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Neighborhood Watch–Who Watches Whom? Reinterpreting the Concept of Neighborhood

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This paper analyzes the Australian and American experiences in Neighborhood Watch community policing schemes. Neighborhood Watch, as a method of social control endorsed by the state, is supported and run solely by volunteers, and so provides a focus to discuss the more subtle meanings and processes of symbolic contestation among state, community, and individual. This paper attempts to show why the community upholds the dominance of formalized law as an ideology, despite the law's proven inadequacies to maintain social control. It also examines how the symbolic concept of "neighborhood" is manipulated by Neighborhood Watch programs. As these programs fail, which they inevitably seem to do, opportunities are opened for reappropriation of the notion of "neighborhood" and its use for the specific needs of individuals, interest groups, and local communities searching for a sense of physical and psychological security that the traditional idea of a neighborhood environment no longer can provide. The ironic conclusion drawn is that alternative forms of social justice, as defined by gangs and vigilante groups, are validated by this state-authorized system of community control that initially set out to destroy them.

Key words: gangs, law, neighborhood, social control, vigilantes

STATE POLICY to involve the public in the Neighborhood Watch program is a relatively new concept in Australian law and order practices. The purpose of this paper is not, however, to assess the effectiveness either of the Neighborhood Watch scheme, or of alternative options to the reduction and prevention of crime.[1] Instead, the Australian experience with Neighborhood Watch provides a comparison with the American experience allowing for the analysis of the symbolic relationships between western law and society, and the more subtle meanings and symbolic processes that occur within the community policing movement. This paper, then, will discuss why there are perceived needs by people to maintain the dominance of formalized law as an idealized cultural imperative,[2] despite Neighborhood Watch's implicit message that current law is inadequate. I will argue that the role Neighborhood Watch plays in satisfying various social needs can influence how people interpret and shape the parameters of law. Moreover, I will show that Neighborhood Watch helps crystalize popular perceptions of appropriate individual interaction in legal processes.

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Despite claims to the contrary, Neighborhood Watch as a mechanism for crime prevention is not overwhelmingly successful–if it is successful at all.[3] There is a basic contradiction when people show overwhelming enthusiasm for a scheme without questioning its effectiveness or their participation in a program that governs their home environment and leisure time. Why is it that people have not demanded some form of accountability for their efforts? People presumably believe that Neighborhood Watch reduces crime, but it is more likely that people simply avoid asking the question. Yet to the extent that support for Neighborhood Watch is predicated on a fear of increased crime, one would expect the public to demand some return, both on their own actions and on those of the police.[4]

If the scheme has not dramatically reduced overall levels of crime, it must satisfy other, more collateral needs necessary to evoke continued community support. It is these public needs that on the one hand support the dominance of law, but on the other hand demand of law functions it cannot fulfill, that create social tension and opportunities for legal re-definition. If Neighborhood Watch is going to be understood as a functioning process, public needs and gratifications have to be both acknowledged and given weight.[5] Neighborhood Watch identifies some obvious social needs in its focus on the protection of property, the person, and associated values that make up the concepts of family, home, and localized community. It requires collective participation within a person's neighborhood, and by implication polarizes social conflict: property owners against the propertyless; employed against unemployed; family, home, and community against the individual outsider; law abider against lawbreaker; morally strong against the sinfully weak (Einstadter 1983). Neighborhood Watch carries the tacit message that law protects "us" from "them." And as everyone is pain-

fully aware, law conceals contradictions and inequalities in access to it and in its very practice. Both the visual and literal messages of the Neighborhood Watch logo are not only that "we" are watching "you," but "we" watch to defend. What I ask is by what processes is the watching being done? More specifically, how does the individual acting within the context of the local community perceive his/her role in enforcement of social control?

Theoretical Perspective

The "neighborhood" as a site of power draws upon its historical associations of an intimate community. Yet at the same time, it has assumed contemporary meanings and experienced new impetus as a focus for community action and politics (Godfrey 1988:24). Neighborhood Watch elicits and manipulates the traditional neighborhood ideal in its establishment of a network of surveillance, which exists as the "community eye." (See Foucault 1977.)[6] People are told to peep out from curtains and report suspicious activity. This network of surveillance holds the Neighborhood Watch movement together by reinforcing the vulnerability of the individual. At the same time it introduces the potential for collective action. Surveillance is never a one-way process, and in the context of Neighborhood Watch, police watch people, people watch people, and people watch police (Mathiesen 1987).[7] If it is accepted that the "supervisors are always supervised," what is discovered about peoples' reactions to Neighborhood Watch on a local level can be seen as a reaffirmation or denial of values held by those who govern the state. The processes of surveillance established by Neighborhood Watch on a small scale replicates—or at least set out to when initially endorsed by the government—the prevailing structures of power relations between state and community.

