



JOURNAL ON EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES

Book Review: *Just Violence: Torture and Human Rights in the Eyes of the Police* by Rachel Wahl

Author(s): Amit Prakash

Source: *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (March 2020), pp. 182-184

Published by: Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2451/61012>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33682/bh2w-zt8e>

REFERENCES:

This is an open-source publication. Distribution is free of charge. All credit must be given to authors as follows:

Prakash, Amit. 2020. "Book Review: *Just Violence: Torture and Human Rights in the Eyes of the Police* by Rachel Wahl." *Journal on Education in Emergencies* 5 (2): 182-84.

<https://doi.org/10.33682/bh2w-zt8e>.

The *Journal on Education in Emergencies (JEiE)* publishes groundbreaking and outstanding scholarly and practitioner work on education in emergencies (EiE), defined broadly as quality learning opportunities for all ages in situations of crisis, including early childhood development, primary, secondary, non-formal, technical, vocation, higher and adult education.

Copyright © 2020, Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies.



The *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, published by the [Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies \(INEE\)](#), is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#), except where otherwise noted.

BOOK REVIEW

JUST VIOLENCE: TORTURE AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE EYES OF THE POLICE

BY RACHEL WAHL

STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017. XV + 245 PAGES

\$90.00 (HARDCOVER), \$26.00 (PAPER)

ISBN 978-1-5036-0101-7

Just Violence: Torture and Human Rights in the Eyes of the Police is concerned with two interrelated questions: how police officers perceive their own acts of violence, and the implications such self-understanding has for police officials' response to human rights activism against such violence. Drawing from ethnographic research in India, Wahl seeks to examine the complex interplay between the competing demands of human rights training that Indian police officials receive, social expectations of their role, their own perceptions of the mechanism through which they seek to deliver "justice," the letter and spirit of the law, and the role of the financial considerations—that is, corruption—that mediate all others.

Wahl questions the standard (and perhaps lazy or self-righteous) explanations by human rights trainers and activists that immorality and incompetence are explanatory variables for police brutality. Embedding the study in international and national debates about human rights education for agents of the state, especially police, Wahl questions the trainers' presumptions that state functionaries do not have an existing moral frame and that such training (e.g., human rights education) can simply write a new script on a blank slate. Perhaps the biggest strength of the volume is that it avoids a purist position and therefore is able to examine the issue of preventing police torture without getting caught in binaries or denying the personhood of police officials.

The book offers an interesting and rich account of police officials' moral universe and their belief in a certain conception of justice, which some respondents claim is the reason behind police violence. Such notions of justice are derived from the social context, which may have some tension with the equal justice premise of the rule of law: "Justice is upheld when people get what they deserve rather than when rule of law offers equal protection" (p. 52). Such an approach, Wahl argues, justifies the use of torture in the minds of police officials when dealing with "hardcore criminals," but in practice all manner of people become victims of such violations. Moreover, assessments of police violence are often filtered through the intentionality of the official concerned, not the outcome. All this leads up to a conflicted and complex image of justice versus human rights for police officials.

The author also examines the ways in which police officials respond to human rights education, including injunctions of the National Human Rights Commission and the syllabus of the master's degree many of them hold. She argues that human rights education has the potential to alter the moral universe of police officials, and that the apparent tension between the moral imagery of the police officials themselves and the one put forth by human rights campaigns does not mean that these officials reject the idea of human rights. Rather, they seem to actively engage with the rights concepts "using the language and logic of rights to contest the very principles on which rights are premised" (p. 102). The result is a rights-based argument for violence, wherein the right to security for the larger population is used to legitimize the violation of all (not some select) rights of those who threaten the security of the rest. Rights thus move from their universal articulation to context-specific enforcement.

The book also locates these complex questions in the global context of securitization, which has complicated the perceived relationship between security and human rights. A similar conflict is also observed in the author's ethnographic accounts of Indian police personnel. Security considerations, especially in light of various terrorist incidents, have led to a prioritization of state and security concerns over human rights concerns.

Having laid out this framework, the book goes on to explore the ways in which the local culture, religion, and tradition influence police violence and torture, especially in light of the fact that rights activists often vernacularize the concept of human rights by embedding them in the language of local religion and culture. Consequently, police officials often view human rights as a derivative of their own religio-cultural frames and construe them to be a part of their own traditions. Detailed ethnographic interviews with police officials again frame the argument that such perceived correspondence between human rights frames and their religio-cultural interpretations and arguments about justice, security, and the nature of policing are used to reconcile with what is seen as "necessary and unavoidable" violence and torture by the police.

Overall, this volume represents one of the few attempts to go beyond the simple binaries of police versus human rights and to give us empirically grounded insight into the views and perceptions of police officials with respect to human rights and torture. It pulls no punches in its abject support for human rights but refrains from demonizing the police officials, and in the process offers a little better understanding of the complex process that undergirds police violence.

One area where the book could go further has to do with distinguishing between various members of the state policing and security establishment: civil police, armed police, paramilitary forces, and the army. These agencies are trained and organized differently and serve different purposes. It is therefore only fair to expect officials associated with these different agencies to have a different moral-ethical stance that informs their perception of human rights, police violence, and torture. The book fails to make this distinction, and the different ethnographic narratives from these different officials are thus interpreted similarly, which obfuscates some of the issues.

That said, this is a good volume—conceptually informed and empirically grounded—and it lays the foundation for more studies that would be of interest to scholars and practitioners of education in emergencies who grapple with the complex world of police, violence, human rights, and their social context.

AMIT PRAKASH

Centre for the Study of Law and Governance, Jawaharlal Nehru University

*The views expressed here are the author's
and do not represent Jawaharlal Nehru University.*

For permission to reuse, please contact journal@inee.org.