

POLICING THE PLANET

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Arun Kundnani is the author of The Muslims Are Coming: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror (Verso, 2014) and has written extensively on topics such as race, Islamophobia, political violence, and surveillance. A former editor of the London-based journal Race & Class, Kundnani currently teaches in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University.

Heatherton: Broken windows policing and community policing are often presented as domestic issues. Your work forces us to understand these policing models in the expanding context of counterterrorism. For someone new to these questions, how would you describe US policing as a global issue?

Kundnani: When I was researching the book *The Muslims Are Coming*, I interviewed FBI agents working on counterterrorism in different parts of the US. It became clear that their work could only be understood within a global context. For example, there are a number of people who have military backgrounds and have served in the war on terror in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and so forth. Inside their field offices, there are clocks on the wall set to each of the US time zones as well as to the times in Iraq and Afghanistan. These give you a sense of the mental geography in which they are working. Agents in counterterrorism investigations will also accompany the military on raids in Iraq and Afghanistan. So even though the FBI is meant to be a domestic law enforcement agency it has this global footprint. You see the same thing with the New York Police Department, which has offices around the world.

Looking at the infrastructure of policing and the flows of data being collected within the US, it is clear that they are completely integrated

within global structures of surveillance. This has been made apparent with the Edward Snowden revelations.¹ There are also multiple examples of surveillance technologies developed for use in Iraq and Afghanistan which then flow back for domestic use in the US: things like social network analysis software, sensor technologies, or drones with the capacity to suck up wi-fi data. These technologies are now going to be used in the policing of protests in the US, and so forth. These are some ways in which the US military's global footprint and domestic law enforcement are connected.

Camp: NYPD commissioner William Bratton recently announced the creation of a new counterterrorism unit called the “strategic response group,” which he describes as “designed for dealing with events like our recent protests or incidents like Mumbai or what just happened in Paris.”² How do counterinsurgency and “counter-radicalization” inform domestic policing?

Kundnani: The notion of radicalization has become the main way in which counterterrorism is understood in the US. It blurs the distinction between what might conventionally be described as criminal activity and what might conventionally be defined as expressive activity, which is supposed to be protected by the First Amendment. In this blurring, Muslim religious and political expression are deemed to be signs of future terrorist risk. This demonstrates a shift away from “reasonable suspicion” that someone is involved in crime as a basis for investigation. We’re moving away from that to a notion of “risk” and trying to determine what kind of risks certain populations represent. Within this model, dissent becomes criminalized in the name of national security, and the term “terrorism” becomes a means of criminalizing various kinds of political opposition, dissent, or insurgency.

The new counterterrorism unit under Bratton likewise assumes an overlap between protest and acts of spectacular political violence. Of course, the violent events he was referring to—the attack on Charlie Hebdo in Paris in 2015 and the Lashkar-e-Taiba attack on Mumbai in 2008—are rare. In the absence of having much to do, this unit will inevitably be spending its time policing protests. It will be doing so with the legitimacy of counterterrorism, which gives it additional powers to criminalize. Of course, this is nothing new. There is a long history of policing in the US operating through a counterinsurgency logic that essentially sees protest as a kind of warfare. This goes back to COINTELPRO and all the other kinds

of linked strategies to criminalize the American Indian Movement, Puerto Rican nationalists, the Civil Rights Movement, and so forth.³

Camp: In a recent article co-authored with Deepa Kumar, you explain how the NYPD's aggressive racialized surveillance of Muslim Americans has authorized monitoring of all political activities, reviving Cold War strategies that criminalize dissent. What links can you draw between NYPD intelligence units and the history of countersubversion?

