

The Politics Classroom

Host: Professor Floros

Ep. 2023.08: The Security State is Everywhere and Anywhere All at Once

In the Classroom: Professor Nicole Nguyen

(UIC Criminology, Law, and Justice and Educational Policy Studies)

Professor Floros: Hey folks. It's Professor Floros in The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio. I've got a great conversation with Professor Nicole Nguyen today, and to cut as little of our conversation as possible, I'm going to jump right to my short introduction. If you want more info about Professor Nguyen and the topics covered in this episode, check out The Bookshelf section of thepoliticsclassroom.org, which is also linked in the show notes.

Professor Nicole Nguyen received a bachelor's degree in English and English Education and a PhD in the Cultural Foundations of Education at Syracuse University and a master's degree in International Education from New York University. She's an associate professor of Criminology, Law and Justice and Educational Policy Studies at the University of Illinois Chicago.

She's the author of *Curriculum of Fear, Homeland Security in US Public Schools, Suspect Communities: Anti-Muslim Racism, and the Domestic War on Terrorism*, and the forthcoming book, *Terrorism on Trial: Political Violence and Abolitionist Futures*, as well as many articles, book chapters, and other academic publications.

So, let's get started in The Politics Classroom, recorded on February 21, 2023.

Intro Music: Three Goddesses by Third Age

Professor Floros: Professor Nicole Nguyen, welcome to The Politics Classroom.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Thanks for having me.

Professor Floros: So, I always ask my guests how they got to where they are. And so, if you could just tell us briefly why you decided to be a, an academic and what made you interested in researching and teaching about education policy and specifically the securitization of education policy.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Sure. I think it's a great question because I didn't set out to be an academic. I didn't even wanna go to college. Uh, I come from a small town and had worked my, my way up in a fast food restaurant, uh, to be a, to be a manager. And I thought that that was gonna be my life. But I sort of felt the pressure to go to college.

And so, I went to college and everyone said I should become a teacher. And so, I entered an English education program. So that's how I became interested in education was that's what people were telling me that should be my path. And once I was in a teacher ed program, I was just curious about, you know, different things that affected students, whether that was access to bilingual education, whether that was their own immigrant histories. And so I continued in graduate school pursuing some of those questions. And I think my interest in thinking about

how the global war on terror and how national security has shaped public schooling in the United States comes from, you know, my own family's experience with the Vietnam War and really having always wanted to ask questions about the impact of the war on our family, but never really feeling like that that was something we could collectively talk about.

Professor Floros: Hmm.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: So I do think in, in some ways that my academic pursuits was kind of a way trying to figure out my own experience in the world with my family, with society, with the public schooling system.

And so, that really drove a lot of my interest. And then once I started studying it, there were so many questions to pursue, whether that was, you know, US education efforts alongside the war in Afghanistan, whether that was changes in national security policy that then affected schools in Chicago. Um, and so I sort of opened a can of worms and have always been interested in that can of worms and, and have just sort of continued trying to understand it better and better.

Professor Floros: Yeah. So when I first talked to someone about what you teach, and they told me that, that you did research on the school to prison pipeline, and I thought, oh wow, that's really interesting. I definitely wanna talk to her. But then when I saw your first book

Professor Nicole Nguyen: mm-hmm.

Professor Floros: I was actually kind of floored. So your first book was *Curriculum of Fear: Homeland Security in US Public Schools* and it never occurred to me that there was such a thing as a Homeland security curriculum, and I'm sure most people are not aware that there is such a thing as a Homeland Security curriculum. Can you talk a little bit about what that is and what the intention of having that kind of curriculum in a school, what, what's that supposed to achieve?

Professor Nicole Nguyen: So I had the same reaction when I found out that this school existed. Like I didn't know these kinds of schools, um, you know, were around and that's part of why I pursued studying it. Um, so this school was designed to train poor and working class youth of color for low wage work in the national security industry.

So you can think about, you know, people talk about the National Security Agency as being kind of a mini city. So you have high level spies, you have military contractors, but you also have custodians who have security clearances, who ensure the buildings are cleaned, you have landscapers. And so it was sort of that range of jobs that the school was preparing young people for.

And so on the one hand, it was a sort of vocational education for high school students in a traditional public school setting. On the other hand, it sort of served like uh, JROTC programs that are also about sort of getting young people to buy into national security priorities. So it has a sort of ideological orientation to it that it's about normalizing national security logics.

It's about training kids to see the world through a national security lens, and it's essentially about ensuring that students believe that there are potential enemies out there who need to be policed and monitored. And I think what was particularly unique and brilliant in the ways terrible things can be brilliant is that these were poor and working class kids of color.

So these are young people who, in their everyday experiences had been criminalized by law enforcement and were now being drawn into those same policing practices. And you'd hear young people say, you know, I was driving in my neighborhood and I saw these barrels in front of, you know, my neighbor's house. And so I called the police because I thought it was a terrorist threat. Or I was riding the bus and I'm just scanning the bus to see who's dangerous and who's not dangerous, and so they're engaging in the very policing practices that they were critical, that they themselves experienced. That for me, that's the ideological cultural work that was being done, was getting young people of color who would otherwise be critical of the policing and national security practices in their communities to actually buy into and then enact the those practices themselves.

Professor Floros: So did being part of this program inoculate them from being profiled or engaging negatively with law enforcement in their communities?

