

The Baldy Center for Law & Social Policy
Podcast recording date: 8/4/2020
Host-producer: Azalia Muchransyah
Speaker: David Westbrook and Mark Maguire
Contact information: baldycenter@buffalo.edu

Podcast transcript begins

[Azalia]: Hi everyone this is the podcast of the Baldy Center for Law & Social Policy produced at the University at Buffalo. I am your host and producer Azalia Muchransyah. This episode I have on the phone with me David Westbrook and Mark Maguire, co-authors of a forthcoming book *Getting Through Security: Counterterrorism, Bureaucracy, and a Sense of the Modern*. Mark is the dean of National University of Ireland Maynooth, Faculty of Social Sciences, and David or Bert is the Del Cotto Professor at the University at Buffalo School of Law.

Bert and Mark, what is your book about and what's the story behind it?

[Mark]: So, we met first as part of a multi-year multinational project called Global Foresight which is, was based in Stockholm University in Sweden but has since moved center of gravity to Uppsala University and to the advanced studies center there. So that primarily funds my work. Bert is one of the senior advisors that helps the project. My research funding for that was to study terrorism events and to try and understand the different cultures of security that existed in different jurisdictions in Europe and elsewhere in the world, and so I was in the middle of doing the actual ethnographic work trying to understand public behavior primarily during terrorist attacks in the UK, in Africa, elsewhere. And I found myself in some ways concerned that what I was doing, although I think quite an interesting project, nobody had ever restructured terrorist attacks from the perspective of the public before, I found myself almost too far into the project to actually really zoom out and ask myself, well why was this scene unfolding this way? Why was it the case that I found open doors to my left to my right in front of me from security agencies, police forces, special forces units, saying you know this is really interesting we'd like to help you; we'd like to talk to you. I'd had all these conversations and I was trying to make sense of it to a certain degree. But why this problem, why was it gaining traction; why was the problem of the public somehow not only of interest but of practical interest to people and what did it mean that was the kind of question. So luck would have it, you know I was introduced then to Bert who had written not only, very eloquently, a very praised and well-cited book on the nature of ethnography in the contemporary but of course he had also written *Deploying Ourselves* and other works about the question of what is responsible projection of force what is the role of something we might call bureaucratic power in the modern world. So, we began a series of conversations, perhaps too many conversations too long-winded at times, too much fun was had maybe at other times. For example, um so but you know in all seriousness we said you know somewhere in some country I think it was either Italy or Sweden, we said to each other well, well why doesn't the commentator on ethnography, Bert, actually come with me as I do some field work. Why don't you look over my shoulder essentially as I do the work of ethnography in a kind of a pressing contemporary

situation which is counter-terrorism and from there the book emerged as a dialogue essentially between the two of us.

[Bert]: Mark came to me with all of these stories that seemed to mean things. They seemed somehow kind of pregnant with sometimes conflicting broader implications that seem to say things beyond the important dramatic context of terrorism and counterterrorism and then there were questions of how the stories related to one another so we began sort of saying okay is this book, it took, in looking at this very dramatic very important thing terrorism and counterterrorism and therefore security of physical infrastructure right? So, there's sort of two or three aspects about it that sort of came out of the conversations. One is that this is something that everybody who's been on a plane has experienced. They've experienced at least a part of it and that seemed very useful because another thing that seemed very obvious to me but for some reason is not very obvious in security studies is that when you start dealing with a regime and maybe it's also obvious to me as a lawyer, there are people making rules. And the people making rules argue about the rules. Sometimes the rules change right, what are the rules responsive to, right? So there's a sort of a logic but given the nature of the beast a lot of that logic is obscured so when you go through an airport you look at sort of the tip of the iceberg but you know there's got to be a lot more going on and because Mark had such incredibly access over these years, he was able to flesh out a lot of what was going on and that was very interesting both on its own terms but also it began to lead into an inquiry into the nature of two other things, one of which is security which is a word that we now hear everywhere. Cybersecurity - a lot of my work is in finance so the security of the financial system obviously these days we are very worried about pandemics right, food safety, one can go on, right? So, securities is this word that sort of floats through the contemporary and it has different referents but it also has some of the same concerns, so what are those concerns? Well one of the concerns is security is usually somebody's responsibility. It could be your webmistress, it could be whoever's head of security at an airport, so there's somebody whose job it is to make sure things don't go wrong and that puts them in a position of failure of attempting to operate successfully in a world of uncertainty. So that then began to lead into an inquiry of the nature of bureaucracy right, in the airport context was counter-terrorism context but also more broadly. So, we had this sort of window into a scene or drama but the drama was a kind of instantiation of much larger concerns that run throughout modern life.

[Azalia]: In your book you use airports as entry points to discuss security from an ethnographic standpoint, how do you see different places around the world achieve security?

