social order where property and social homogeneity in terms of class and race are central. While calling for citizen vigilance toward suspicious outsiders and focusing on crime against property as main form of deviance, it diverts attention from hierarchies of power and political struggles that seek to challenge the primacy of property and more largely the racial capital social order and the heterosexual normativities harnessed to its social reproduction. At the same time, the regime of vigilance encompassing negotiations around informal policing also struggles with an ontological ambiguity: by challenging the monopoly of violence of the state, ronde and Bürgerwehren threaten to signal the advent, in Europe, of the “failed” state of the postcolony that is in many ways seen as the cause of the mobility of those Others deemed threatening that are often invoked as the very raison d'être of patrols.

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NOTES

All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
1. The COVID-19 pandemic made ethnographic research on informal policing in Germany impossible. Therefore, for this case study I rely exclusively on data collected from online sources: social media, relevant websites, press articles and the accompanying reader comments; the latter have been recognized as an important and valid source of data for research (Henrich and Holmes 2013). I am aware of the asymmetry of data and its impact on comparability.
2. My research in Rome also highlighted the intersection between urban space, concern for decorum, and the economic interests at stake in keeping at bay urban blight (degrado), as well as immigrants and Roma, perceived as abject and criminal (Ivasiuc 2015, 2019, 2022). The practice of patrolling, in this case, was spurred by the leader of the group, his economic interests as administrator of a condominium in the neighborhood, and his political aspirations on the local far-right scene, and by an incipient process of gentrification affecting the eastern periphery of Rome, which lowered real estate prices and spurred discontent among residents.
3. These comments accompany the article by Lodovica Bulian (2017).

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