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Yes and no. So if people found out that they were a part of the program, so say they were applying for a job and one of their references was a teacher from the Homeland Security Program, they were more likely to get the job than if they were just a kid with a regular recommendation. It's the same JROTC students or the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps. If they were wearing their military uniforms in the community, you know, people would shake their hands and say, thank you for your service.

If they weren't in uniform, they might be, you know, treated as a potential criminal. And so it did have an effect, and young people were quite aware, "I'm respected when people associate me with this program." And so again, that's part of the power of the program was they understand that these kids are not respected but if you put them in a military uniform, if you put them in a national security context, they could be, uh, respected.

Professor Floros: Well, okay. There's so many questions there. First of all, I'm gonna put a pin one second in preparing kids of color for low wage jobs. So I'm definitely coming back to that, but like to be a janitor or a landscaper, do you need specialized national security training? Like it doesn't seem like that would be a necessary requirement for those types of jobs. Even getting a security clearance wouldn't require that kind of training.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Right. So you're not gonna convince kids to sign up for a program if they think they're gonna be a custodian with the NSA versus a custodian with her own high school. So that was not really the story that was sold to students, right? The story that was sold was like you, you could be some high level, cool spy making, you know, hundreds of thousands, thousands of dollars with the security clearance. And their curriculum reflected that, you know, they would be in math class and there's an example of a kid throwing a football and what's the parabolic force needed, you know, to hit your target?

And they changed that to, you know, now you're a sniper and you're trying to hit a target in North Korea. What's the parabolic force needed? And so that curriculum is exciting to, to

young people. And it's especially exciting if they think I'm gonna have a job that's actually designing some kind of weaponry that will actually shoot a missile at North Korea.

And so even though the program clearly was about low wage work, they were being sold this idea that you can go to college, you can get a high level job, you can get a, get a se, security clearance that'll add 20 or \$30,000 onto your salary. And so that's part of how they got by. It was like, "If you look, there's no jobs around you except for national security jobs. And so if you want one of these national security jobs, participate in this program, get a security clearance, you know, get an internship and, you know, maybe go to college and get access to all of these fancy jobs."

Professor Floros: Did the, the folks who brought the program to the school that you looked at, was the fact that they were low income kids of color, the selling point for bringing the program there or?

Who, who initiated this? Did this come from like some kind of national security perspective and they targeted this school, or did the school say, "Hey, we need resources. This is something that's out there that we could tap into."

Professor Nicole Nguyen: It was sort of both. And so the district as a whole, right, there's, you know, 12 or 15 high schools in the district, they're trying to find ways to improve student outcomes at a time when this sort of Baltimore/DC corridor is rapidly changing because there are so many more national security jobs, there's private contractors, the field is just exploding.

And they wanted to recruit families to move to this area specifically for these jobs. So when the school reform project like first emerged in collaboration with the security industry, the idea was that that this was gonna be a program for middle class and upper middle class kids. This was a way to attract students and their families to this particular school area. You're gonna buy homes here, you know you're gonna increase property values and you're gonna have this like specialized school curriculum that's like designed for your kids. And what ended up happening was that those middle class families moved elsewhere and there were lines drawn in particular ways so those kids would go to a specific school. So you had a cluster of middle class, upper middle class kids that ended up going to a different school.

Professor Floros: Hmm.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: And so the school had to figure out, "Okay, well if, if this isn't gonna change the makeup of our school, if it's not gonna change the demographic profile of our school, then we have to reconsider who this program is for."

They talked about the program as being for these, these like forgotten kids that you had, um, you know, honors programs or IB programs, AP programs for what they called high flyers and that you had special education and that you had avid, like you had all these programs for different levels of kids and sort of the bubble kid, the B or C student didn't really have a specialized program.

And so the idea was that if, if you get kids plugged in, if you give them a sense of identity and ownership over the school, this will move them from a C student to maybe to being a B or A student. And so that's then who they imagined the program to be for. But it was for kids who lived in public housing. It was kids who were, you know, low income versus what they had originally imagined was, we can transform this region by attracting middle class families to this school. And that just didn't end up happening.

I will say that the teachers working in the program, cared about the students. And the program worked in many of the ways that we want education programs to work. They engaged kids, they gave kids a sense of identity, they had a sense of ownership, they had a sense of purpose. They got to go on field trips, they got to wear, you know, special t-shirts. Like it was creating that sense of belonging, that sense of academic engagement that we know corresponds to positive student outcomes.

It's just why did it have to be through a national security lens? Like was that the only thing available to get kids plugged in and interested in school? And there was another school down the road that had this environmental justice focus, right? And so it's not like the only jobs and only frameworks available were through a highly militarized national security framework.

You know, on the other hand, like I understood why teachers thought it was a good program because, you know, even when I was there, I was super excited. I loved going on field trips. I participated, I like got swept away in all the bizarre military things we were doing. And so, you know, from that view it's, it's easy to see why it got so much buy-in from teachers and students.

If you take a step back and, and think about it for a minute, it is bizarre that that's, we're using national security as a hook to get kids interested in education and not from a critical perspective.

Professor Floros: Well, and especially your last point about, you know, the kind of information the students are getting, I think feeds directly into your, uh, second book called *Suspect Communities, anti-Muslim Racism and the Domestic War on Terror*.