Kundnani: In the late nineteenth century, the NYPD had Red Squads dedicated to the political policing of the Left. In post-9/11 New York, there is a clear continuity in practices such as the construction of vast databases of information on people's activities, surveillance of communities for their purported ideologies, the use of informants, and the deployment of agents provocateurs to criminalize legitimate political activity. What Deepa Kumar and I are saying is that there is a recent history of these practices in relation to Muslim Americans, but also that there are continuities going back to the policing of Black protest; the policing of labor, particularly through the first half of the twentieth century; and the policing of various kinds of anti-imperialist movements. Every time these things happen we tend to think they are unprecedented, so explaining that history was important to us.

We also wanted to demonstrate that this kind of surveillance, which comes out of political policing, is also a means through which race itself is reproduced. By defining a community as "suspect," you construct a racial lens through which that community is viewed. There's a very important book by criminologist Paddy Hillyard called *Suspect Community*. Hillyard looked at the experience of the Irish in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s and discovered that the Irish "community" in England did not pre-exist police surveillance but was itself constituted through the interrogation process, both in the minds of the police and of their targets. The police picked up people who happened to be Irish, interrogated them and found out who their relatives and friends were, and then worked their way through those networks. Eventually, this method of investigation produced in the minds of the police a picture of the "community" as a network of suspicious persons linked together by various social relationships. At the same time, this experience of policing also bound together those targeted as a

community with a shared experience of being rounded up. Hillyard's point is that the community is forged in the police cells. The surveillance practices of the police are integral to the construction and reproduction of the Irish as a racial group. That, I think, is something that can be generalized.

What it means to be a Muslim in New York now is in part defined by the experience of being an object of this surveillance gaze, which is also a kind of racialized gaze. This is what is linking together what would otherwise be very different experiences of being, say, an African American Muslim in Harlem, or a suburban Pakistani Muslim. There's not much that links these people until they are lumped together by all being under surveillance by the NYPD. This is simplifying things a little, but I do think there's something important to be said about how surveillance actually creates a racialized identity.

Heatherton: The war on terror has devastated many innocent lives, particularly those of people profiled as Muslim. Yet, as many organizers have argued, the emphasis on innocent victims has also narrowed the discussion and produced mixed results. Efforts to clear people of guilt who "do not deserve" state repression can unwittingly reinforce the idea that some people do deserve such treatment. Can you discuss the strengths and the weaknesses of the innocent victim narrative?

Kundnani: There's an obvious tension. There is a temptation to say that in order to reach a mainstream audience, we need to find a kind of "perfect victim." But when you look at who's being criminalized domestically in the war on terror as far as Muslims are concerned, more profound questions are raised beyond those of innocence or guilt. We don't have a very good grasp of what is essentially a political issue. We can imagine that terrorists are all evil fanatics driven by some kind of religious madness, but by and large the people who are getting sucked into this are teenagers who are not especially religious. They have a narrative that the West is at war with Islam, and they believe that they should be combatants in that conflict. Until we comprehend that framework of militarized identity politics, we're looking for a notion of religious fanaticism that actually has little to do with terrorism.

Camp: Your book describes how the fantasies of state intellectuals have produced the very thing they purport to confront. Can you explain?

Kundnani: This is the key point. We are producing the very thing that we think we are fighting. This happens in at least two ways: either through the use of informants to entrap people who would otherwise not be involved in any kind of plot, or through foreign policies that generate political contexts in which violence becomes more likely. That's the tragedy of it. This conflict looks like it could last as long as the Cold War because we keep manufacturing the enemy we're fighting. The foreign policy establishment has a conception of the world in which resistance to US empire cannot be confronted directly and is instead viewed through a racial lens. In responding to racial fantasies of its own making, the US empire ends up producing the very violence it fears.

Heatherton: A report in the *New Statesman* gave an example of Westerners ordering copies of the book *Islam for Dummies* before they left to join ISIS.⁴

Kundnani: Absolutely. All the reports that are coming out from ISIS show that those who go there lack any kind of religious sophistication. What is driving a young kid to leave Britain and travel to Syria are the images of violence available online. They show Muslims being victimized in very violent ways either by the West or by people who are seen as proxies for the West. Or they show a path towards heroism. The way in which that kid is being recruited is basically the same way that kids are recruited to join the US military. You use victimhood, you use heroism, and you glorify violence.

