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BOOK REVIEW

Most research on state violence in Pakistan, which, in itself, is scant, has focused on the victims of such violence rather than its perpetrators. Zoha Waseem's *Insecure Guardians,* the first comprehensive study on the police in Pakistan, addresses this critical gap in the literature. This book provides a historical overview and ethnographic investigation of the development of the institution of the police in Karachi, from its colonial origins to the present. Waseem's core argument is that the "postcolonial condition of policing," characterized by insecurity and informality, has created a militarized culture of policing in Karachi that relies on extrajudicial forms of violence.

The introductory chapter argues that the Karachi police force inherited its rigid, hierarchical structure from the colonial police that privileged elite officers and kept those in the lower ranks in a subservient, precarious position. This precarity, Waseem argues, pushed lower ranking officers to engage in corruption and "informal" (or extra-legal) forms of violence against colonial subjects. Chapter Two traces the establishment of a militarized civilian police force created to protect British colonial and native elite interests by suppressing the native population. The police were divided along class and caste lines, with the top tiers occupied by colonial officers and native elites, and the bottom rungs comprised of lower class and caste groups kept in a deliberately precarious position. This model, she argues, was transferred after independence to the newly independent state, with little or no change in the structure or ethos – what she terms "the postcolonial condition of policing." Waseem describes how successive governments, both military and democratic, similarly exploited the police to protect their own interests.

In Chapter Three, Waseem begins her ethnographic chapters, exploring the "*thaana* culture," or the culture of local police stations, and focusing on the procedural informality in everyday police operations at the local level. She describes various levels of police corruption, including bribery and extortion, and attributes this rent-seeking behavior to economic insecurity. Chapters Four and Five move beyond the internal workings of the police and focus on the institution's relationship with external actors. Waseem attributes the "institutional fragility" of the police to the pressure exerted on them by elite state actors, namely politicians and the military. Chapter Four focuses on political patronage and the meddling of political parties, while Chapter Five focuses more squarely on the relationship of the Sindh police with Pakistan's most powerful institution, the military. Waseem sheds light on the tense relationship between the Karachi police and Sindh Rangers, the paramilitary force

periodically summoned to Karachi since the late 1980s to intervene in the maintenance of law and order alongside the police. This creates a hierarchy in which the police find themselves in a subordinate position vis-à-vis the Rangers, further demonstrating Waseem's contention that, as an institution, the police are insecure.

While Waseem's work addresses a critical gap in our knowledge and understanding of the institution of policing in Karachi, the book has some serious weaknesses in terms of both its methodology and key arguments. As for the methodology, Waseem mentions her familial connection to the police via her father, Waseem Ahmed, the Capital City Police Officer (CCPO) of Karachi during "a sensitive and tumultuous time" (p. 40) in the city's history. Waseem's reflection on her positionality is limited to the first introductory chapter, however, where she describes how her "biographical ethnographic kinship" (p. 41) helped open doors initially, but also, as she progressed with her research, her need to negotiate access with junior officers who were weary of speaking with her. Waseem contends that her positionality had a positive impact on her research, as she was able to cultivate "critical empathy" (p. 41) with her interlocutors. This reflexivity, unfortunately, is left only for the Introduction, not interrogated rigorously throughout the book. This is a critical omission given the fact that Waseem's status as the daughter of a senior police officer (who held his position during a period in which hundreds of encounter killings and instances of extrajudicial violence took place) would have affected every interaction she had throughout her fieldwork, both within and outside the institution of the police. Waseem's empathetic rendering of the police as an insecure institution omits its contentious relationship with Karachi's poor and marginalized communities, who face the brunt of police corruption and violence.

This sympathy for the police is present throughout the book, as the author argues that the police are forced into corruption due to their financial limitations – limitations that explain the corruption of lower-level officers but do little to explain the larger-scale corruption of senior officers. This is also demonstrated in Waseem's explanation of excessive police violence, including the practice of encounter killings, which she blames largely on external actors' pressure on the police to prove they are maintaining law and order. Her concept of the "postcolonial condition of policing" hinges on the conception of an insecure or "nervous" state creating the conditions for an insecure police force, which compensates by engaging in excessive violence. Waseem illustrates "security threats" to the state, including the presence of militant groups and criminal gangs as examples, but also acknowledges that the state itself often creates and supports the groups causing its own supposed insecurity; for example, in the case of the Lyari gangs, which she mentions were supported by various state actors. Thus, an under-theorization of the Pakistani state itself is one of the book's major flaws, and leads to this contradictory argument. Far from being weak, the state is actually extremely powerful, even if internally divided.