So was that an aspect of that national security curriculum that you observed that there were these like "Muslims are the enemy," or you know that terrorism is an issue for the Muslim community and people of color are the potential bad people. Was that part of the message that these students of color were receiving through this curriculum?

Professor Nicole Nguyen: It was definitely a part of the curriculum. I remember there was someone from the Army Corps of Engineers who was talking about building bridges in Afghanistan and there was some discussion about like, what Afghanistan was like. It doesn't have electricity, people don't wear shoes. You know, like these sort of ultra-orientalist, you know, images, uh, of Afghanistan.

And I remember the teacher interrupting the speaker and said like, "Oh yeah, it's like, it's like Aladdin. Like if you've seen Aladdin, you know what Afghanistan is, right?"

Professor Floros: What?!?!?!?

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Mm-hmm. And it's something that's super relatable. Like most kids have seen Aladdin and so they know, and so that is their then image of Afghanistan, you know, paired with images from the Army Corps of Engineers showing like these shoeless people living without electricity, right? Um, and then there's no analysis of like, well, why isn't there electricity in certain parts of Afghanistan? Like to what extent does, you know, the military engagements is defining that, you know? So that was certainly a part of it. I think another interesting component was kids got a lot of understanding of transnational context from Call of Duty. And so I've never played Call of Duty, but apparently Chechens, Russia like that, that's like a central sort of component of the background of Call of Duty.

And so they were also drawing a lot from, from that video game in their discussions.

Professor Floros: Okay. I'm just gonna leave that one there. So, your second book was on the Countering Violent Extremism program that was started under the Obama administration and has, if I understand correctly, largely continued though maybe under a different name?

Professor Nicole Nguyen: It still continued. They were thinking about rebranding Countering Violent Extremism as Countering Radical Islam under the Trump administration. And it's semi-rebranded under the Biden administration as Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention. It has another community prevention program as well, but for the most part people know it in this country as Countering Violence Extremism.

Professor Floros: Can you just give us a elevator pitch version of what the Countering Violent Extremism program was created to do and how it goes about trying to accomplish those goals.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: I don't know if people remember this, but there was a time in the middle of the Iraq War where we decided just bombing people wasn't gonna be the solution.

And you saw soldiers passing out coloring books, playing soccer. It was sort of this hearts and minds approach. And we started thinking in the United States that we can't just police and criminalize and infiltrate Muslim communities to disrupt this alleged threat of domestic terrorism. We have to engage in building community relationships, community partnerships with Muslim communities, and so this became the Countering Violent Extremism initiative. But as with the Iraq context, like we never stopped bombing Iraq. Even as we were playing soccer with kids, we were still doing military interventions. And so, we never really stopped the policing practices, the infiltration of mosques and Muslim communities.

But we did want to, I'm saying "we" as like the US security state, was trying to recruit Muslims to participate in the making of national security. So the idea was that we would enlist, the United States could enlist Muslim leaders, Muslim communities, but also public school teachers, mental health professionals, librarians, just sort of a wide range of social service providers to identify and report potential terrorists through their everyday work. So if you were a public school teacher, the idea was you'd be trained on, you know, "Here are the signs of terrorist radicalization. If I see any young person who I think is exhibiting those signs of radicalization, I'll report them to law enforcement. I'll report them to some official."

And what was controversial, problematic in the very initial stages of Countering Violent Extremism was that the warning signs of terrorist radicalization were things like growing a beard, wearing traditional Muslim attire, traveling to a foreign country, um, speaking Arabic, outrage over a US or Western foreign policy.

So things that are both super common, um, as well as deeply racialized. And so, you know, people said, "You want to say that this is an all-inclusive, you know, national security program, but you're clearly still criminalizing and targeting Muslim communities." And the fact that it's a school teacher who's doing the policing and not an actual cop doesn't make it any better, and in fact kind of makes it worse.

And so that's where, you know, I think people, as you said at the outset, like people say that I teach the school to prison pipeline. I think one of the important parts of the school to prison pipeline is the role that teachers play in policing, criminalizing, and having young people arrested in school.

And so this is one sort of iteration of that, is that teachers are taking on these policing responsibilities by identifying who they think are potential terrorists and then reporting them to law enforcement. So they become a reporting mechanism, you know, under this model. Teachers aren't encouraged to intervene or to ask more questions or to support young people's curiosity about Middle East politics, for example.

And so it's just, it's giving teachers more policing powers.

Professor Floros: So, it's like the teachers went to that high school and got immersed in that national security curriculum and then went back to their schools and saw threats everywhere.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Yes. Yes. And so you also have mental health professionals doing that. You have religious leaders doing that. So if you're a, just think if you're a Muslim kid and you can, you know, you're an immigrant kid from Syria and you saw some things in Syria and you wanna be able to talk about that with your therapist. But that, if you say any of that, if you disclose your experiences with, with war, with displacement, you know, with outrage over President Al Assad's, foreign policy, domestic policy, that you get flagged as a potential terrorist, you're not gonna talk in a therapeutic setting, right? And so it, it also sort of prevents access to particular kinds of services.

Professor Floros: And the Countering Violent Extremism initiative, was that exclusively aimed at Muslim communities? Because, you know, I, I don't do a ton of research on terrorism, but the data that I've seen suggests the largest number of incidents in the United States are actually perpetrated by white supremacists or right wing, uh, militia organizations, et cetera, not by Muslims. And so was this program focused on the breadth of the terrorism threat in the United States, or was it targeted at Muslim communities?