It could be argued that Neighborhood Watch, which exists ostensibly by the strategies of observation, represents an extension of state control by concealed and insidious methods into the domestic sphere (Abel 1982; see also Brady 1981; Cohen 1987; Santos 1982). This perspective has been challenged however, and recent work has indicated that informal methods of social control may in some instances operate to resist state power (Fitzpatrick 1988; Henry 1985; O'Malley 1987).[8]

I have drawn upon both theoretical perspectives, and maintain that pluralism, or more correctly "integral pluralism" (Fitzpatrick 1983), is not an effective or flexible enough tool to identify dominating relationships of fusion between informal and formal methods of social control. Symbolic codes and social rituals present an analytical key to both identifying and understanding relative power relationships among individual, community, and state (Harrington and Merry 1988:714).[9] Following Abel's direction, Neighborhood Watch does allow police access and control over the community in a manner it previously did not have. I argue however, that this control is achieved largely through the processes of taking from and imposing upon the symbolic associations that form popular ideas and of the conceptual logic of what constitutes a "neighborhood." Since symbols are constantly capable of redefinition, there is a persistent threat to the state that symbols will be reappropriated by individuals and used in a manner to resist it. The primary question then becomes, by what means does a government govern popular symbols?

By focusing upon symbolic analysis, it is possible to move away from seeing control as the imposition of state restraint, toward seeing control manifested via the social codes that symbolism identifies and defines. Codes may be declared, but the underlying social organizations on which they rely, as well as meanings they do not publicly elicit, are of fundamental importance. The crucial point is that symbolism's fabric is woven from numerous cultural and political sources, as well as from a measure of individual choice—choice that ironically amounts to constraint in its characterization as both rational and responsible, and so befitting a citizen who by definition is intrinsically subordinate to the state.[10] It is the element of choice to participate in Neighborhood Watch that is one of its major attractions. In an advanced capitalist consumer society, the right to choose is firmly insinuated into the public arena, even if choices are more often than not fabricated options. The paradox is that the state reinforces this often romanticized right through endorsement of Neighborhood Watch, but in so doing it may in fact legitimize the individual's right to exercise particular action outside established modes of community policing and state control. In the neighborhood, the way people view the police, the government, themselves, and other citizens has the potential to shift.

Law as Ostensible Justification for Performance

For Neighborhood Watch to operate as officially planned, people must participate in it and be seen to be participating. It is clearly a public performance (Turner 1985). Neighborhood Watch "performances" rely on law to provide the rationale for drama, since they invoke the power of the state and invest in the ideology of democracy and bureaucratic control. As these interrelationships become more complex, law shields public performances from scrutiny and grants them the space to determine what is often indeterminate within the operations of their licensed activities. Neighborhood Watch, by operating on "the right side of the law," uses law as the pivotal focus in definition of both its own functions and the nature of its opponent. As Moore (1978:109) poignantly wrote, the "legal wrong . . . makes it possible to have a show-down without necessarily acknowledging the deeper long-term motives or objectives which may accompany such action."

Neighborhood Watch in Action

DEFINING THE SCENE AND CHARACTERS. The very title of Neighborhood Watch denotes its urban parameters—its relationship with the city. But Neighborhood Watch relies for its effectiveness on the united action of a geographically defined, localized group. It seems that Neighborhood Watch seeks to superimpose an artificial collectivism (through public performance) on the diverse and anonymous nature of the city. It also attempts to redefine urban cultural meaning by enabling the individual to identify with a group.

