

COMMENTARY

Police, Provocation, Politics: Counterinsurgency in Istanbul: Acknowledging the 2023 Anthony Leeds prize in urban anthropology

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I want to express my sincere thanks to the Critical Urban Anthropology Association, the prize committee, and everyone involved in the selection process. Being awarded this prize is truly an honor, and I am deeply humbled to join the list of brilliant and inspiring scholars who have been recipients of this award in the past.

Police, Provocation, Politics was originated from a sense of responsibility to illustrate the extent of police violence and surveillance experienced by Istanbul's racialized Kurdish and Alevi working classes. These communities, who refer to their neighborhoods as the "Gazas of Istanbul," are among the main constituents of leftwing and anti-colonial dissent in Turkey. But during my ethnographic research in these neighborhoods, I realized that visible forms of police violence and repression are just the tip of the iceberg, and that police violence and surveillance operate in remarkably complex, subtle, and at times counterintuitive ways. What prompted me to extend my research beyond the more apparent forms of police violence was the puzzling coexistence since the mid-2000s in these neighborhoods of intense police surveillance and militarized spatial control alongside armed and masked revolutionary vigilantism and gang activities. As an important body of critical urban anthropology literature shows, for many decades now, militarized police and drug gangs have been intrinsic to urban spaces inhabited by racialized and dispossessed communities, both in the Global North and South. In the context of these Istanbul neighborhoods, however, the presence of masked and armed revolutionary vigilantes, who fight both against the police and gangs, adds another layer of complexity to the situation. My sense of puzzlement intensified when I found out that unarmed revolutionary youths who were working to end drug dealing and gang violence in their neighborhoods through a series of public, collaborative, and

peaceful activities were all selectively targeted by the anti-terror laws and put behind the bars as terrorist convicts.

In *Police, Provocation, Politics*, I argue that this seemingly paradoxical and long-enduring coexistence of militarized police, gangs, and armed revolutionary vigilantes in these urban spaces can only be understood within the context of policing and counterinsurgency strategies that are informed by the colonial school of warfare and Cold-War/decolonial era counterinsurgencies. These strategies, which continue to inform contemporary urban policing, have worked not merely to violently repress dissent but also to refashion the existing or emerging forms of dissent against the state. Combining archival work and oral history narratives with more than 4 years of urban ethnography and illustrating how global counterinsurgencies (such as British counterinsurgencies in Malaya and Northern Ireland, the French counterinsurgency in Algeria, and US counterinsurgencies at home and abroad) travel across time and space, I argue that policing is not just about maintaining an order that is based on oppressive relations. But, in defense of that order, it also involves generating disorder by provoking perpetual conflict, violence, and enmity. In other words, in *Police, Provocation, Politics* rather than focusing on policing and counterinsurgency strategies for producing docile and compliant citizens, I focus on the provocative aspects of policing. I show that policing is not just a Foucauldian project of docility production but also a Schmittian project of enmity production.

In *Police, Provocation, Politics*, the police are not limited to those who are in uniform. Building on Rancière's definition of the police, but also maintaining a critical stance toward his understanding of the police and politics as binary opposites, I see the police as a larger system of assemblage. Although police and military officers undoubtedly play privileged roles in this assemblage, various actors,

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such as the media, academia, individuals benefiting from oppressive systems, and even insurgents themselves can and do work as active agents of policing dissent. Indeed, the effectiveness of counterinsurgent policing hinges on its capacity to turn those targeted by the police into unwitting yet effective agents of policing. Throughout the book, I explore and illustrate how the Turkish security state employs diverse and provocative strategies in an attempt to turn dissident groups against each other, themselves, and the communities they strive to represent and protect.

As much as it is about policing, *Police, Provocation, Politics* is also about politics. Exploring the transformation of a neighborhood from 1970s to 2010s, it provides an ethnographically grounded analysis of the tension between policing and politics. It provides insight into how oppressed populations attempt to counter the policed order of things and their inspiring struggles to build a more just world. To put it more concretely using a few examples from the book, while the police predestine the racialized working classes and the dispossessed to mere survival, *Police, Provocation, Politics* shows how Istanbul's racialized working classes have strived to become active political actors on the world-historical stage, experimented with local direct socialist self-governance, and filled in trade unions and socialist organizations to create a better world. While the police confine poor racialized women within domestic spaces, labeling them as “ignorant,” and passive “victims” of patriarchy and capitalism, the book shows how the women from these neighborhoods have challenged patriarchal distinctions between public and private spheres and utilized direct self-governance experiments to defy gendered and class-based hierarchies. While the police drive working-class youths from urban margins toward criminal activities, drug dealing and addiction, the book illustrates how the youths from these areas actively search for ways to put an end to the processes of criminalization and depoliticization.

While Ranci re presents police and politics as binary opposites, ethnographic analysis reveals that excesses and gray zones always lie somewhere between the two. In racialized working-class spaces characterized by multiple and intersecting forms of oppression, political activity designed to resist those oppressive structures does not always fit neatly into clear-cut divisions between the police and politics. For example, as I show in the book, creating a sanctuary space for the racialized working classes is a significant political intervention that has opened up a safe space for these communities and enabled them to experiment with autonomous direct local self-governance. But it also contributed to these communities' isolation, a primary aim of counterinsurgency. Or, to provide another example, armed revolutionary vigilantism both paves the way for the mimetic reproduction of official sexist and racist policing practices and is a political intervention by making the neighborhoods dangerous places for drug dealers and gangs—thus, policing and politicking at the same time.

In *Police, Provocation, Politics*, I also ask how, despite the state's well-crafted counterinsurgency techniques, revolutionary and anti-colonial endeavors manage to endure in a country that, since its foundation, has enforced oppressive and, at times, genocidal policies targeting its dissenting racialized populations. In response, I take into consideration the invigorating power of the martyred dead and what I call *inspirational hauntings*—the hauntings of past resistance and rebellious and defiant subjects who seep into the present and serve as encouraging and emboldening political and ethical resources. Hence, as my interlocutors explained to me time and time again, the dead, especially those who lost their lives due to oppressive structures, are very much alive and continue to intervene in the present as active political agents.

Finally, *Police, Provocation, Politics* also reflects on anthropology's role in counterinsurgency. Defined as “culture-centric warfare” by some counterinsurgency theorists, counterinsurgency efforts benefit from anthropological research and thinking. Hence, it is no coincidence that some Turkish police officers have PhD degrees in anthropology. As critical anthropologists, we must remain acutely aware of the history of our discipline and its troubling legacy of being weaponized against oppressed populations. Anthropology's historical ties with policing and colonial governance underscore its potential to be utilized for similar purposes, a reality that demands our attention and critical reflection. Those of us engaged in research among and with racialized, dispossessed, and colonized communities, who are often targeted by the police, bear a particular responsibility to be vigilant about the afterlives of our work. Sometimes, this requires engaging in ethnographic refusal, both in the processes of research and writing.

Once again, I am thankful to the Critical Urban Anthropology Association, not only for granting me this award, but also for creating and preserving this space for critique, which is much needed in these challenging times. Upon sharing the good news with my friends and colleagues, I was touched to hear that many of them found inspiration and encouragement in the acknowledgment of radical critique within academia. Thank you for your commitment to critical urban anthropology.

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