Professor Nicole Nguyen: So when CVE first emerged in 2015, 2016, it had an explicit focus on Muslim communities. It was being deployed specifically in Muslim communities, and the indicators of terrorist radicalization, like growing a beard, wearing traditional Muslim attire, they were explicitly anti-Muslim, right? And explicitly targeting Muslim communities. Obviously there was backlash over this, over the targeting of Muslims.

You know, so during this period I was attending security conferences. I was just hanging out with security professionals as a part of my research. And so every once in a while you would just see, um, a so-called former white supremacist who would be included on a panel. So, it would be like four people who are talking about the threat of Islamic, so-called Islamic terrorism, and then you have one person who's talking about white supremacy, but then if you looked at it, translated into practice, it was still directly targeting Muslim communities. And so all of these iterations have said, "Oh, we're ideologically ecumenical," that's their phrase, is that "we're an equal opportunity surveyor of national security threats."

But in practice it's disproportionately targeted Muslims. Um, people may remember the creation of the Black Identity Extremist label. Um, the idea that, uh, Black folks in the United, this was after sort of Black Lives Matter became prominent in the United States. The idea was that Black folks protesting police brutality would just start attacking police all the time.

And so they needed a new category of a domestic terrorist threat. So they came up with this Black Identity Extremist label. It's since been rebranded as Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violence, and so it collapses white supremacists in with so-called Black Identity Extremists. And so, I mean, this is done strategically, so you don't know. There's a big pot of money for this category, Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violence, and you have no idea how much is allocated for white supremacists and how much is for Black protestors essentially.

You also don't know the incidents that happen under that category, which are white supremacists and which are people of color protesting state violence, right?

Professor Floros: Wow.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: You can also think of, if you follow the Standing Rock protests, Indigenous water protectors protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline that was being built through Indigenous land. Um, they were marked as jihadists with what they were calling a, a strong female Shia following. Um, so again, explicitly anti-Muslim framing of Indigenous water protectors. Um, the framing of jihadists then allowed for this deployment of military security personnel. And as the protest sort of dwindled, they were saying there's gonna be what they refer to as a bleed out model, similar to in Afghanistan, you know, after the Soviets left, you know, the idea was that these foreign fighters would just go and take up arms somewhere else, and so they were saying Indigenous water protectors would just go somewhere else in the United States and start doing the same thing.

And so it, it justified this huge crackdown on Indigenous protestors, the arrest of Indigenous protestors. So the, the category of terrorists becomes flexible in order to repress any kind of political dissidents that's challenging state power.

Professor Floros: That doesn't even make sense.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: I, I know it doesn't have to make sense though,

Professor Floros: But doesn't it? Are local leaders so complicit that there's only pushback from the marginalized community that is being targeted.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: I think there's been consistent pushback from lots of different people. It has only led to nominal changes. We'll change the title of the program, we'll give presentations that talk about the threat of white supremacy. It hasn't actually led to changes in policing practices. And you know, that's where I think it's not enough to say like, "Oh yeah, there's probably a few bad actors who, you know, decided Indigenous water protectors were jihadists." Like somebody out there did that. You know, I think we have to think about what is the history of policing in the United States.

You know, Indian constables during, you know, the, the early days of settler colonialism in this country is where modern day policing comes from, right? It comes from these constables, it comes from slave patrols. And so, you know, I think we have to contend with an institutional history that is carrying us forward with contemporary policing practices. And so I think we can change the names all we want. We don't fundamentally change the purpose of policing in this country. And I think that's a much harder project to undertake.

Professor Floros: I was gonna, before you brought up the Standing Rock example, I was, well, no, I'm still gonna ask it. If there's a very gendered, uh, lens through which these programs are deployed in that, my expectation would be that men and boys are more frequently, you know, again, with the growing a beard, et cetera, that they are more often in the sight of policing and of the state.

But the Standing Rock example suggests that, you know, women are not excluded from this. Can you talk a little bit about that, about kind of, the gendered aspect of these types of initiatives?

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Yeah. I don't think there's clear, you know, I don't think it's easy to say that men and boys experience policing this way, and women and girls experience it that way because, under national security policy, yes. I think men and boys are seen most often as the perpetrators of acts of violence. If you take the case of Omar Mateen, who committed the Pulse Nightclub shooting,

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Um, so he did the shooting and then it was immediately assumed that his wife, Noor Salman, was somehow responsible for aiding and abetting for somehow supporting the Pulse shooting, and she was actually arrested and went to trial for it. And so that's oftentimes women play some kind of supporting role. I mean, this is still deeply gendered, but the idea is that women play some kind of supporting role in men and boys, sort of perpetration of violence. It's also interesting because then women also get framed as important levers in interrupting terrorist violence because they're seen as the ones who are credible messengers.

They're the ones I see, as being seen as having impacts on men and boys, so on their husbands or on their children. And there's also this framing that gender justice is an important counter-terrorism tool. And so the gender politics get taken up in all these complicated ways.

Professor Floros: Can you explain what you mean by that? Gender justice is part of countering extreme, uh, violent extremism?

Professor Nicole Nguyen: So the idea is that, you know, women's empowerment is a sign of sort of societal progress and can upend some of the root causes of violence in communities. And so the assumption, right, sort of the hidden sort of racial assumption there is that, you know, Muslim women are oppressed by Muslim men and also that Christian Americans are not oppressed; American women are not oppressed in any kind of way.