Through emotive language in brochures, and on signposts that line local streets, Neighborhood Watch clearly identifies the spatial setting of its psychological drama. A resident walking down the street to buy some milk is reassured that s/he

is a member of the area. By accepting the geographical construction s/he accepts as well the implied social demarcations that notion carries of "us" against "them." This identity is crucial. For Neighborhood Watch to function at all, the tension between "criminal" and the focus of attack, be it person or property, is absolutely necessary. There cannot be a system of law, and Neighborhood Watch cannot claim to be its champion, if there is nothing to protect or enforce. The new "neighborhood" encompasses a policing power and so necessitates for its very identity an integral element of criminal activity.[11]

In the Neighborhood Watch monthly newsletters, crime has value as a statistical result, numbered, categorized, and then listed. The criminal is presented as an abstracted caricature—a masked, unemployed, drug desperado who breaks down back doors and makes off with video equipment and microwave ovens. The criminal is depicted as anti-social and so removed from society; as a consequence, social motivations for criminal activity can be distanced. In a similar way, individuals participating in Neighborhood Watch are also caricatured, and so decontextualized. The neighborly individual only makes sense if s/he belongs to a neighborhood, works together with others, and adopts identity by virtue of a geographical placing, which forms part of and in turn defines the topographical imagery of urban living.[12]

A COMPLICATED STORY. The focus of the conflict Neighborhood Watch embodies is not so much concerned with mechanical conformity to rules, but with what conformity, or lack of it, signifies.[13] Its apparent success in dealing with social crisis represents the continuance of society's present "common sense"—society's public myths or ideologies, which "not only give substantive content to one's political world view but also tend to define how that content is to be linked to specific political symbols" (Elder and Cobb 1983:54).

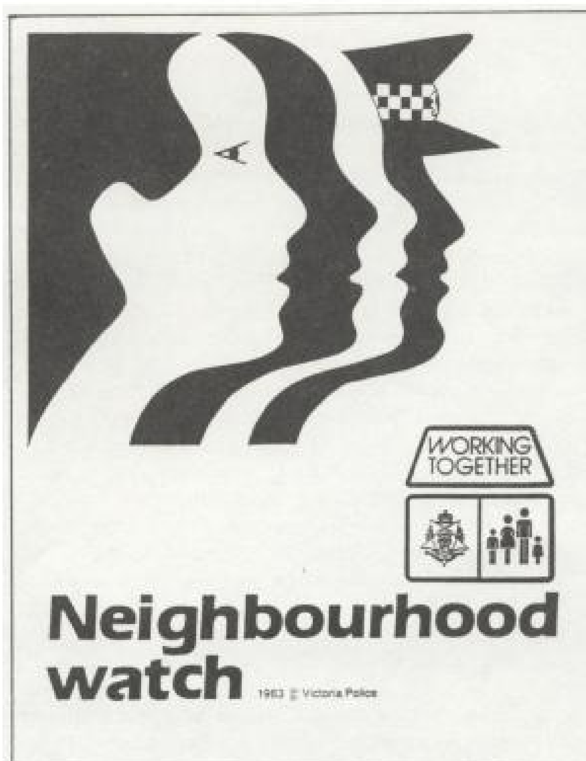

FIGURE 1. THE NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH LOGO

The Neighborhood Watch logo (Figure 1) visualizes the specific symbols that the Neighborhood Watch newsletter puts into writing. Perched high on straight metal poles, innocuously interspersed at regular intervals along residential streets, the logo becomes the equivalent to a political badge, or an advertising poster (Hebdige 1979). As discussed, the primary image is "we" (visually symbolized by the overlapping silhouettes on the Neighborhood Watch logo) are a homogeneous group, united in our common purpose to defeat crime. "We," importantly situated in the foreground, are morally superior, both in relation to the criminal and the state. "We" do not work with the police—we become community policemen, adopting the same stance and appearance and gaze, and at the same time drawing upon old-world values of a citizen's dutiful responsibility. In sharp contrast to the amorphous silhouettes, the viewer's attention is first caught by the detail of the eye, which looks toward the only other detail, the policeman's hat. A much smaller visual symbol in the bottom right hand corner is the stylized, nuclear family, neatly protected within the confines of a house, and labeled "Working Together." This emotive image of family is the strategic unit considered necessary for a cohesive society, and implicitly dictates the need for its preservation. The "criminal," while an integral component for understanding Neighborhood Watch, is not visually represented on the logo. This absence reinforces the abstraction of the law breaker and the sense that crime is an unidentifiable force. By denying physical reality as a focus for attack, people are more confused as to how to combat crime. And sustained panic can be used to divert attention and soften any social resentment toward the police as enforcers of control.