[Bert]: In capitalist societies and in so-called developing situations, a lot of times the state monolithic or not doesn't do much right? And so, then you begin seeing um either the state never asserts that it has the monopoly of force or ends up devolving it. So, you see people may be armed right we may not see security as primarily a state function or as exclusively a state function, right? So this whole question of sort of state and where violence is gets very complicated. The other way to take this is not so much institutional in terms of levels of violence but also it's important to keep in mind that along with things like credit cards, airports have been astonishingly unified globally, so while you

can find differences you can also find decades and decades and decades of soft law attempting to make airport experiences and airport safety adhere to global standards with a fairly astonishing level of success. So I think that needs to be said too right there is also this – you can find fragmentation but you can also find huge levels of cohesion right, you can walk through airport security anywhere in the world and you know, you don't even have to be able to read signs you know how it goes and then I think this is particularly true in Europe if what we're thinking about is the state and the notion that there's this unified state that is somehow providing security it's not only fragmented vis-à-vis civil society fragmented vis-à-vis the state itself. It's also fragmented vis-à-vis levels of authority which is why we start with Brussels right, so you've got an enormous amount of international law, you've got the European union whatever its relationship to security is, you've got regions, you've got owners of things right? So if you look at an integrated Europe or a lot of an integrated globe, they're not single authorities. So one of the things that one of the sort of the big aims of the book is to kind of disaggregate this notion of the state and say okay well what kind of state here are we talking about.

[Azalia]: So, who do you think is best to provide security? Is there any model that we can follow?

[Mark]: So, your question is an excellent one I think people are asking it more and more particularly in the US from what I could judge from several thousand kilometers away. But I think it's probably less the question of what is the model or where different models place their emphasis. So the image of the London police officer from the 19th century is somebody who is both a representative of and in the community and a representative and abstract authority and the law at large basically, so let me be blunter than that. Just because I said I'm trying to establish it's a problem, so here's one of the other problems. In Ireland we have a community police force by and large they're the guardians of the peace basically mostly on our although we do have a special unit to deal with certain problems um. But throughout the last 50 years of history we've also had a shadow government in the form of a very large terrorist organization, the Provisional IRA, who like to run their own courts for example, who love the idea of policing neighborhoods. And so when there was a when there was a drugs problem they you know they were the concerned community representatives who you know you can fill in the rest so and it's not to say that every small-scale social structure leans to the right nor is it to say that leviathan lurches to the left. It's simply to say that if there ever really is a quintessentially modern problem this is probably it. Which is how do you organize a rich and safe life without leaning to authoritarianism or giving way to the certainly the worst instincts. And I think people who are interested in the reforming of police, reforming or even abolishing prisons as you hear this movement quite a lot these days and there's a lot of mileage we had in these discussions. They tend to come with precast answers and I think what the book is trying to do is actually to reveal the fact that this is the central problem of the contemporary. And the problem is essentially how does our society which when I say that in general whatever we want to say the modern has lost the capacity probably to govern on a very small scale. That the problem of an airport is, Dublin airport up the road, a small airport – 30 million passengers a year, 10 million meters and creatures. You actually can't police it as if it was a small village. It's not possible, so the desire to have a more informal less militarized approach is a laudable

one. But you, you're always going to be torn then between being much more structured and systematic. So, the problem is a bureaucracy problem – to what degree could we organize reality better and who's going to be at the table to make that decision.

[Azalia]: In light of what is happening around the world right now, how do you see the development of security moving forward?

[Bert]: In complicated contemporary situations in which we rely on experts, the expert is by definition not the public. In other words, the expert has authority that the public doesn't enjoy and so when we say you know look to the science look to experts and so forth, we create a key contemporary problem right? And in so far as we have these specialized knowledges and specialized personnel with specialized training, specialized authority, it sets itself up somewhat antagonistically to this notion of the public right. But yet it's the public where terrorist groups hide, it's the public that terrorists kill. It's the public that that sort of form the water in which they swim, to ape Mao a little bit right. So, there's a, so this weird object yet context known yet unknown quality that we're trying to somehow secure right. Then of course we don't know if we've secured it until something goes wrong. It's a falsifiable statement but it's not a true statement, we can't show it right? We can only show its failure. So one of the things that then seems to happen is you then set up security breakers of some sort right. They could be checkpoints at airport, they can be borders right, so we've seen a huge reinstantiation of borders but notably in Europe right and along old national lines, not along lines somehow epidemiologically derived right. The Danes closed the bord..., the border to Sweden. It's a little, right so in the heart of the European integrative project we see a willingness to re-inscribe borders fairly quickly. So going forward one of things that I think emerges from our book but in the abstract is applicable elsewhere is how do we think about the interrelationship between networking efficiency, long supply chains and things like borders right? Resilience, short supply chains right, not so long ago an awful lot of people in the world we move in were talking about a borderless world that seems very naïve six months later right. You know if you don't have borders how are you going to stop people who might be whatever right, how are you going to check right. So, I think there's a real tension there and I think that the pandemic and you know and certainly if we get more you know the notion that face masks are made in a handful of places on the planet. It seems in hindsight to be simply insane but it was very efficient at time.

