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## The Law and The People: “Democracy” in the World of “Psycho-Pass”

In the anime “Psycho-Pass”, Japan seems to have achieved the impossible. By surrendering politics and governance to Sibyl, an all-encompassing AI that governs the nation, people seem to have received a functional utopia. Is this system, which relies on “police logic” and the suspension of liberty for order, truly a perfect society? This paper aims to answer this question, particularly through the lens of Ranciere’s “democracy” as the grounding power of institutions (Ranciere 2010, 51).

### Part I (God From The Machine: The Sibyl System)

In the 22nd century, Japan is governed by the Sibyl System. The system describes itself as having “[attained] a logical society in which various contradictions and inequalities are resolved [...] by achieving an absolutely perfect system, Sibyl has become an existence that embodies that ideal” (Psycho-Pass 2013, “Justice”). According to Bourdieu, the state is a body which “successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical and symbolic violence”. Furthermore, he posits that by “realizing itself in social structures and the mental structures adapted to them, the institution [...] has all the appearances of the natural” (Bourdieu 1994, 4). A successful state, then, has to wield symbolic power by presenting the assumptions of its rule as an objective given. In the case of Sibyl, science is the source of its legitimacy. As science is something defined by objectivity and rationality, its foundations seem to best fit the nature of modern thought as defined by Weber: a world of rationalization, where the products of reason and calculability are trusted above all else (Crash Course, “Weber”). If the system’s logic is based on such a foundation, then, isn’t it trustworthy? Let’s examine how exactly the Sibyl System uses science to carry out its governance of Japan.

Sibyl naturally seems to rely on a distinctly positivist point-of-view, assuming that society and people can be understood and presented through systemic observations and quantifiable data (Crash Course, “Sociology”). On the personal level, it governs by performing instantaneous cymatic scans of each individual. Through this scan, Sibyl combines someone’s societal and psychological profiles, and “Hue” (current stress level) to create a “Crime Coefficient” (CO), which indicates that person’s propensity to commit a crime in the near future. The overall aggregate of this data is what is referred to as a person’s Psycho-Pass, which influences everything from a person’s education, to career options (considering both maximum efficiency and personal fulfillment). Most importantly, however, the Psycho-Pass is used by law enforcement against those whose COs breach safety thresholds (with consequences being decided by the severity of the breach). On the societal level, Sibyl manages the country as a closed system, with Japan’s borders completely sealed off to preserve the balance the system has created. Because of

this, Japan seems to operate as a limited autarky, with at least its food supply and vital resources all efficiently produced and managed by Sibyl (with new technologies and Sibyl's efficient decision-making overcoming economic limitations).

In-universe, Sibyl's governance has resulted in a society that, despite its strictures, is incredibly secure, stable, and prosperous. It does not infringe on personal freedoms so long as people abide by the law and maintain their Psycho-Pass, its autarky operates as a mixed economy similar to modern capitalist societies (judging by the various goods and services available), personal and artistic expression is allowed (though subject to censorship on grounds of mental disturbance), and almost all forms of organized crime have effectively been erased from society (with petty or one-time crimes constituting most of the remaining statistics). In short, Sibyl's society would have to be viewed more like a hyper-Singapore than a hyper-North Korea.

Now that we know how Sibyl governs, let us examine how it executes justice, how it conceives of citizenship, and what sort of a grounding philosophy we can find behind its logic as the state.

## Justice

Bourdieu says that the state possesses the means of imposing specific principles conforming to its own logic, and is naturally the site of the exercise of symbolic (and thus juridical) power (Bourdieu 1994, 9-10). Normally this is expressed when the state conceives of and executes the law. Sibyl, however essentially *is* the law. In normal justice systems, the *police*, the *courts*, and the *system of punishment and corrections* work together to administer justice (Crash Course, "Crime"). For Sibyl, however, the courts are removed entirely because justice is determined solely by the parameters set by the Psycho-Pass system, and so isn't founded on a legal framework at all. When a person commits, or intends to commit, a crime, his Psycho-Pass flags him as a potential disturbance to social peace. This person is then either arrested by the police and brought into therapy or rehabilitative incarceration (depending on whether or not a crime was committed), or deemed an irredeemable danger to society and executed on the spot. It is important to note that the police themselves have no say in the process, since the "Dominators" (weapons used to administer the different forms of justice) are wholly controlled by Sibyl (via the CO), and only carried around by officers. The idea of Sibyl effectively serving as judge, jury, and executioner seems to helm dangerously close to what we perceive of as absolutism, or authoritarian forms of government. Traditionally, criticism of absolutism tends to come from its propensity towards abuse (which has much worldly precedent), and its inherent unaccountability to people. Sibyl, however, as a machine intelligence with strict rational parameters, is supposedly immune to this abuse.