By dissecting the logo's visual and literal images it is possible to identify the "myths" that society seeks to nurture. The mythologies of work, family, and community are fundamental to a liberal-democratic society. And contemporary realities of unemployment, divorce, a transitory society, and social disharmony do not diminish the myths' importance. In fact, such challenges only reinforce the power of the pervasive and linking ideology of freedom of choice.[14] People, especially in the current context of worldwide economic recession, feel a loss of individual control over family, home, and work. They can nonetheless cling to their apparent ability to choose the government and methods by which society will be governed. The individual can take comfort in resorting to legal processes, while law remains "the bulwark of freedom." If all else fails, by taking a positive stand a person can satisfy immediate doubts and appear to exercise control over his/her personal situation.

Participation in Neighborhood Watch allows local residents to make such a stand. Individuals appear to be transferring the policing power of the state to themselves as part of a move to decentralize government authority (Cotterrell 1988:21). People feel they are making a choice. This element of choice is the dominant ideology Neighborhood Watch promotes. By telling people it is up to individuals to fight crime in their own backyards, it indirectly promotes the potential for new concepts of liberty to emerge. These concepts are neither intended nor an-

ticipated by a centralized government. In short, the failures of Neighborhood Watch to fight crime incite struggles over neighborhood symbols that help define and support myths of individuality, free choice, and a democratic state. For while law defines the concept of freedom and stakes out the level on which tension can exist, it ignores the human agency factor of those participating in the neighborhood program. And human intervention highlights the failure of the myths to protect the "free" individual. In other words, there are points of crisis when law proves fallible, and cultural myths demand social redefinition (Moore 1978:49).

Redefining "Neighborhood"

The "neighborhood" has been given contemporary significance through the operation of Neighborhood Watch. I have argued that the initial appeal for individuals in Neighborhood Watch represents a capitalist society's fear for the future. This fear demands that the mechanics of social control define the unknown and make it controllable. In Neighborhood Watch, control is implemented as the "people" appear to take law into their own hands. And so centralized state powers of law and order, supported by the reigning ideological myths, are reinterpreted and reasserted through new channels of justification.

The above scenario, however, overlooks the fact that people are anxious, not just to impose constraint on others, but also to exert a measure of personal choice in its implementation. Yet the individual's role is inherently contradictory. On the one hand, a person consents to and promotes the sense that state control is being decentralized by becoming a member of Neighborhood Watch. And yet on the other, the individual is ultimately forced to acknowledge, rely upon, and so legitimize police power and governance which represent exactly what that person perceives s/he requires liberation from. This tension allows opportunities to exploit new symbolic codes pertinent to those dissatisfied with the system.

In many large American cities, where today the rift between popular dreams and social and economic realities is widest, Neighborhood Watch does not employ the rituals of meetings, agendas, fund-raising, and community education initially prescribed when the scheme was first introduced in the 1970s. Nor in America is Neighborhood Watch recognized on every suburban street by neatly spaced signposts. Social groups still revolve around the forum of the neighborhood, and may still rely on a link with police, but they promote the leading concepts of family, home, and security in different ways to justify action not initially endorsed by the Neighborhood Watch program. In Australia, by contrast, Neighborhood Watch rituals, as formalized in evening meetings and manifested publicly through street signposts, continues to be of social importance. These rituals serve both participants' understanding of Neighborhood Watch as performing an essential role, and the wider local community through which Neighborhood Watch constitutes its meaningful presence.

Conclusion

I have argued that in new methods of local policing, neighborhood as a symbol has been fractured and put to different uses. These uses reflect to various degrees a popular recognition that the present legal system has failed and that "neighborly" community cohesion is a fallacy. As Appadurai has argued, we have entered into a "new condition of neighborliness" that penetrates to the very heart of a person's individual and collective identity (Appadurai 1990:2).[15] In the light of these failures, the acknowledgement of an individual's right to choose some alternative form of social control has gained attractiveness and strength.[16] Neighborhood Watch, in promoting the right to choose, has allowed the city context to breed a new form of social surveillance. While visions of Arabian vigilante groups in Chicago and other American cities may be hard to reconcile with Australian law enforcement, there is increasing evidence of community disillusionment in Australia.[17] Although on a different scale, Australia is beginning to experience its own forms of informal social control.[18]

In America, it is not necessarily bad that the concept of "neighborhood" has been extended and manipulated in meaning beyond that ever envisaged by the original founders of Neighborhood Watch. In a sense the local community should have some power to act, especially if the police are inadequate and the situation has become urgent. Yet just as symbolism has changed to meet changing circumstances, so too has the individual performer had to adopt a new role in ritualizing the means of control. "Liminality" resulting from crisis has granted the space to redefine the Neighborhood Watch performance. In the past Neighborhood Watch has allowed individuals, through participation, to play out public cultural myths by labeling themselves members of a wide social jury, enforcing and maintaining the letter of "just" law. Now, as people begin to play a greater part in the actual direction of performance and in desperation take law into their own hands in a real sense, roles have become confused and power relations realigned.