Professor Floros: Again, that makes no sense.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: It doesn't have to make sense. So part of this, if you think about Laura Bush, when, uh, George Bush wanted to justify invading Afghanistan, Laura Bush came out and said, we're freeing women. We're increasing women's literacy rates in Afghanistan.

Even though Afghan women were saying, "Bombing our country is gonna, you know, is gonna set back women's rights, decades. You're gonna also kill women. You're gonna kill children in the process." Right? And so not listening to local women about what local women need. And so the framing around women's empowerment is in, in the United States is another way to justify these national security practices.

This is about liberating women. It's about empowering women. It's about, you know, putting money in women's hands, you know, all that kind of stuff. That, that becomes about an, a narrative that we can construct about the US being sort of this civilizing, democratic, liberatory nation. And so it doesn't have to make sense because it's not a true story. So it'll never, it'll never make sense.

Professor Floros: Okay. So there is a, I think an, an outsized fear of radicalization, but it's not like there isn't any radicalization or folks who are preying on disaffected people or abused people or you know, whatever the case may be, in order to recruit them to their cause. What would be a more effective or just way to counter those messages without engaging in this expansion of who polices people?

Professor Nicole Nguyen: You know, first I wanna say even with something like white supremacy, I think oftentimes if you think about it as white supremacy as an iceberg, that sometimes we focus so much on the tip of the iceberg, what is the most visible. So we can think of like white supremacists hate crimes. We can think about mass shootings, that when we think about white supremacy, that's what we think about. And so sometimes we ignore the structural roots of white supremacy that produce those manifestations of extreme violence.

And the same is true, uh, with what we call terrorist violence in the United States, that that is sort of the tip of an iceberg. And we have to think about, well, what are the root causes of those expressions of violence? So things like US foreign policy. Uh, so even if we think about the September 11th attacks, you know, not condoning the September 11th attacks, but there was a real clear narrative around why Osama Bin Laden attacked the Twin Towers, why he attacked the Pentagon. And it had a clear sort of analysis of US foreign policy, US empire in the Middle East.

And so I think we have to think about those sort of root causes. What does ongoing US imperialism, US military interventions do to make narratives like ISIS's attractive to young people? Because young people would say to me like, "There's a war going on in Syria, right? Like Assad is bombing people. Assad is using chemical weapons," and so, how could you not be moved to do something about it in the way that many people have felt moved to go to Ukraine as war volunteers to oust Russia, right? And it's, you know, the ideologies are different. The, the politics are different, but in, in many ways, they're quite the same drive, of people feeling, you know, "There's an oppressed group, they're being militarily attacked and like literally no one's helping them. So I feel called to, to help them." So those are, you know, you have to think about the big root causes.

And I also think, you know, mental health professionals talk a lot about things like safety planning. And so some will do all of these things to intervene, so it never rises to a Duty to Warn situation where they have to call law enforce. So if a young person is in school and you know, has lots of questions about mid, Middle East politics, rather than treating that as fomenting terrorist radicalization, how to actually engage it seriously and to provide young people with their frameworks to interrogate Middle East politics and to have a particular stance on those politics. That's not us dictating what people's politics should be, but like, how do we provide young people with the tools to sort of make sense of, of all the stuff that's happening in the world, you know. If young people are disaffected, if they've experienced war and displacement, we need to provide services for them to provide care for them, uh, rather than say, "Oh, those are signs of, you know, terrorist radicalization. Now we're gonna deploy the police, we're gonna criminalize young people," um, et cetera. And so it's really about how to create systems of care, um, while sort of attending to what the root causes of violence are in the first place.

Professor Floros: And yet, you have an article on carceral care work where you talk about the securitization of social services, where the provision of services are contingent on participation in community policing and how a lot of the funding comes from the security apparatus. So, is the idea, provide the care work without the strings to policing, but the money is in the policing and so that might be the only place that someone has to turn to get funding for the care work that the community needs.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Yeah, so I, you know, part of why I wrote that piece was because, you know, there are these brilliant calls for defunding the police and funding social services. And you know, I think it's a good model, but one that has to contend with the history of Social Work's child removal policies, right? For example, that were, you know, about breaking Indigenous children from their families, and so, we can't assume that providing social services of and in itself is a good thing.

It has to be done in a way that isn't tied to policing and incarceration. And so I think that's a real challenge in the current national security context, but also the current policing context where social workers, therapists are increasingly called on to take on what used to be police responsibilities, right?

So responding to mental health crises. Sure, people could do that by themselves, but oftentimes they have a police officer tagging along with them. And so I think the question is really how do you provide care in a way that isn't tied to national security and that doesn't come with a lens of counter-terrorism, right? So I think one of the things that we're seeing is

that the way that people have been trained to interact with Muslim and Arab clients is to see them through a terrorist lens. And so, people can have similar experiences, but if you're Muslim and Arab and say, "I've had experiences with war, um, or displacement" or like "my parents are fighting," that, that gets coded as a potential security threat and needs a, a particular kind of clinical intervention rather than something that needs like a therapeutic approach.

And so I think we can't just wholesale say providing mental healthcare is a good thing because it has to be non-criminalizing, non-pathologizing care. And I think that that's extraordinarily difficult to do in the current context.