## Citizenship

States wield cultural and symbolic capital in order to mould structures and principles that contribute to the conception of national identities and cultures. These then form the *nomos* of a proper citizen (Bourdieu 1994, 7-8). In Sibyl's world, it seems that citizenship, or social belonging, is dependent solely on one's Psycho-Pass. If so, this

means that citizenship becomes something that has to be actively maintained rather than something that is a given foundational right. You are born and registered under the system (no immigration) and are educated that one's Psycho-Pass must be kept clean at all times, buying into the cultural logic of the Sibyl System where mental health and its care remain the priority above all other social concerns (which is reflected in every facet of society, aesthetics, design etc. similar to Bourdieu's state being the foundation of logical-moral conformism) (Bourdieu 1994, 13). Slipping far beyond normalcy without committing an actual crime labels you as a "latent criminal". This becomes a breeding ground for discrimination. In addition to common prejudice, latent criminals are also feared due to risk of psycho-hazard (possible mental contamination from empathizing and associating with them). Now obviously this seems to us like a clear case of prejudice and discrimination, and we would be right. In addition, theories of deviance indicate that such a set-up makes it almost impossible for people many latent criminals to ever fully reform, being repeatedly reinforced into their criminality by the logic of the state (Crash Course, "Deviance"). Though based on scientific grounds, the fact that the plight of latent criminals is seen as either a necessary evil or even desired outcome for the system to work strikes us as injustice against their human rights. The reason why these arguments do not work in the case of Sibyl, however, is because it exists in a world where Human Rights (rights are never brought up directly in the series) have no place in the logic of the system, where what matters is success in following the system's demands. In this, we can see parallels to how the divide between the rich and poor are treated in a place like the Philippines. People's conception of the poor (reinforced by the logic of capitalism) paints them as failures rather than victims of external circumstances, and the poor themselves are less secure due to their social standing. The difference from the Philippines, however, lies in that the "healthy" are the vast majority in Sibyl's world. Sibyl also most likely takes advantage of these statistics as it would most likely see the discrimination as permissible so long as it motivates the majority of people against a similar fate. This conclusion seems logical because, as we will see, it lines up exactly with what seems to be the Sibyl System's grounding philosophy.

### Utilitarianism

Sibyl, true to its rationality and scientific nature, bases its conception of the greater good on a distinctly *utilitarian* ethical philosophy, which states that an action's morality should be measured in terms of the happiness that it produces, as happiness is considered to be the ultimate end (Crash Course, "Utilitarianism"). The key characteristic of utilitarianism for us, however, is that, as a flexible and results-based system, it empowers the decision-maker rather than an external law. This is something that matches Sibyl's set-up exactly. If utilitarians are often counseled to make decisions "from the perspective of a benevolent, but disinterested stranger"(Crash Course, "Utilitarianism"), this makes Sibyl the best possible judge. This is the justification behind why its governance is so heavily centralized: the system knows best and should make decisions for everyone and everything. By showing itself to be the "perfect" rational decision-maker, it supposedly is able to properly use of all of the tools criticized for being so open to corruption and human error. People may decry this surrendering of governance as imprisonment, but Sibyl would merely respond that its morality is sound due to the results that it evidently brings forth. By creating a far more peaceful and orderly society

than anything that has ever been achieved before, it has provided the greatest amount of good, to the greatest amount of people.

## Part II (Vox Populi, Vox Dei: The Rupture of “Democracy”)

Previously, we have explored the basis of Sibyl’s pronouncement as the ideal system. Yet how will this stand if we consider Ranciere’s conception of the political, and the thematic conclusions of the show itself?

To Bourdieu, states are not founded upon a conscious ‘social contract’, but are instead the product of an *unconscious* agreement; one founded upon the state imposing its own image of coherent objectivity upon the people (Bourdieu 1994, 14). In other words (taking from Hume), states are founded on *opinions*, and on the mere *appearance* of totality (Bourdieu 1994, 15). Sibyl need only hide enough of any cracks that might exist in its system, letting people fill in the gaps with their own ordered perceptions. In reality, the show slowly reveals just how many cracks there are within the system, and the magnitude of some of these are enough to challenge the system’s legitimacy as a whole.

Enter Shogo Makishima, a “consulting criminal” (similar to Sherlock Holmes’ Moriarty) who believes that Sibyl has robbed humanity of its spirit. Decrying the comfort-focused, stress-free “happiness” of the system (where the leading cause of death is actually “eustress deficiency” (Psycho Pass 2012, “Symbolism”)), he presents an alternative philosophy: eudaimonia is in the pursuit of one’s darkest desires, because the stress and free will that Sibyl guards against is actually vital to true fulfillment. With this framing, he seems to paint the freedom Sibyl operates against similarly to how Plato views democracy: a way of life in which all semblance of order and “good governance” is turned on its head (Ranciere 2010, 49-50). When he manages to create technology that blocks Psycho-Pass readings, the precarious nature of Sibyl’s order is revealed (Psycho-Pass 2013, “Sulfur”). Liberated from the grip of Sibyl, humanity (both “criminals” and the “healthy”) is still shown to be as violent and savage as ever, revealing a society that *tears into itself* at the slightest provocation. The fact that chaos is introduced so easily, however, clues us into how much Sibyl actually relies on the compliance of its own population to maintain its order. This hearkens back to one of Ranciere’s observations: that Sibyl’s “police logic” is upended by the fact that any form of stable rulership hinges upon an anarchic foundation, that power is always *political* in nature, regardless of whether or not it is a formal democracy (Ranciere 2010, 53-54). In effect, Makishima’s actions serve to reveal Sibyl as merely playing the part of a superior being. In reality, it relies deception to function, with the largest secret being the its very nature as a whole.

