

Recall This Book  
Episode 40  
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Hayal Akarsu

Elizabeth Ferry:

From Brandeis University in semi-quarantine welcome to Recall This Book, a podcast that looks backwards to see into the future. Our idea is to assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events by looking at books, the shape of the world we inherited. Today my co-host is John Plotz. Hi John. And Hayal Akarsu. Hayal is a Junior Research Fellow at the Crown Center for Middle East studies and she holds a PhD in Anthropology from the University of Arizona. Her dissertation, to be turned into a book, is called *Reforming the Police: Violence, Security, and the Social in Turkey*. And it analyzes the entanglement of European Union-inspired police reforms with authoritarian governance in Turkey.

She has some recent publications and one of them which just emerged is called “*Citizen Forces: The Politics of Community Policing in Turkey*” with *American Ethnologist* in 2020. Our episode today continues our mini series on global policing by which we don't mean either Interpol or the status of a hegemonic power, such as the U.S. that claims to act as the police force for the world. We mean the topic of policing and police power in global context. In keeping with our podcast strategy of juxtaposing examples from different times and places, we will be discussing Hayal's work and also bringing in some examples from Brazil. So maybe to start us off, Hayal can you tell us a bit about your work and about the fieldwork that you did for it.

Hayal Akarsu:

Sure. So I work on the implementation of police reforms in Turkey, and I can start actually by talking about how I started this project. I grew up in Turkey in 1990s where at the backdrop of police violence and incredible police brutality against the political opposition and all kinds of marginalized

identities. And in 2000s, I was struck by seeing all this smiling, caring, images of police posters, reflecting the police reforms that Turkey is undergoing. So I started to question, okay, what does that, why do police in Turkey invest in building such a caring image and reform? And it was a period of EU harmonization projects where police has invested a lot on different kinds of reform projects. So, but in 2013, when I have started in my preliminary research is a part of what has happened and the protest was mainly a sit-in against the demolition of City Park.

What then turned into a large, massive scale antigovernment protest because of the police brutality inflicted on protestors and strikingly, when these protests were happening, police was actually implementing a project, EU-funded project on prevention of disproportionate use of violence. So I asked, *okay, how can I make sense of this paradox?* On one hand, police think a project to prevent disproportionate use of force, but still we experience excessive violence of police on protestors. So I decided to work on what police reforms do to the police and what police do with police reform if they are not preventing violence. So I did my fieldwork for 18 months in the police academy, in the police stations, I looked at for instance, one cohort of police students. I took classes with them, sat in on classes with them. I also patrolled the streets with the police, attended their all kinds of community policing activities. And I also observed these international networks of police reform. So, uh, because police reform, especially nowadays is more than a global phenomenon as we think, because they have all this kind of surveillative materials of reform and they have been implemented in different parts of the world.

Ferry:

Okay. So you touched on a lot of themes that we've been talking about for the last week collectively, have been talking about the last few weeks, um, the relationship between the police and the rest of the government. Police as a state sanctioned form of violence, attempts at reform and the question of whether those are effective and what they're effective for. How do you see your work as connecting to say the recent you know, social movement,

particular iteration of Black Lives Matter and the criticisms of state police violence?

Akarsu:

Actually, one thing that relates to like broader historical moment, uh, that my research touches on, is the question of reform because we, uh, recently we hear a lot that reforms do not work, and in my work I show that reforms do work, but not in the way that we, uh, aim them to be working. For instance, I can give one example about all of this training on the use of force, right, for instance, in 1990s, police in Turkey tend to understand the question of violence as something they need to hide, right? Like they are doing torture, but it's kind of something that you do in a backstage, something that you need to cover up.

Ferry:

You're not supposed to talk about it, but it happens.

Akarsu:

Right, it was a kind of secret, but with these reforms of standardization use of force, I realized that most of my interlocutors came to understand their work as being like more force experts. So all of these forces, standardizations about use of force continuum, that it gives you this kind of escalation of force, which needs to be proportionate to the resistance you face. Then you see most of the police officers claiming that, *okay, what I did was not a torture or violence, I just used my legally-interpreted right to use of force and it was proportionate to the resistance I faced*. So this was for instance, one of the things that we hear a little bit and the United States too. Recently, I was looking at the statistics about assault rates against U.S. Border and Customs agency. When you see that, like they have this incredible higher rates of assault rates against officers, because this is, this is, uh, in a way, their way of showing that, *okay, we didn't do anything wrong but we were entrapped*, right? I felt the threat.