Professor Floros: I can't imagine that people in the Teaching of History program at UIC are being taught to criminalize their students. How, how are teachers being brought into these kinds of programs?

Professor Nicole Nguyen: You know, part of this is, we live in a white supremacist society, so part of it is just in the air we breathe. Right?

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Like every day we're breathing in images of who's a suspect, who's a criminal, who's dangerous, right? And so part part of it is that, but also we've sort of gutted alternative approaches in school discipline. Right. So, you know, I think when I was in school it would be really strange for one of my teachers to call a disciplinary dean to remove a kid from class or to call a security guard or to call a police officer like that. The idea of some outsider coming into the classroom was sort of unthinkable.

Um, and you know, I've seen over time how schools, you know, slowly encourage teachers to engage in exclusionary practices, right? So, to remove a kid from the class, to kick a kid out of class, to send them to in-school suspension, to call a disciplinary dean, to have the the kid removed, right? And so that takes teacher discretion away and it also means we're using punitive approaches to what is like kind of standard kid behavior. Right? Um, and so that, that's part of it is there are policies that are not of teachers own making that they then have to abide by because of this sort of tough on crime approach. And it comes from, this is sort of written into No Child Left Behind, but it comes from this "broken windows" approach to policing.

The idea was that any minor infraction could lead to just full-on mayhem. And so the idea is that if you didn't nip small misbehavior in the bud in schools, that you just have like a riot or some kind of giant fight on hand. And so that's, those are the logics that were at play and, you live in a sort of racialized society. It gets sort of enacted in a racialized and gendered way.

Professor Floros: And so this like zero tolerance was part of No Child Left Behind?

Professor Nicole Nguyen: So Zero Tolerance policy started, as you know, no weapons and no drugs, and No Child Left Behind had in it some language around persistently disruptive students. It empowered teachers to kick kids out who were persistently disruptive.

And so that was one of the ways. You went from Zero Tolerance for drugs and guns to Zero Tolerance for minor infractions.

Professor Floros: Wow.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: And No Child Left Behind also tied federal funding for schools to Zero Tolerance policies. So if you were a school and you wanted federal funding, which is every public school, you had to institute Zero Tolerance policies.

Professor Floros: And I'm assuming that there was no official recognition that maybe kids are disruptive because they have a learning disability or some non-behavioral, but is manifesting in their behavior, reason for not being able to sit still.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Yeah, or just school is terrible. Or sitting in a desk that like wraps around your body for an hour and a half is, is ridiculous. And I couldn't do it now as an adult, you know? Like I, I think we think the structure of school is great for kids and it, it's miserable. Kids are awake at like 5:00 AM they eat lunch at 10:00 AM.

Professor Floros: Yeah.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: You know, there's no reset. Like school is terrible, and we wonder why kids aren't, why they're disaffected and like you just go, if you had to redo school again. I mean, I did redo high school and it's, it was miserable. It was miserable.

Professor Floros: Okay, so your book coming out in October is *Terrorism on Trial: Political Violence, and Abolitionist Futures*. So, I wanna ask more about the content of this, but I keep hearing people talking about abolition, and I'm very confused by what they mean because historically, abolition has been about the ending of chattel slavery in the 19th century, but that phrase is being used today. So can you explain what the modern use of abolition is supposed to speak to?

Professor Nicole Nguyen: So you're absolutely right that the concept of abolition emerges from efforts to abolish slavery, and these efforts sort of continued. As you know, Angela Davis talks about how sort of every era has had its own peculiar institution.

So, you know, we abolish slavery, uh, but we had things like the convict leasing system and then Jim Crow. And each of these had sort of its own sort of abolitionist movements to end these, what she calls peculiar institutions. And so if we see the rise of mass incarceration and the history of policing in this country as tied to slavery, drawing sort of on that sort of historical evolution of policing in the country that's rooted in, in, in the slave trade. And so it, it is sort of thinking about the racial roots of policing and that the idea is that like there's no way to reform slavery. There's no way to reform Jim Crow. And so there's no way to really reform our way out of the kind of police violence we're seeing, um, today, but that has sort of existed historically, um, since Indian constables and slave patrols. And so, you know, Ruth Wilson Gilmore talks about abolition as not just about ab, absence; it's also about presence. So it's not just the absence of police and prisons, it's also the presence of all of the things that kind of make police and prisons obsolete, which is Angela Davis's term.

So, the way that abolition is, abolition is thought of in this country, I think is, "Oh, we just get rid of police and prisons and abolitionists live in some fantasy land where there isn't harm and violence." And the sort of abolition is both absence and presence is about thinking about what kind of society and what kind of structures do we need to have in place both to reduce harm and violence from happening in the first place, but to also respond to harm and violence in really different ways. Um, and so this is where you see conversations around community accountability, restorative justice, transformative justice as offering these alternative frameworks that really try to get at holding people accountable, accountable for the harm and violence they do and do that enormously difficult work of both transforming individuals to never commit that harm again, and also trying to transform society to make that kind of harm and violence unthinkable.

So, if we think about, for example, attacks on trans people in this country, you could arrest people and put them in prison for, you know, five or six years. Those people will eventually get out of prison and nothing really fundamentally will have changed for trans people in this country. If you start getting at the roots of why people are attacking trans people, you're gonna reduce violence. You're gonna have to create different ways of responding to anti-trans violence that doesn't rely on the police. Many, you know, many trans people have only had negative interactions with the police and are not likely to call law enforcement if they're attacked, right? And so again, it's thinking about this both/and of reducing, if not eliminating the role of police and prisons while also building up these other sort of structures and institutions and processes that can then make the idea of police and prisons just really obsolete.

