

Book Review

Waseem, Zoha. *Insecure Guardians: Enforcement, Encounters and Everyday Policing in Postcolonial Karachi*. 328pp. Hurst Publishers 2022.

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On the frontline of a myriad struggles for the city, Karachi's police force finally gets the book it deserved. Often accused of using excessive force and extra-legal means to enforce the law, Karachi's cops are a deeply insecure lot nonetheless. It is this paradox of seemingly out of control yet fearful enforcers that Zoha Waseem explores brilliantly. Brimming with ethnographic insights and theoretical sophistication, *Insecure Guardians* takes the sociology of policing to new heights.

Zoha Waseem's book is the first ethnographic study of police-work in Karachi and Pakistan at large. Building upon 20 months of fieldwork in various localities of Karachi and more than 200 interviews with law enforcement officers, journalists, party workers, civil society activists and lawyers, Waseem documents the frustrations, the dangers and the creative improvisations that have come to define police work in Pakistan's largest metropolis. Following other recent ethnographies of policing in South Asia (particularly Jauregui 2016), she sees processes of 'procedural informality' – best captured through the vernacular idiom of '*jugaad*' – as key to the everyday operations of the police and to their self-representation as a weak force. In a situation of chronic financial, human and logistical shortages, the Karachi police have to 'make do' to survive an unforgiving urban environment. These improvisations are also key to understand the practices of corruption within the force, which are irreducible to the accumulation of economic resources for personal gains and also serve to finance ordinary police work. They even shed light on practices of extrajudicial violence – including 'fake encounters' or summary executions under the guise of self-defence –, which find justification in the necessity to fix alleged deficiencies of the criminal justice system through creative interventions.

For Waseem, these dilemmas and the peculiar nature of the Karachi police are best captured as a sort of post-colonial predicament. The Karachi police are heir to a violent, authoritarian legacy emphasising the maintenance of public

order at the service of the rulers. They also inherited deep social cleavages, pitting the elite PSP cadre against provincially-recruited, non-gazetted officers. The chronic civil strife that came to characterise Karachi's urban scene over the past decades has only reinforced the militarisation of the local police – that is, its tendency to reproduce a military ethos and organisational pattern, while equating policing with the forceful defence of order at any cost, including by violating the letter if not the spirit of the law. The professional and physical insecurities of junior officials jointly contributed to procedural informality and militarised policing, 'as both are connected to the perception that gaining the support of superior officers and countering security threats require operating outside the law' (p. 14). One of the great insights of Waseem's book is to show that these two processes simultaneously empower and disempower the police, as they expose them to demands from above (senior officers, politicians) and from below (local communities), while endowing lower rank officers with a huge amount of discretion.

If the Karachi police struggled with that colonial legacy, path-dependency does not explain everything. The *post*-colonial, in this predicament, hints at major transformations in the context of a restless and deeply divided metropolis at war with itself. As bitter urban conflicts became the order of the day, between 1985 and 2015 roughly, the force underwent new forms of politicisation. It became ever more subservient to the rulers of the day and to the dominant classes, to the detriment of the citizenry and of its most vulnerable sections in particular. While the existence of 'people-centric' police forces is open to question, the Karachi police are indeed an extreme case of 'regime-centric' institution.

After a rather dense introduction presenting the central theoretical argument and reviewing literature on the militarisation of policing, in South Asia and beyond, Waseem presents a rich historical account of the Karachi police from

colonial times to the present. Informed by archival work and oral history, this makes a fascinating read. The third chapter is probably the most original of the entire book. Building upon the unique ethnographic material gathered by the author in police *thanas*, on ‘encounter’ sites and during public events between 2014 and 2021, it presents a sympathetic yet uncomplacent account of routine police work in Karachi – including its murkier side. She extends the discussion to political parties, judicial authorities, the media and civil society groups with whom the police have developed strong interdependencies over the years, thus inscribing law enforcers into a larger social configuration. Finally, the last chapter focuses on the troubled relationship between the police, the military and its paramilitary offshoot – the Sindh Rangers, with whom the force has developed a tense collaboration along the years.

Thanks to her obvious empathy towards Karachi’s police personnel,[1] Waseem provides a vivid analysis of their predicament and of the idiosyncratic solutions explored by these men (as women remain largely absent of the discussion). In the process, Waseem not only contributes significantly to the growing ethnographic literature on police work (Fassin 2017; Hornberger; Martin 2019; Willis 2015) but also complicates on-going debates about police brutality and corruption. The developments on ‘rankers’ – these policemen who rise through the ranks due to their inclination to bend the rules – are particularly original and well-documented.

Insecure Guardians is also a major contribution to the fast-expanding literature on the pluralisation of policing (Jones & Newburn 2006; Diphorn & Grassiani 2019; Pratten & Sen 2007). Indeed, another fascinating dimension of Waseem’s work concerns her discussion of the conflicted policing landscape of Karachi, where a myriad of actors compete for the right to police the city. From MQM militants to Lyari’s gangsters and from industrialists turned security-providers to regular law enforcement agencies, Karachi is a particularly rich terrain to engage with contemporary security assemblages. Throughout the book, she engages masterfully with this complexity.