Ferry:

Like a self defense defense.

Akarsu:

Yes. And for the Black Lives Matter in Turkey--racialized policing it exists to a certain extent. But what you see in Turkey is mostly, the kind of disproportionate distribution of police violence, especially against the marginalized communities, for instance, Kurdish people or religious minority or other kinds of gender and sexual minorities. And I remember one slogan that was chanted during the Gezi Park Protests, which was, *Police, sell simit*, [which is a Turkish type of bagel] *Police, sell simit, and live in dignity*. they were asking police the kind of question of what they are for, or which part of population are they supposed to protect. These, these kinds of moments actually in my larger public to question the role of police in a society.

John Plotz:

So I have a question that relates to that, Hayal. I really, I love your recent articles. They're so fascinating about the role that the language of reform plays in implementation. And for example, you have the case of sort of community policing, where you talk about the way the community policing ends up being an enabling structure for the sort of violence against minority communities that you've just referred to. So I guess the question I have, it's a really big one. It's, it's how you think about the relationship between what the police do and are. Are the police carrying out a governmental, like a governmental agenda that is supported or so that what you see with the police is they are basically the instrument of carrying out what is a broadly supported policy anyway, versus understanding the police is like a machinery with a logic of their own? Cause I sometimes feel in the United States that we, people are, are either confused or conflicted about whether they see the police, the problems with the police, being the police, doing what society as a whole wants them to do, or the police doing this thing, which is just like inherent to the logic of policing, which is not really carrying out a governmental agenda.

Ferry:

Just to jump in. That's a really good point because I think one of the, one of the conversations that's come out really clearly, and is not resolved is, you know,

are the police not doing what they're supposed to do? And that's the problem, or is the problem that the police *are* doing what they're supposed to do? And that, that also runs through your work. But that's your question, right, John?

Plotz:

Yes.

Akarsu:

I think it's an excellent question because, and my short answer is actually police doing, uh, both, both kind of combining all of this logic of mental ideas about reform or how a good society should be divided or structured, but also police has its own logic. And in addition to that, I can add that police is also reading in a way, uh, what public asks for them to do. This is also something that we need to take into account. And we usually think that police is just a sole agent, but when we think about all kinds of, uh, like demands of public and popular support for the police, we asked to see how all these different scales of rules or policing are coming into play.

Ferry:

So you when we were discussing this conversation, we decided to bring in a book that I want to shift it to in a second, which is called *City of Walls* by Teresa Caldeira. It's about Sao Paulo in Brazil. But I think this is an interesting segue because one of the things that Caldeira talks about is sort of talk of crime. So she kind of distinguishes between actual crimes that that may or may not be recorded, but also a kind of, you know, language or topic of conversation of, you know, crime is getting worse and a sort of generation of noise around that that was connected to a need for, or perceived need for more police or more private security.

Did you see that in your case that people were sort of maybe not talking about crimes as individual events but talk of criminality say--

Akarsu:

Absolutely. Talk of crime is actually part of all of this community policing activities or, general reception of the public, because, so there are some-- think about some social problems about the like economic prices about, uh, urban transformation. And when do we start to think them through the lens of crime? So when do we start to think all of these different social political problems as a problem of crime? So this is a one thing that I observed. And also what I like most about how Caldeira's book, there are several things, but about the talk of crime, she says how the talk of crime is contagious, right? How it spreads and how it proliferates and how through the talk of crime and the fear of crime new techniques of exclusions are developed.

So, police in a way contributes to this increasing violence. Both they're part of the problem in some ways and in people of color's case and in my case too, but also, uh, she also talks about how, uh, through this talk of crime, they became more focused on this public offenses, uh, they thought. And other things and I haven't talked much about in my article, but what I liked about Calgary's research again, the link she makes, uh, about the private security and the public security, right? Because security has become a service, bought and sold in the market. And when the upper class in Sao Paulo, when they invested in private security firms, building falls and creating more segregated cities, then they started to think police for the less favorite ones and private security for the rich, which I also observed in my research.