The notion of an insecure state – one that is constantly threatened and must resort to repressive tactics to maintain power – is grounded in a structural-functionalist approach premised on the notion of internal weakness and crises of integration that lead to violence as a functional necessity.[1] The logical outcome of this analysis would

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[1] Jeffrey A. Sluka, "Introduction: State Terror and Anthropology," in *Death Squad: The Anthropology of State Terror*, ed. Jeffrey A. Sluka (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 1–45.

be, then, to strengthen the police to make it less insecure – a dangerous prospect for anyone concerned about the rights of marginalized people. A power-conflict model, which Waseem chooses not to take, would demonstrate, rather, that state terror is the result not of weakness but of excessive strength and the concentration of power in the hands of small number of elites:

> Terror states do not emerge because violence is necessary, but rather because elites choose to rely on it, believing that it is a cost-effective means to achieve their politicoeconomic ends—namely, to preserve and advance their privilege within a system of social stratification.[2]

Waseem's research highlights the immense power of Pakistani elites, which include leaders of political parties, the military, and business, who use the police to protect their interests through violent means. However, she chooses a conservative rather than a critical analysis. By diagnosing the problem of policing as the result of a weak, insecure state, the author absolves elite powerholders, including senior police officers, of their role in perpetrating violence.

Much of Waseem's argument rests on the idea of informality: the police resort to informal methods (both corruption and extrajudicial violence) as a means of compensating for their insecurity and overcoming institutional constraints. However, the concept of informality has itself been critiqued across a variety of fields for its imprecision and fetishization of the "formal" as something necessarily desirable.[3] This reliance on informality as the explanation for violence does not account for the various formal laws created to protect the state and justify its excessive violence, including the colonial sedition law and the Anti-Terrorism Act (1997). If anything, history has demonstrated that formalizing the power of state institutions has only led to an increased reliance on violence and repression as a strategy of rule.

Finally, one of the most disturbing aspects of Waseem's work is its treatment (or lack thereof) of victims of police violence. While the book opens with the story of Naqeebullah Mehsud, a young Pashtun man killed by the police extrajudicially in January 2018, whose death became a major spark for the emergence of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement, the actual victims of police violence receive little mention in the remaining text. Two very disturbing scenes appear in Chapter Three: the first is that of a "half fry" – a euphemism used by the Karachi police to describe the practice of torturing detainees to extract confessions. Here, Wassem witnessed an incident in which the detainee was blindfolded, taken to a remote location, and shot in the leg and hand. In the second scene, Waseem describes going to the location of a police encounter in which eight people were killed following a tip-off by a police contact, indicating that this was most likely a planned (or "fake") encounter staged for the benefit of the media (and presumably for Waseem herself). In both cases, the police invite the author to the site where violence is planned to unfold. Arguably, Waseem did not know in advance that she would witness torture or encounter killings, but, with the knowledge that she or anyone with any familiarity with the police would

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[2] Ibid., 30.
[3] Manuel Rosaldo, "Problematizing the 'Informal Sector': 50 Years of Critique, Clarification, Qualification, and More Critique," *Sociology Compass* 15, no. 9 (2021): e12914.

have, one could assume that she knew she was being invited to witness a spectacle of state violence when she received these late-night calls. This raises serious ethical questions around the responsibility of the ethnographer and what it means to write against state terror.[4] These scenes come across as voyeuristic rather than sympathetic to those suffering at the hands of the police, especially because the perspectives of the victims or their families are absent from the book.

Conducting an ethnography of a violent institution such as the police is indeed a challenge few would voluntarily undertake, particularly as participant observation requires of a certain degree of empathy with one's interlocutors.[5] This tension is inevitable, but as social scientists, neutrality is also never an option. Writing about state terror requires taking a clear moral stance – one that holds perpetrators accountable and highlights the effects of power on the marginalized. While Waseem's research provides important insight into the operations of one of the most important, yet under-studied state institutions in Pakistan, it ends up reading like an apology for the police; one that refuses to hold the perpetrators of state violence accountable and instead calls for a strengthening of the police, an institution whose sole purpose is to preserve the interests of elite powerholders by any means necessary.

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[4] Sluka, "Introduction: State Terror and Anthropology," 30.
[5] Didier Fassin, *Enforcing Order: An Ethnography of Urban Policing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).