Professor Floros: I imagine that this is something that has to start locally and demonstrate effectiveness before it can spread. So are there communities where this shift is happening?

Professor Nicole Nguyen: You know, I can even just think about my own community. I grew up in a really small town in Pennsylvania, and we were a community that you didn't call the police, not because we had any critique of the police, but because the idea of an outsider coming in to do anything was kind of unthinkable. And so the idea was always we take care of our own issues, right? So if there's two guys who are drunk, fighting at the bar, but you call one of their friends to interrupt the fight, right? Or you have the bartender interrupt the fight.

And so I do think, you know, in places all across the country, there are communities who don't call the police because they don't trust the police because it goes against their cultural values, um, et cetera. And those places have, have created ways of responding to harm and violence that don't necessarily rely on the police. And a lot of people will say, you know, if I, if I experience intimate partner violence, I'm not gonna call the police. Like, it's not a police matter to be solve, but I also need people to respond and to hold my partner accountable. And so who would those people be? So I think in, in really like small ways we're seeing, um, alternatives to incarceration.

And then I think you could see people sort of block by block or neighborhood by neighborhood trying to create these sort of alternatives to calling the police because in a lot of communities that already doesn't happen. And I come from a predominantly white, you know, small town in Pennsylvania, and we would never call the police for something, you know, for some act of harm.

Professor Floros: What are you talking about when you're talking about political violence? Is it political if it's imposed by the state, or are you talking about like civil wars? Like what? What are you talking about when you are talking about political violence?

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Yeah, it's a good question. Um, you know, part of, part of the work of the book is trying to reframe terrorism as political violence to insist that we have to take seriously what is the relationship between power, politics, and violence, and that if we wanna reduce or eliminate this thing we call terrorism, we actually have to think about the power and politics that are at play. I think the more I think about the concept of political violence, the more, the harder it is for me to think about any form of violence that isn't inherently political or about power. So even sort of gender-based violence, right? It's about power, it's about politics. Um, and so it's sort of insisting violence is more multifaceted than sometimes we give, give it credit for.

Professor Floros: Trying to define what terrorism is, is also a very difficult endeavor because no one can agree. But my understanding is that pretty much every definition includes that there is a political motivation in the purpose behind the violence.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Well, I think the way conventionally terrorism is understood is that, and the way that it particularly emerges, we were talking about the Countering Violent Extremism programs before. In those models, the idea of terrorism is that it comes from some kind of cultural, theological, psychological pathology, not actually from politics. So if you think about ISIS, for example, ISIS is just like, weirdos doing really terrible, horrible things in a way that you're not actually talking about things like Sykes-Picot. You're not talking about Assad, like you're not actually talking about the politics that are at play because everyone is so focused on, you know, the really terrible violence of ISIS and not thinking about the really terrible violence of Assad that is more invisible to the outside world because Assad doesn't want his atrocities known. Um, whereas ISIS is intentionally highly publicizing it's beheading, it's violence, um, et cetera, as a sort of recruitment tool. And so I think, you know, there's somebody, I forget who, which scholar says it that it's not the cruelty that differentiates ISIS from Assad, but actually it's visibility.

Professor Floros: In addition to the political context in which ISIS is operating, there is also the fact that they are engaging in a lot of these acts in order to consolidate control of territory, right? So it's not, "We're engaging in brutality against our opponents because there are opponents." It's, "We are eliminating opposition where we are going to now rule," and that is, just, I mean, take away everything else; that is political.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Yes. And I, the whole thing is political, right? And even which side we're funding, who we're giving military weapons to. And you know, the sort of people I've, I've been doing research with show that like, you know, at any given moment, like ISIS is operating alongside the US. Like, and everything's always shifting and like you could be ISIS today and something else tomorrow. Um, and so like how do you make sense of those sort of everyday realities on the ground?

Professor Floros: Yeah. I remember when the, the Civil War in Syria was in its earliest phases, and there was a, you know, the Obama administration was concerned about who to support because they had ties to Al-Qaeda or whoever. And what seemed to be missing from

that conversation was something that I think was also apparent during the Cold War, was that most communist rebels or whatever, they may have been Marxist, but they weren't like super committed. And, and some of them weren't even Marxist, you know, but they were, it wasn't like they were super committed to like, imposing, you know, a Maoist or Leninist regime. But if the United States was supporting their adversaries and being communist was how you got support from the Soviet Union, then you were communist, right?

And I think the same was true then, and may still be true in Syria, right? That if Al-Qaeda is the one that's providing support and you need to defend and, you know, take territory or whatever you're trying to do, okay, you'll partner with Al-Qaeda because it's a means to an end not necessarily any kind of ideological simpatico or anything.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Yes. It's, you know, who our allies are at any given moment isn't, uh, necessarily consistent with previous positions. A lot of what was happening in Syria was that the, the alliances were shifting...

Professor Floros: mm-hmm.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: so frequently, you couldn't tell "Am I a US ally today and not tomorrow?" depending on these designations that are super fluid and, you know, just kind of based on whatever way the wind was blowing for the United States at any time.