Ferry:

Yeah, this is kind of an unspoken part of this whole discussion about, you know, private policing, which if you know, which may sort of, depending on the situation of inequality and polarization in the country may rush to fill a gap that is left by other kinds of policing.

Plotz:

The University of Chicago has the second largest police force in the state of Illinois.

Ferry:

Right.

Akarsu:

That's so interesting to me, like, as someone like I did my BA in Turkey, then I moved to the United States in 2007 to start my MA in New York. And after having spent like more than a decade in the United States, still, it strikes me that like universities in the United States, they have a police, right? So like seeing police on campus in Turkey, usually it means there's a coup or something like that. So what and I was even thinking, okay, so, uh, I'm a locked out from my office. Why, why I need to call the police to get my door unlocked? Right? All kinds of different services that we, uh, do in the universities is actually pretty interesting thing. And also it reminds us to think that when we talk about the police, actually, we are talking about a huge like industry and huge like institution, like a state, which perform so many different roles. Right?

Plotz:

I think that's an excellent point. And just a couple of things about the bracket creep there. One is that Brandeis police were only recently armed. It wasn't even after 2001, it was as a result of some other incident, I can't, it was the marathon bombing or something, but there doesn't really seem to be any rational reason that they suddenly got armed, but they did. And that defines them in one way. And then the other way is that question of right. I mean, getting locked out of your building is such a great example. Or if somebody has a psychological crisis, where do they go? And lately I've seen signs appear, Elizabeth, you might know more about this than I do, but like in DC, there are tons of signs where my parents live and my brother, there are tons of signs saying things that you can do rather than call the police. And it's basically just helping people to reimagine the division of governmentality, you know, like, and, and I do think that's an enormously important question. Like in Massachusetts, there's a few sorts of criminal justice work that are performed by the department. Like the prerelease centers in Massachusetts are operated by the employment Bureau or the labor Bureau rather than department of

corrections. So like these little internal divisions which so invisible to most of us outside the system, but probably very crucial.

Akarsu:

Or we try to not to see it. Right. Because, um, one thing that I can give credit to police, like Turkish police they are constantly complaining that they were asked to do too much. And, uh, I also observed in the field kind of social policing projects that police do are visiting people's homes, asking for them to like, what kind of needs they have psychological or, or kind of do they need a job? So and police were being okay, like they treat us as social workers with guns but we have other things to do. So why are we doing all this other kind of things?

Plotz:

Totally. But I feel like that also relates to that question of like, whether they're doing what they ought to be doing, or they're doing something that is distinct from what they're asked to do, because that social working function is, as I understand it, like part of the vision in the US of, of what community policing is, right? Like if the officer is present at the school, talking to kids on the playground, or if the officer is like at the local convenience store, you know, hearing from them about the problem of the broken street light, then the idea is that they'll be less likely to use deadly force in the neighborhood.

Ferry:

Right. Right. But I mean, that's the argument around defunding the police, right. Is, is--It's not so much about defunding as kind of dismantling this bundle of activity in order to clarify, and to redirect investment into these other things that wouldn't necessarily be handled by the person who also has a gun.

Akarsu:

And most of them, when the police handles that kind of situations, they are not, they're not doing anything--they are not doing much, right? What they are doing this for instance, if people complain about homeless people, they're just



taking them from one location to another. So it is just like taking the problem off of the site of the citizens who feel uncomfortable.

Plotz:

I agree with that, you guys, but, but can we just pause on that? I mean, I do think there's an innate tension here because to the extent that one expects part of policing to be more like social worker functions, one creates a vocation that has that kindler, gentler side to it. And to the extent that one takes those roles away from the police one does, you know, *Starsky and Hutch*-ify, you know what I mean?

Ferry:

I hear what you're saying. I think it's sort of a, it's a tension that's produced by the evacuation of support and funding for other kinds of services. Right. I mean, if there was great provision of health services and employment services and other kinds of things in a neighborhood, the police might still be rescuing kittens off of the roof and hanging around--

Plotz:

No, no, that's firefighters, right?

Ferry:

Firefighters right. See? It's all, it's all getting mushed up.

Plotz:

No, but Elizabeth, I a hundred percent hear what you're saying, but I guess I'm just saying, like, I do think some of this stuff is baked into the problem of the division of labor, like professional. I feel like there's a Weberian analysis here about professional specialization, you know?