It is revealed that Sibyl’s core is comprised of a hive mind of the “criminally asymptomatic” (people whose psychopathic nature and *ubermensch* morality renders their COs stable regardless of their actions). By forming the leadership collective out of the willingly extracted brains of society’s worst criminals, their lack of empathy and removed

nature allow them to execute Sibyl's utilitarian mandate as an entity devoted to order above all else. This nature, however, is a secret that must be kept from the public in order for Sibyl to continue to function, revealing the system as not being a "coherent totality" after all. Even the Psycho-Pass itself is subject to misuse to preserve the deception (Psycho-Pass 2013, "Gate"). In fact, it operates similarly to how Bourdieu characterizes a state as "abolishing the histories of lateral possibilities", presenting itself as universal and orthodox whilst removing the elements of its history that present the fragile reality (Bourdieu 1994, 15). In addition, by revealing in itself a capacity for bias, it establishes Sibyl's existence as not purely objective after all, but rather biased towards a rational objectivity that leaves no room for the multiplicity of true humanity as defined by Makishima. By prioritizing and misusing the mandate of scientific advancement (in its rational pursuit of progress), the system operates through positive repression by removing the "burdens" of free will and judgement from its citizens, effectively "delimiting the sphere of the political" with the aim of evicting it entirely (Ranciere 2010, 54). When people are so focused on the comfort they are given and on the maintenance of their Psycho-Pass, they surrender the will that they possess and effectively "privatize the universal" in submission (Ranciere 2010, 56). While this reveals the logic of Sibyl's form of governance, it also reveals in itself its own flaws. By effectively denying the reality of power's foundation on the *demos* that grounds any set of institutions (regardless of their logic), Sibyl's governance is built on a facade that is easily torn away when those of the *demos* that are cast out choose to take advantage of the "people's power" (Ranciere 2010, 51), making it no different from any other totalitarian state despite its advancements.

Sibyl's logic of foregoing liberty in service of the greater good is not borne out of selfishness, but out of the conclusion that there *is* a perfect way that leads to a "perfect" society. Akane (the show's protagonist), however, witnesses firsthand the flaws of the system (not the least of which is its very erasure of its own nature), and how the answers it provides are not all-encompassing. Her decision at the end of the series to allow the Sibyl System to continue (rather than exposing it herself), however, not only affirms her belief in the primary purpose of the law to protect people, but also shows a recognition that the *demos* is central to Sibyl's ruling power. Through this nuanced choice, the show seems to acknowledge the reality that there *isn't* one perfect way after all, and the nature of politics presented by Ranciere ensures that there will never be. Instead, there is only the "practice of dissensus" which serves to re-open what the practice of ruling then plugs; an ever-shifting order that is subject to de-legitimization by the *demos* rather than a single immutable way (Ranciere 2010, 54, 58, 61). Akane's choice recognizes that, all things considered, Sibyl's order may be the best order at the present moment, but not for all time. There will come a day when even Sibyl will "no longer have purpose" and will be shut down by the people who will one day learn to judge for themselves again (Psycho-Pass 2013, "Perfect"). The only thing that is immutable is the groundless nature of "democracy" and the possibility for ever better systems in the future. At the same time, however, she makes a decision (mirroring Ranciere's own) to work in the current "broken time" rather than merely abandoning it (Ranciere 2010, 60). In this way, she acknowledges that the hierarchy may be beneficial in many ways, but it is always open to a need to bypass it as soon as it betrays its own principles and is no longer necessary. In addition, Akane's character growth through the series to outgrow reliance on the Sibyl System for moral judgement shows the capacity of the *demos* for exercising judgement that is constructive rather than merely chaotic (as Makishima showed). In this, the true

nature of “democracy” is shown as something that also *legitimizes* power (Ranciere 2010, 53). It may have a tendency to tear down when necessary, but it also has the capacity to build something better without relying on logic imposed by the state to serve as its morality.

Sibyl posits its achievement as “the ultimate happiness sought by the rational human mind” (Psycho-Pass 2013, “Justice”), and in many ways this statement has truth in it. If the rational conception of happiness would be prosperity and security, then Sibyl has indeed done well in providing this. The realities of power’s foundation as *political*, however, renders it constantly open to de-legitimization, making it fundamentally precarious by its very nature, (regardless of any justifications of superiority through objectivity or intelligence). The law protects the people, but people also protect the law. Sibyl may pride itself as an oracle of utopia, but its apparent blindness to its own flaws and temporality become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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