Waseem’s work also makes a significant contribution to urban studies. Through the lens of police work, she sheds new light on the violent and disorderly fabric of Pakistan’s most volatile metropolis. Her navigation through Karachi’s often murky waters will be of immense interest to urban sociologists, anthropologists and geographers. Her constant engagement with other urban contexts, in South Asia and beyond, also enriches her case-study without depriving it of its ethnographic texture. Thus, Waseem’s work is not only a remarkable ethnography of police work and its ordeals, but also an important discussion of the often messy ordering of urban worlds.

If Waseem’s book is bound to become a reference work for scholars of policing in Karachi and beyond, it also raises a number of questions. First of all, one wonders whether Waseem’s use of ‘informality’ in the context of policing does not fall prey to the same critiques that have been addressed to its uses in economics and in urban sociology: isn’t it too broad a category? Isn’t it too normative? Thus, what is the normal in

the police, an institution granting considerable discretion to its field officers? Moreover, what is the analytical value of this notion when informality becomes the norm?

Waseem’s discussion of extrajudicial violence among the Karachi police also stirs reflection on the spectrum of the comparison. As police officers themselves explain to her, these forms of police violence cannot be reduced to professional or economic incentives, even if the involvement in ‘fake encounters’ is widely recognised as a way to move up the ranks and to extort money from potential victims and their families. In a more complex and troubling way, these police murders tend to be justified as an extreme form of extra-legal punishment on the part of self-righteous officers who have convinced themselves that they are bringing justice and security to society. This endorsement of a right to punish by the police could have been further elaborated. As other scholars of policing have shown, it is not limited to spectacular forms of extrajudicial violence but pertains to a larger continuum of punitive practices that, in every police force, starts with routine practices of humiliation of the policed (Fassin 2013 [2011]: 132).

The ubiquity of such punitive practices, well beyond (post-) colonial police forces, hints at a much more general trend among public enforcers. While they may not reach the same level of intensity, in terms of lethality, the punitive proclivities of North American or European police forces – which have been exposed by recent public scandals (Ralph 2020) – tend to suggest that what Waseem studies in Karachi is merely at the far end of a spectrum of ‘punitive police work’. This notion was first coined by the chief investigator of the Wickersham Commission on police brutality in the United States in the 1920s, American journalist Ernest J. Hopkins. In his book *Our Lawless Police*, published in 1931, Hopkins rails against the fact that ‘The [American] policeman has usurped, in amazing degree, the power to punish; and that without the formality of trial and conviction, often without the formality even of arrest’ (Hopkins 1931: 17). While the notion of ‘police vigilantism’ used by Waseem (and, before her, by Jauregui 2015), tends to suggest that police punishments would happen outside the realm of the formal law, that of ‘punitive police work’ suggests otherwise and lends itself to wider comparisons. It reminds us that the coercive resources of the police are underpinned by legal prerogatives which, combined with their bureaucratic skills, enable them to cover their tracks through administrative sleight of hand in writing reports. And when officers are required to account for themselves, it is first of all to disciplinary bodies that are inclined to indulge their extra-legal use of force. The qualification of punitive practices as a form of ‘police work’ makes them part of the everyday activities of an institution that is tightly managed, yet still gives considerable freedom to its agents on the ground. It also rules out the ‘bad apple’ hypothesis of individuals who go off the rails. While the ‘excesses’ of some punishers in uniform may prove controversial, their use of extrajudicial violence can only become established in the long term if it is seen as a service in the general interest, distinct from any personal score-settling – a point which finds confirmation in Waseem’s own investigation of extrajudicial violence on the part of Karachi’s law enforcement agencies. And what public scandals such as the one that surrounded the death of

Naqeebullah Mehsud at the hands of ‘encounter specialist’ Rao Anwar remind us is that, even when they seem to have become routinised, such acts of police brutality remain tributary to a threshold of acceptability. As a prominent activist-lawyer eloquently put it shortly after the city’s most controversial cop was put on trial and briefly incarcerated, ‘Even in a context as fucked up as Karachi, Rao Anwar was an aberration, in the sense that no police officer ever behaves this way. He really stood out from the rest. Even in this kind of society, there are some limits to the kind of aberration you can become’.[2] That such ‘aberrations’ can ultimately go scot-free, even after their crimes have been so widely documented, is another matter worth pondering.

[2] Personal interview with a prominent Karachi-based cause lawyer, Karachi, July 2018.

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Footnotes

[1] In her introductory remarks, Waseem reflects upon her ‘biographical ethnographic kinship’ (a phrase she borrows from Beatrice Jauregui): as the daughter of a former senior police official, she was perceived by senior officers as part of the ‘police family’ and was granted more access than a lay ‘civilian’. On the other hand, her position as a ‘civilian’ and the daughter of a senior officer also raised suspicions (see pp. 40-42, and for the implications of this ambivalent positionality in a particularly problematic situation in the field, when a suspect was severely ‘punished’ by police officers in front of her, pp. 160-162).