Heatherton: FBI director James B. Comey recently addressed the tension between African Americans and law enforcement. While he admitted a troubling legacy of racism by law enforcement, he also rehearsed an old argument that Black people grow up in “environments lacking role models and good education and decent employment.” His comments echo British officials’ attempts to address the “cultural issues” or lack of “proper upbringing” among British

Muslims. Can you talk about the implications of this culturalist framing?

Kundnani: There's a tendency to use culture as a way to depoliticize issues that are about power. Whether people are speaking about Muslim communities in Britain or the US or about other racialized groups, the formula is, "The problem is rooted in *their* culture, not in *our* politics." When applied to Muslims, this involves seeing Islam as a "backward" cultural force that completely determines everything Muslims do, irrespective of social or political circumstances. This then implies measures to "integrate" Muslim populations into what are considered to be the "superior values" of European or Western society. Political conflicts around racism and imperialism are thus transformed into debates around values and cultural integration. There's a long history of that in Europe, which ultimately goes back to European colonialism.

In the US, though there's a slightly different dynamic, there's also a long history of saying that Black people are in poverty because of the "dysfunctional Black family" or other cultural reasons. This is still a powerful narrative today. You even hear it from Obama. Essentially it's the same culturalist response to what are actually political issues rooted in histories of oppression.

Heatherton: In the wake of the police killing of Mark Duggan in August 2011, a cycle of rebellion rocked British cities. William Bratton was brought to London as an advisor. How do we understand the export of US policing practices to the UK?

Kundnani: When British politicians or people in leadership positions import ideas from the US, they usually win support from most of the establishment. The US is seen as almost the definition of innovation in policing, so there's been a constant stream of imports from the US to Britain. In the late 1990s we imported the "zero tolerance" slogan from you. We got all these things a few years after they hit the US. "Broken windows" has been floating around as a slogan that the British police occasionally invoke. The Mark Duggan killing was part of a much older pattern of people, especially Black people, dying in the custody of the police in Britain, as a result of chokeholds, the use of pepper spray, and so forth. Historically, only a small number of police officers have been armed in Britain but we're moving towards a police force that is increasingly

armed.

The uprising and grassroots response to Mark Duggan's death sprang from people's repeated experience of racist violence from the police. Mark Duggan was killed in Tottenham, where people had been campaigning for decades around cases of Black people being killed in police custody, going back to at least the 1980s. What happened in 2011 was a crisis in the sense that the police felt they were no longer in control of the streets. They wanted to bring in a new kind of formula to reassure the power brokers and the wider public that they were still in control. In that context, Bratton became an attractive figure to call in.

The slogan that came out of that collaboration was not "broken windows" but something called "total policing," which sounds as bad as it is. It's a continuation of a much longer trend of integrating the police into other spheres of public service provision. This is one flow that actually moved the other way across the Atlantic. This tradition of creating partnerships between the police and other agencies, whether social services or schools, is something that has come over to the US after having been in Britain for a much longer time. Integrating law enforcement surveillance into all of these other spheres that serve purposes very different from policing is dangerous. Youth workers, for example, have been expected since the early 1990s to be the eyes and ears of the police. They are supposed to collect information about young people through a model of risk assessment, rather than criminality. They then share that information with the police. That's the policing model we've had since the early 1990s. Total policing is an outgrowth of that.

