

The democracy of death: political violence in criminology

Vincenzo Ruggiero reviews criminology's theoretical frameworks for understanding institutional violence, war and terrorism.

There is a preliminary distinction to be borne in mind when addressing political violence. It is the distinction between authorised and unauthorised force, the former as violence of the authority, the latter as an expression of defiance against the authority. Authorised force amounts to law-making violence, and may be foundational, when it establishes new systems and designates a new authority. But it may also amount to law-conserving violence, when it protects the stability of systems and reinforces authority. I would call both these types of violence *institutional violence* (or violence from above). I would use the term *anti-institutional violence* (or violence from below) to designate unauthorised force addressed against the authority.

It is extraordinary that even detailed studies of the relationship between violence and 'the rise

analysis of socialism and communism is a gold mine: in discussing them jointly the author notes the difference between a 'reasonable proposal' for change and an 'abnormal' programme of 'social destruction'. In the same tradition, Robert Merton introduces the form of deviant adaptation that he terms 'rebellion'. How many criminologists have concentrated on this type of adaptation? But let me continue in this overview.

In the work of the Chicago sociologists, political violence coincides with institutional violence. These sociologists tell us how violence is, in a sense, 'contracted out' to organised criminal groups for the benefit of institutional actors. Organised crime and official politics are described as allies who rely on the mutuality of their services. Conflict theorists within criminology, perhaps inadvertently, adopt Simmel's argument that conflict is among

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of modern society', which describe trends of homicide and dynamics of urbanisation, or discuss civilising processes and social change, manage to omit political violence from such dynamics and processes (Eisner, 2004). And yet, the history of criminological thought contains an avalanche of suggestions, viewpoints and insights about both institutional and anti-institutional violence, along with the theoretical controversies, the shortcomings and the potential explanatory tools that such a central topic needs (Ruggiero, 2006). Classical criminology, for instance, focuses on institutional violence and warns that this violence may be replicated by oppressed people in the form of violent anti-institutional outbursts. Excessive authorised violence, according to Cesare Beccaria, provokes unauthorised responses in kind. Positivism maintains that political violence from below is not 'atavistic', but 'evolutive', because it tends to 'hasten the future' of socio-political systems. However, positivists draw a crucial distinction between rebellion and revolution, and identify pathological aspects in the former and evolutionary elements in the latter. In the functionalist tradition, political violence can be the result of moral rules losing their regulatory strength, particularly when political and economic change affect the patterns of individual and group expectations. Durkheim's

the most vivid forms of human interaction, but end up proposing 'the politicality of crime'. These theorists, particularly those who in the 1970s identified themselves as critical criminologists, seem to be at ease when analysing endemic violence caused by structural inequality, but uncomfortable when faced with political actors rationally choosing to use violence as a form of collective expression. In the contribution of symbolic interactionism in criminology one could view political violence as 'joint action', namely the result of the violence from above that it elicits and to which it simultaneously responds.

All of these contributions may be invaluable for the analysis of contemporary authorised, as well as unauthorised, violence, that is the two extreme forms of political violence: war and terrorism. Definitions of 'terrorism' are always controversial, although one tentative definition could describe this type of political violence as 'pure' violence: we have pure violence when organised forces, overtly or covertly, inflict mass violence on civilians, non-combatants. Terrorism, therefore, can be defined as pure, random, violence, incorporating a notion of collective liability. The targets of terrorism, in other words, are not precisely identifiable actors whose conduct is regarded as wrongful, but general populations, which are hit because of their nationality, ethnicity,



religious or political creed. This definition brings not only international terrorism but also, and perhaps even more immediately, the characteristics of contemporary wars to mind. Terrorism and war share a number of features, and in a feud-like fashion the two aliment each other. Contemporary international terrorists, in this perspective, appear as 'clones' of those who wage war against them, namely of those who utilise 'pure', random, violence against non-combatants.

Criminology can provide us with the pointers not only for an analysis of 'war crimes', but also for the formulation of a notion of 'war as crime'. Some of its tenets can be used to call for a general ceasefire and the criminalisation of war, the most extreme form of institutional violence. Pacifist arguments within criminology allow us to declare that the notion of 'war as value' has enjoyed unmerited longevity. Think of Durkheim's work, where we find the concept of 'universal patriotism' as opposed to provincial nationalism, but also the idea that some forms of deviance do not generate solidarity within the law-abiding population because, like cancer and tuberculosis, they cause damage beyond the functional threshold. War, in this perspective, is functionally incompatible: instead of bringing vital forces together, it causes disintegration. Becker's notion of 'moral entrepreneurs' may well be utilised by pacifist criminologists to identify the harmful conduct of those supporting and waging war, and in a fashion that would please labelling theorists, help us stigmatise them as 'outsiders'. Criminologists who work in the area of corporate and state crime provide important guidelines for peace arguments. The crimes of the powerful occur in contexts in which the growth of corporate actors causes a structural change in society whereby 'natural persons' play an increasingly insignificant role. In such contexts interactions become largely asymmetric, in that corporate actors are in the position to control the

conditions in which their relationships with natural actors take place. The former hold more information regarding the nature of their relationship and the way in which this can be altered. War can be equated to state and corporate crime for the similar asymmetric position that decision-making groups occupy vis-à-vis natural persons, who become victims even when they are unaware of having been victimised, and even when victimisation is disguised under heroism and patriotism. Finally, following some abolitionist suggestions, criminology as ceasefire would reject the idea of 'just wars' as abolitionism rejects the idea of 'just desert'.

Contemporary wars are tantamount to arbitrary aggression, they are asymmetrical exercises in which States accept to share the language of those they attempt to fight. They are becoming forms of paramilitary policing, non-Clausewitzian conflicts which do not involve the exclusive use of regular armed forces; and do not entail a distinctive, bilaterally accepted state of war. For this reason, they are more likely to take place outside agreed rules and are bound to destroy the very principles in the name of which they are waged (Hirst, 2001). Contemporary wars attempt to impose democracy with bombs: a democracy of death.

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References

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