And so even the like category of foreign terrorist organization, even though it had material effects for people, It didn't actually like map onto something that was con, like, there wasn't like a concrete analysis of like, "Oh, they do this, this, and this." It's sort of just like, "who's our ally today? Who's our enemy today?" and we're gonna make these designations.

Professor Floros: Is there anything about your current research or a project that you're working on now that the book is in press, that you're really excited about?

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Yeah, so I'm actually working with people who identify as abolitionist mental health professionals to figure out this question. So, it's bridging the second and third book project to try to think through how do we provide mental healthcare to Muslim Arab and other immigrant communities in ways that sort of don't capitulate to, to the state, right? How can, how can people provide safe mental health care, um, and how do we train just general mental health professionals to be able to provide that care?

So that includes like, what are the frameworks to think about what is liberatory mental health practice, um, to, here's the things to watch for, if you might be called on by the national security state to engage in these policing practices that might feel like a generic risk assessment that you might do with a client, um, to know that this is actually like an anti-Muslim, anti-Arab kind of program that you're being asked to contribute to.

Um, and so I'm super excited because I don't actually know anything about social work or counseling or any of these mental health professions. And so to learn about it through, um, people who are thinking about mental healthcare as a kind of liberation, as a kind of

empowerment, um, as a kind of abolitionist practice has been really exciting because now I don't know anything about mental healthcare except from those frameworks.

Um, and I'm trying to, you know, part of the, the messiness of it is how to bring conversations around mental health care, abolition, and national security together, cuz they're three groups of people who don't normally talk to each other and so like to try to sort of break those disciplinary boundaries, but, I have to understand each of them enough to be able to bring those conversations together. So that's kind of like the exciting, the exciting part.

Um, but you know, a lot of my work has shown how mental healthcare is seen as the next frontier of the global War on Terror. And so, um, really trying to do the work of, um, ensuring that mental healthcare professionals understand what's coming, um, and how to sort of prevent their practices from becoming a part of the War on Terror. Um, I find, you know, really important and critical for folks.

Professor Floros: Yeah, I mean, I think one thing that I kept thinking as I was reading through your work is how little the War on Terror is in the public spotlight. Like my first thought before I act, *actually* thought about it was "Really, is there so much emphasis on the war on terror anymore?" And of course it is, but we don't see it. It's not as visible as it was in the aughts, right? And so why is this something that is so sneakily infiltrating all these aspects of life? And most people probably wouldn't have a clue.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: You know, I think every time there's been some kind of police crisis, like if you think about the LA riots, right? There has been this turn to some softer, friendlier policing mechanism, and so there was enormous outrage about sort of the blanket surveillance and criminalization of Muslim communities, and so, you know, the security state is smart.

It knows that I can't keep doing this, um, because people are gonna continue protesting, people are gonna continue resisting, and so it, it kind of had to become smarter. What is, what the security state is doing is super brilliant, right? It's enacting the global War on Terror without us actually understanding that that's what's happening.

Um, we don't know that Homeland Security programs exist. We don't know that mental health professionals are being tasked with identifying and reporting potential terrorists. And so sort of the under the radar is a part of the brilliance and strategy of the security state. It also means that essentially the security state is everywhere and anywhere all at once. So even the most intimate spaces of everyday life, your therapist's office, like your guidance counselor's, office, your gym, like these are now sites of surveillance, right? And so what, what space of privacy is available to us? If you're Muslim and Arab, there is no sort of space that is free from any kind of surveillance. And young people felt that. Young people thought, "I can go to a community center, but I don't know if my community leader is trying to figure out if I'm a terrorist or not. I can go to my therapist. I don't know if they're trying to figure out if I'm a terrorist or not." You know? Same with school, same, you know, with the rec center, the YMCA, right? Like every space could be a cite of surveillance, and so young people just can never be themselves.

Professor Floros: And is this similar to J. Edgar Hoover and the surveillance of like the Black Panthers and stuff? Has that also continued forward, or is the focus on surveillance mostly around Muslim communities or it's just people of color?

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Yeah, so I think the connection to J. Edgar Hoover COINTELPRO is really important because yes, it's certainly a racialized project. It's definitely about policing people of color, but it's also about repressing political dissidents. And that's what COINTELPRO was about, policing Black people, but it was also about suppressing the Black Panther movement, um, and just Black dissidents in general.

And so that's part of what we're seeing. And I think relating this to the concept of political violence is really important because it's about suppressing any threats to state security. And so that could be people protesting in the street. It could be people protesting military intervention. It could be people taking up arms to resist US military intervention. And so, in this model, right, any form of political dissidence is a threat. It needs to be surveyed and repressed and criminalized, you know, in the name of national security.

Professor Floros: And yet might be creating the very national security risks by alienating people that they say they're trying to prevent.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Yes.

Professor Floros: Well, Professor Nicole Nguyen, thank you so much for joining me today in The Politics Classroom.

Professor Nicole Nguyen: Thanks for having me.

Professor Floros: Professor Nicole Nguyen is an associate professor of Criminology, Law, and Justice and Educational Policy Studies at UIC.

This is Professor Floros in The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio. If you'd like more information about the topics covered in today's episode, please check out The Bookshelf section of thepoliticsclassroom.org, which is linked in the show notes.

Thanks for joining my conversation with Professor Nguyen, but that's all I've got for this week. Class dismissed.

Outro Music: Three Goddesses by Third Age