[Mark]: I would, I would just say one other thing actually, just mostly to riff off of Bert in jazz fashion but particularly with the United States I think there is a long history of security in which people have become fairly justifiably suspicious of what they're being told by people in authority. And that crisis of the expert, I think we can probably put somewhere and deal with in a different venue but there is within the world of securities we've investigated it, there is a what you could call borrowing from the anthropologist George Mark, as paranoia within reason. A certain sense that actually you know there are security agencies they do things they don't tell you about these things and many of the meetings or events I would have attended were in secret. At one point I had to sign a particular act you know crown copyright and all the good stuff so things do happen in that fashion and because I think particularly in the United States the secretive institutions are so large and frankly so powerful vis a vis Europe that an awful lot of the

population now actually does feel that they're being told one version of things and we do live in of course a world in which information is more plentiful than expertise. So, any little bit of evidence then can be seized upon to construct a conspiratorial view of what's happening essentially. For example, I just want to give a quick example just to lighten the mood of the conversation but people have often looked at Germany in the last week or two and said oh look they have protests, you know anti-state, anti-public health, etc. but Germany has a very different relationship to its state, it doesn't see its government as something that in recent history it has the potential to destroy it, speaking as a German yeah. Not speaking as a German, they do have a sense that you can organize to do the wrong thing in public. In Hamburg they riot occasionally, we don't hear about it in the international media but there's well organized riots on roughly the same day every year that lasts roughly the same amount of time and then the police move people on. It's all very friendly but the idea that you can actually protest is configured differently and that may be something that needs to be considered a little bit, as well, that protesting power has different cultural features in different parts of the world.

[Azalia]: To summarize what do you think is the biggest takeaway from your book?

[Bert]: Two things, I think. One is we believe that this is sort of a window by no means the only window but a window on to much more general issues, security, bureaucracy, what we think we mean by the state, and that's all in the book, basically. So how do we get to kind of a livable modern and the pitfalls are obviously at the moment are at the same seem very terrifying and apparent when one need not recall Nazi Germany although I tend to. But there are clearly many many versions of the modern that we don't really want. And without getting, and they're hard to talk about and one of the things that we think that this kind of inquiry can offer is maybe we can find better ways of talking about some of these things right. So one of the, so to come back to the notion of sort of the bureaucratic silo, to come back to the notion of para ethnography, one of the things that we think ethnography can offer is a more nuanced way to begin to navigate among these different institutions, ways of thinking, kinds of people that collectively construct the way we live now. So, so we think there's a real political, not in the usual sense that word is used, but political in the sense of helping us understand the polis, role for the engaged amateur, for the person whose job is not on the line. Right, so what somebody like Mark offers to somebody you know who's running security for an airport or running a special forces unit or something like that, is he's not competing for his job. He's not dependent on it, he's not— so there's a level of freedom yet conversation that the ethnographic conversation allows which allows you to sort of step outside a little bit and say is this how we want to organize things? And so we think there's a sort of a political turn, sometimes we call it the turn from Wissenschaft to praxis, to sort of use fancy words right? But it's sort of the turn from just knowing and just observing to an engagement but it's not engagement in the way that that's usually used in a sort of reflexive antagonistic activism.

[Mark]: I will close, at least my response, by just saying one thing. It's not a terribly elaborate comment, but these days there is a question of what do you do about these types of contemporary bureaucratic issues or problems that seem to be unsolvable and in some ways I don't want us to appear in this conversation as people who are, who are

simply saying nothing can be done or we must temper power or you know to some degree nothing else. The reality is we're saying that we're probably using the wrong language of engagement and the wrong mode of engagement with bureaucratic order here in its most violent form. And I would simply say this is a challenge to people, this is why you should read the book. We don't say this is unethical therefore we shouldn't engage with this problem. What we're actually saying is that ethics is not perhaps the issue here. The issue is mediation. We have bureaucratic formations that include the order and structure that moves people through airports and the order and structure that releases violence and in order to fully understand that, we must also think about the different ways in which we can mediate that, mediate through conversation, true understanding that perhaps some of the worst outcomes probably started with somebody in an office who had the best of intentions or just simply wasn't exposed to a different form of thinking in a different silo or that their career was rewarded by coming up with a terrible solution but that their advancement was contingent on solving something in a way people in society probably wouldn't have wished it to be solved. All of this, I think the social scientific emphasis on the ethics of the problem is perhaps further downstream than we think. I think the question is how do we engage and mediate these discussions first.

[Azalia]: That was David Westbrook and Mark Maguire, co-authors of a forthcoming book *Getting Through Security: Counter-Terrorism Bureaucracy and a Sense of the Modern* and this has been the Baldy Center for Law & Social Policy podcast, produced at the University at Buffalo. Please visit our website buffalo.edu/baldycenter for more episodes and follow our social media on Facebook and Twitter @baldycenter. Until next time, I'm your host and producer Azalia Muchransyah.