The message is clear when Lisa Sliwa, a leader of the famous New York Guardian Angels who for a decade have patrolled subways and are for hire to clean up neighborhood "human garbage," stated in an interview with a Melbourne journalist, "I don't want to hear about them [criminals] coming from broken homes or their mothers didn't love them. These streets belong to us. And I don't want to be told by a guy in a cop car with a gun that I can't fight back."

American government policies have supported these radical community responses and have given such action—albeit indirectly—viability and credence. In New York, Mayor Dinkins prides himself on a newly implemented force of street walking "beat cops." In Chicago, a recent proposal put forth by the Alliance for Neighborhood Safety argues for proactive strategies. The Alliance recognizes that each community has its own needs and problems, that local residents are the most likely to know what their neighborhood's worst problems are, and that the most effective way of fighting crime is to prevent it. Yet actual methods of deterrence remain vague, and ambiguities abound over issues such as who is in control, who is accountable, what action warrants interference, how much force can be used, and, most importantly, who determines what is the law.

In Australia, Neighborhood Watch will no doubt continue to enjoy support for some time while the police and media maintain a campaign of crisis control. Public perceptions of high crime rates have not diminished. But there is a new element

that helps explain the Australian peoples' failure to demand accountability both of their own participatory action and of the 10,000 hours of volunteered police time in Neighborhood Watch programs. There is a new and, I would claim, increasing fear encouraged by the dramatic example presented by America. The fear is not of crime itself, but of peoples' choice in how they will deal with the crisis when the state system of law and order is proven fallible.

It is no longer possible to ignore America's community response to increased levels of crime and gang activity. A recent study has shown that Australia ranked third behind America and Canada among western nations as having the highest crime rates and the most overcrowded jails. In an effort to evade American models of voluntary policing, Australia's chief commissioner of police, Mr. Kel Gare, denounced the use of private security firms offering their services to municipal councils and directly to householders. Senior police inspector Gary Jamieson, in charge of auxiliary forces, warned Australian people that they may end up with vigilante groups such as the Guardian Angels in New York.

Whether Australia will follow America's lead towards increased community policing is difficult to speculate. It is certainly not a remote possibility, despite America's levels of violence being exacerbated by greater ethnic tensions, denser population distributions, and higher unemployment and inflation. If the Australian government decides to revoke its current policies in favor of community policing, then it has cause for alarm. As time progresses, it will be increasingly difficult for the government to hold back demands for individual rights to action, especially when such rights are complexly intertwined with the sense of an individual's identity and personal value. Australia is not the only country that gazes in trepidation at the American examples of social control gone wild. Australia's present dilemmas will, in different degrees and different forms, have to be faced by most other nations that participate in late capitalist social organization; they are subject to parallel economic fluctuations, mass media influences, technological pressures, ethnic tensions, family dislocations and widespread disillusionment especially among young adults.

Government policies in the future will be challenged to meet the volatile problems of social order and control. The situation in America is dramatically real as the difficulties presented by local violence moves out of the authority of centralized government, and into a sphere of community self-regulation. There is the obvious potential for individuals who make up a "neighborhood" to adopt the role of both jury and judge—to both create and enforce arbitrary law. The paradox is that the inadequacies of the present police force has and will grant people like Lisa Sliwa the legitimacy to act. Neighborhood Watch as the tool of both government and police has, by not being able to maintain order, allowed disorder breed a new form of control. Power balances have shifted, perhaps marginally, but nonetheless significantly. In the light of the American example, the official Australian *Neighborhood Watch Prevention Handbook* message that, "the greatest element in the fight against crime is a refusal to accept that which we should not have to endure" (Daley 1987:8) carries new meanings and disturbing connotations—disturbing because we cannot be sure just who is watching whom, and by implication, whose law is ultimately more just.

NOTES

[1] It would be impossible to do so in Australia because there has been little attempt made to gather independent empirical data bearing on assessments of the success of Neighborhood Watch.