Camp: That reminds me of a quotation by a state official suggesting that "counterinsurgency is armed social work."⁵

Kundnani: Yes, absolutely. It's not a coincidence that it's the same formula. This model of policing comes out of the counterinsurgency model used in Northern Ireland. The counterinsurgency practices implemented by the British army in Malaya and in Kenya were reproduced in Northern Ireland from the early 1970s onward, during the conflict between the Provisional IRA and the British army. Because Northern Ireland had a higher level of formal democracy relative to Kenya and Malaya, the intelligence gathering could not be done overtly through the army. Instead, it was integrated into all these other public services. The first principle of

counterinsurgency is that you set up a comprehensive response that integrates all government departments. A child protection officer in social services plays as much of a counterinsurgency role as a police intelligence officer. In the early 1980s, after the urban uprisings in England, the head of the Northern Ireland police became the chief constable of the Metropolitan Police in London. These ideas from Northern Ireland were then imported into mainstream policing in England. Legislation was introduced to facilitate this transition so that the police began to integrate into all of these other departments.

Heatherton: So would you say that flows of policing knowledge draw from the present war on terror as well as from established colonial legacies?

Kundnani: Technologies and practices that have been developed in contexts where the US has a presence overseas are brought back into the US and then, in turn, Europe imports them. No doubt all kinds of other places around the world, like Brazil, import them as well. But within that, there are other flows of ideas, technologies, and practices that have been innovated in Britain or Israel and flow to the US. I think the US is still seen in Britain as the best place to look for ideas, but occasionally it happens the other way around.

For example, the kind of “partnership” policing model that I mentioned earlier, with its roots in counterinsurgency, is being imported from Britain. Here Britain likes to think of itself as Greece to the US’s Rome. There’s a feeling that, while Britain may no longer run its own empire, it retains a historically informed expertise in defeating anticolonial opposition that has been built up over a much longer period than that of the US. When I was doing research in Washington, DC, I was amazed by the number of British people in the national security think tanks. Their tone was always one of having the greater historical depth needed to run a colonial program.

Camp: Your colleague at *Race & Class* A. Sivanandan has often argued that capital “requires racism not for racism’s sake but for the sake of capital.” This implies that the struggle against racism requires a radical anti-capitalist struggle. Could you talk about how the fight against policing and surveillance is, therefore, a necessary part of a larger struggle against racial capitalism?

Kundnani: The racist and imperialist violence upon which capitalism depends cannot be acknowledged in liberal society so it is transferred onto the personality of racial “others” and seen as emanating from “outside” the social order. Surveillance and policing structures are then established to catalogue, monitor, and disrupt those dangerous “others.” This is a key part of the history of capitalism. But I don’t think we’ve fully grasped the dramatic transformation that has happened in the last decade or so in regards to this global surveillance infrastructure. I don’t think the post-Snowden debate has really grasped it. The questions about privacy and better encryption do not really address what is essentially an infrastructure of empire. This is about the politics of a neoliberal empire, but one that is unstable and therefore feels the need to know everything that’s happening all the time, to preempt possible disruption and opposition. More than ever, the question of surveillance is at the heart of how capitalism is reproducing itself now.

The post-Snowden debate also has not been able to grasp the way that race is central to surveillance. If you look at how the NSA is responding to the allegations, it’s by saying, “You, as an average American guy, don’t have to worry about surveillance. We’re only going after the bad guys who are the terrorists, the foreign spies, and so forth.” This is a racially coded way of reassuring the majority of Americans. That part of it never gets discussed. We much prefer this “Big Brother” account of NSA surveillance, where everyone is equally under surveillance, but that’s not how it works. The danger of describing the NSA in terms of a Big Brother image is that you end up saying that the problem is mass surveillance of everyone, which can carry the implication that “targeted” surveillance is fine. But, in practice, “targeted” surveillance could mean collecting data on everyone in Yemen, or the entire Muslim population of the US.

In terms of organizing I think we want to come at this in a completely different way. We can focus on the fact that specific groups are having their lives totally transformed as a result of surveillance. How do we then build on that very specific experience and create alliances with communities that have been experiencing it for decades, like African Americans? These should be our starting points in organizing. Ultimately, though, the struggle against surveillance cannot avoid confronting capitalism itself.