Ferry:

Right. I just think it would be less of a problem if there was actually any funding for any of those other things.

Plotz:

Fair enough. Yes.

Ferry:

Actually I think this is a good time to shift to our Recallable Books. So Hayal, do you have something to bring to the table?

Akarsu:

Sure. So there are many great ethnographies right now, uh, emerging on police in different parts of the world. So I think it's really important to read about policing and police in different parts of the world. But for today, I want to suggest a TV show, probably you all know "The Wire", as a kind of recallable show because what I like most about "The Wire" is it sees--it shows us this complex space of policing. And for instance, we see how wiretaps and technology shifts, uh, they shift the temporal rhythms as spatial labor of police work. So you see on the one hand, the violence presence of police on the streets of Baltimore, but you also see how we think the technology increasingly has become a sedentary management of data, evidence, and all this kind of all like back work for the policing. So instead of all these heroic shows on police, I think "The Wire" has a kind of ethnographic quality in telling the kind of entangled relations that police are into and how, these neighborhoods are policed heavily, in the United States.

Ferry:

So maybe I'll bring, the text that I wanted to bring in is actually Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. And particularly the section at the end of the book, which documents some of the psychiatric cases that he and his colleagues encountered and worked with. And, and Fanon is really using these to talk about the, um, the psychological damage and deformation that colonialism causes and on everybody. And, but in the, in the examples that he gives about the police in particular, it's also the damage that is done to the colonizers. Um, and in particular, he has a really harrowing case about a police -- I think he's a captain actually, a police officer who is engaged in pretty constant torture, um, to the point of death of potential informants and who has developed a series

of severe psychiatric symptoms. And who's really, um, uh, comes to seek medical advice in order to complete, to be able to get back to work. Um, so, Fanon writes, "His superiors refuse to give him sick leave. And since moreover to the patient [that's the police officer]' did not wish to have a psychic psychiatrist certificate. We tried to get him treatment 'while working full time.' The weaknesses - that is torturing people- the weaknesses of such a procedure may easily be imagined...as he could not see his way to stopping torturing people that made nonsense to him for in that case, he would have to resign. He asked me without beating about the bush to help him go on torturing Algerian Patriots without any prickings of conscience, without any behavior problems and with complete equanimity." So the relationship between the police and the authoritarian state power between the police and colonialism, the racialization of police work, and also, I guess in a more general level, the way in which police and policing the common way to think about all of these other questions, these bigger questions of power and violence, race and the state.

Akarsu:

It's a great book.

Ferry:

Yeah. So, I guess we, we have come to the moment when we'll have to, um, thank you and say goodbye. So thank you so much, Hayal, for joining us.

Akarsu:

Thanks for all having me.

Ferry:

Thanks, John.

Plotz:

Yeah, thank you, Hayal. That was great.

Ferry:

Recall This Book is the brainchild of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry. It is affiliated with Public Books and most of the time has been recorded and edited in the media lab of the Brandeis library. Uh, and sometimes in our homes, uh, by Plotz, Ferry, and a cadre of colleagues in the Boston area and beyond. Our music comes from a song by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy, “Flyaway,” sound editing is by Claire Ogden and production assistance, including website design and social media is done by Kaliska Ross, Mark DeLello oversees and advises on technological matters. We miss him sorely.

We appreciate the support of university librarian, Matthew Sheehy, and Dean Dorothy Hodgson, and of the Mandel Center for the Humanities at Brandeis. We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticisms, or suggestions for future episodes. You can email us directly at [ferry@](mailto:ferry@plotz@brandeis.edu) or [plotz@brandeis.edu](mailto:plotz@brandeis.edu), or you can contact us via social media and our website. Finally, if you enjoyed today's show, please be sure to write a review or to rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. You might be interested in checking out past episodes, including topics like vectors of warfare with Vincent Brown or our first episode on policing and white power with Dan Kryder and David Cunningham or money as a social and political project with Christine Desan. We also have our Spring 2020 series called Books in bark--Books in Dark Times, where we converse with various partners about what books bring comfort and joy in these cataclysmic moments.

Plotz:

Elizabeth, can I also put in a plug? We hope to continue the global policing series most immediately with a discussion about indigenous Australian deaths in custody. So look for that in the future.

Ferry:

Thank you. And goodbye until next time.