[2] The use of an ideological perspective as an approach to sociolegal phenomena is discussed in Harrington and Merry (1988:711).

[3] The Australian Institute of Criminology analyzed the long-term effects of community crime prevention and found no clear correlation between crime reduction and the operation of the program (Bennett 1987; see also Rosenbaum, Lewis, and Grant 1986). This finding is supported by Christopher Corn's more recent study (1988).

[4] Susan Smith (1989:284) suggests that accountability is a pivotal issue, because its absence at the level of the state has forced the development of policy in conflict with autonomous actions.

[5] Spitzer (1987:57) argues that modern sociological theorists tend to ignore the links between "social organization and social control—a link that is mediated as much by the consciousness, desires and goals of those who are to be controlled as the interests and agendas of the controllers."

[6] Wickham (1983:493) states that any discussion of resistance to power must be understood in specific "intersections of practices around specific operational policies." While I agree with Wickham that the specifics of power are crucial, I also maintain that Foucault's analysis is important as an aid to initially identify the wider social issues.

[7] Reichman (1987) discusses how surveillance in private spheres has dramatically increased with the sophistication of technology.

[8] Henry, O'Malley, Fitzpatrick, Harrington and Merry (and others) reject the more traditional analysis of informalism as a means solely to maintain social control. These critics implicitly doubt what has been called Abel's "mechanistic" approach (O'Malley 1987) and argue that interactional processes between a government and the public are complicated, and by no means a simple flow of power from the center outwards. The state is not a monolithic entity. While governmental power through the latent threat of legal coercion is strong, it is not systematic. For a helpful review of the emergence of various theoretical approaches see Henry (1985) and Merry (1988).

[9] Merry (1988:879) picks up many of the theoretical concerns discussed above, and ties together the threads of current debate on how to analyze sociolegal phenomena when she writes "I think it is essential to see state law as fundamentally different [from all other forms of ordering] in that it exercises the coercive power of the state and monopolizes the symbolic power associated with state authority. But, in many ways, it ideologically shapes other normative orders as well as provides an inescapable framework for their practice."

[10] Spitzer (1987:57) writes, "Control and constraint are often used synonymously; yet it is clear that in capitalist societies choice may be far more basic to the ordering of social life."

[11] The impact of crime fills a void, for gone are the means by which the "neighborhood" was defined in the past. Going, if not gone, are the legal distinctions between private and public law (Moore 1978: 106). Gone are the conventional distinctions between a person's private life and public work, and, as a corollary, gone too are the clear spatial differentiations between residential and business areas. Crime as a focus provides the means for a new definition of "neighborhood" at a time when most neighborhoods in an historical sense no longer exist.

[12] This analysis is analogous to Warner's discussion of the "slum." He discussed how this geographically-based word was a means of talking about the poor in an abstract way. The term helped create distance between the lower and middle classes of the new industrial city (1985:383–394).

[13] Moore (1978:4) wrote that the function of law does far more then define the parameters of legal activity, for "conformity to the rules seldom in itself is the central objective."

[14] Cotterrell (1988:10) called this the "ideology of liberty," and wrote "while liberty is treated as freedom from legal intervention, this liberty is merely what it is defined to be by law. The conception of liberty thus becomes empty of substantive content."

[15] "The task of cultural reproduction, even in its most intimate arenas, such as husband-wife and parent-child relations, becomes both politicized and exposed to the traumas of deterritorialization as family members pool and negotiate their mutual understandings and aspirations in sometimes fractured spatial arrangements. At larger levels, such as community, neighborhood, and territory, this politicization is often the emotional fuel for more explicitly violent politics of identity, just as these larger politics sometimes penetrate and ignite domestic politics" (Appadurai 1990:18).

[16] Brigham (1987) argues the failings of legal control and the right of an individual to some measure of social security are two emerging ideologies which have entered the public discourse, and have become crucial to the strategies and tactics of special interest groups now claiming a place within the neighborhood.

[17] Arabian vigilante groups in Chicago circle their city block, dressed in long flowing gowns, speaking into walkie-talkies to both police and fellow patrollers, and epitomize the new type of control some people feel is necessitated by present inadequacies in crime prevention. This trend is most common among socioeconomic minority groups who have the least hope of ever fulfilling the American myths of popular culture, but arguably have the greatest need to be seen to be part of it.

[18] For example, a Perth-based vigilante group recently came to Melbourne to promote and establish a branch of their night patrol team.

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