
Book Reviews

Deniz Yonucu 2022: *Police, Provocation, Politics: Counterinsurgency in Istanbul*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press



Police, Provocation, Politics makes a timely contribution to the rapidly growing critical scholarship on discriminatory and authoritarian policing, surveillance and security practices designed to disrupt, maintain or generate specific and selected socio-political orders. In this book, anthropologist Deniz Yonucu embarks on the ambitious task of understanding state repression in the working-class neighbourhoods of Istanbul by studying the historical and political influences of national and international counterinsurgency strategies used by the Turkish state, including the colonial school of warfare. Through archival research, oral histories and four years of ethnographic fieldwork, Yonucu investigates how the revolutionary violence, vigilantism and dissidence of those living in working-class neighbourhoods has

persisted and co-existed in urban Turkey alongside—and despite—intense police surveillance, militarized spatial control, and the frequent treatment of these neighbourhoods as ‘open prisons’. These efforts have been collectively informed by colonial and post-Cold War doctrines that have sought to dismantle organized resistance and delegitimize dissent against the state—a dynamic that reverberates far beyond the case of Turkey.

To address this puzzle, Yonucu focuses on the ‘dissident working-class neighbourhoods’ in Istanbul which primarily house the Alevi population, Turkey’s largest minority community. The Alevis have long been subjected to discriminatory state policies and are frequently treated as ‘internal enemies’, partly due to their left-wing political mobilization and association with radical leftist groups, including Kurdish groups such as the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (or PKK for its Kurdish acronym). Specifically, Yonucu focuses on the pseudonymous district of ‘Devrimova’, an Alevi neighbourhood that bears all the hallmarks of being a ‘revolutionary neighbourhood’ (*devrimci mahaller*), in that the dissidents here primarily belong to the working class, the area has long been under militarized control, and there is widespread police surveillance (both overt and covert).

And yet, as Yonucu argues, these forms of state control have long co-existed with varying forms of revolutionary violence:

this seemingly paradoxical coexistence [of state repression and persistent revolutionary violence] can only be understood within the context

of the Turkish state's policing and counterinsurgency strategies, which are informed by Cold War counterinsurgencies and the colonial school of warfare and which have worked not merely to violently repress the Alevi and Kurdish left but also to violently refashion a population's dissent against the state. (p. 5)

Yonucu further argues that through such practices the state has learned not only to police this form of resistance through excessive violence and militarized clampdowns—which could risk the creation of 'martyrs' and, by extension, generate public sympathy for the sacrifices made by residents inside these neighbourhoods—but also to create fissures and fractures within the revolutionary groups with the aim of creating an environment of distrust, delegitimizing their political cause, and damaging their alliances of solidarity.

Over the years, as the case of Istanbul illustrates, the Turkish state has learned that the violent eradication of resistance can be counterproductive, and thus such resistance must be policed in a way that manages and controls agitation against the state, always retaining the possibility of low-intensity conflict. Therefore, Yonucu suggests—building on the work of Jacques Rancière, Giorgio Agamben and Hannah Arendt (among other work exploring the relationship between policing and politics)—policing should be understood not simply as efforts geared towards managing disorder, but also as activities designed to generate disorder and thus 'depoliticize', or undermine, a certain kind of politics.

In its refashioning of working-class politics and dissent against the state, Turkey's security state and its elite rely on what Yonucu frames as affect- and emotion-generating 'provocative counterorganization', or techniques that are designed to create a wedge between revolutionary groups and their allies, supporters and members. In Turkey's case, such 'counterorganization' involves exacerbating sectarian sentiments and class-based cleavages and creating ethno-sectarian enclaves. This has been made possible by the state—and its police forces—drawing upon multiple counterinsurgency tools and tactics, including (but not limited to): spatial control of neighbourhoods; invasive policing and surveillance methods; excessive use of police violence including, at times, indiscriminate shootings; media censorship; limiting access to neighbourhoods for 'security reasons' (p. 67) and effectively rendering them 'no-go areas'; stigmatizing and criminalizing entire spaces as locations of 'terrorist' activity; and the routine humiliation, subjugation and intimidation of local residents in a collective bid to starve otherwise legitimate political mobilizations of support and sympathy.

Yonucu documents these complicated dynamics and the evolution of the Turkish state's counterinsurgency tactics by bringing a rich ethnographic and human perspective to revolutionary mobilization in Istanbul's neighbourhoods over the past few decades. The book's core empirical chapters first present the reader with a brief history of Turkey's operations against the Kurdish liberation movement (operations inspired by the British counterinsurgency in Malaya), before then describing how, once the displaced Kurds had moved into urban areas such as Istanbul, these neighbourhoods themselves became political actors, creating space for the reorganization of leftist revolutionary politics. When the state's deployment of excessive violence failed to pacify these groups, it resorted to psychological warfare and low-intensity conflict, informed by doctrines developed by NATO and the RAND

Corporation, among others. This included the use of draconian anti-terrorism laws that have been weaponized against even ‘the most collaborative and community-minded revolutionaries’ (p. 97), including non-violent Alevi youth.

Yonucu further analyses how the political mobilization of the working class has been sustained, despite such a combination of state warfare, unending insecurity, the presence of undercover police, and the risk of death or long prison sentences. What she finds is that ideas of martyrdom and sacrifice have a mobilizing effect that enables Alevi working-class individuals and groups to resist docility and fear and to persist with their opposition to the security state. This remembrance of the martyrs and ghosts of state violence past keeps the memory of fallen revolutionaries alive and, by extension, the defiance of the dissidents who continue to mobilize.

Policing, Provocation, Politics is a fascinating work that connects complicated historical and international trends with their effects on local and neighbourhood policing practices. Yonucu’s work is an insightful resource for scholars working across disciplines to understand the impacts of counterinsurgency strategies on policing, and how these strategies traverse borders to directly impact the lived experiences of critical thinkers and actors. Yonucu explores this subject empathetically, through the traumas and ‘hauntings’ of her interlocutors (as well as her own), finding hope in their resilience.

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