EDITORIAL

Crime as Protest, Protest as Crime
Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Giovanni A. Travaglino and Cristina d'Aniello

Abstract: This special issue explores the complex and multifaceted relationship between crime and protest. Crime may in some circumstances be considered a legitimate form of resistance against oppressive authorities. It may also be seen as an unacceptable form of violence or a symptom of social disorganization. Similarly, while protest is a tool for promoting social justice, it may be criminalized and treated as a threat to public order. The articles in this issue draw on a range of theoretical and methodological approaches to examine various aspects of the relationship between crime and protest. They explore strategies used by governments to suppress dissent, the relationship between moderate and radical protest actions, and the ways in which marginalized groups challenge the designations of illegality by immigration regimes. The articles demonstrate how crime and protest are deeply intertwined, and they provide new insights into the complexities of social activism and the challenges faced by those who engage in it.

Keywords: crime, criminalization, interdisciplinarity, methodology, protest, social justice

The relationship between the concepts of “crime” and “protest” is complex and multifaceted, and has been the subject of intense debate across academic disciplines (Schneider and Schneider 2008). While crime can be construed as a legitimate form of resistance against oppressive authorities and unjust power structures, it has also been seen as an unacceptable form of violence or a mere symptom of social disorganization. Similarly, while protest is often seen as a vital tool for promoting social justice and change, it is frequently criminalized by authorities and treated as a threat to public order and stability.
In this special issue, we analyze the linkage between crime and protest by addressing how illegal practices may sometimes be employed to challenge unjust power relations. Historically, some forms of crimes have been seen as expressions of dissent against the powerful (Abrams et al. 2022). For instance, groups such as smugglers, pirates, and bandits or—more recently—gangsters, hackers, and mafias have sometimes been able to attract support and help from communities perceiving authorities as unjust and unresponsive (Hobsbawm [1969] 2001; Travaglino 2019; Travaglino and Abrams 2019).

Along similar lines, the boundaries between what is considered legitimate and illegitimate forms of protest have been shifting. The use of violence by some protest movements has raised questions about the social implications and efficacy of such tactics (Stott et al. 2018). For example, the looting that occurred during protests against police brutality in the United States in recent years has been criticized as opportunistic and criminal by some black leaders while being justified as normative by others (McKersie 2021). Conversely, as protests have become more widespread and global, authorities have increasingly sought to control and restrict these movements through various means, including legal regulations, surveillance, and physical force. These efforts have been particularly visible in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, as governments have sought to use public health concerns as a pretext for cracking down on dissent (Ferrero and Natalucci 2020).

The criminalization of social protest has typically involved the use of legal and institutional mechanisms to suppress political expression and dissent. These mechanisms have included the use of anti-terrorism laws to target protest movements, as well as the use of anti-riot laws to criminalize forms of protest that involve disruptive or confrontational tactics. The criminalization of protest has raised fundamental questions about the nature of democracy and the role of the state in regulating political expression (Pickard 2019).

Thus, as this brief overview suggests, while crime and protest are often viewed as distinct phenomena they are often deeply intertwined. Understanding the complex dynamics that link crime and protest is essential to developing effective strategies for promoting social justice and change. It is also crucial to developing a more nuanced and informed understanding of the political drivers and implications of crime. By exploring the complex and contested terrain of crime and protest from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives, this special issue aims to shed light on the ways in which these two phenomena are interconnected and mutually constitutive.
The articles in this special issue draw on a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches, from empirical analyses of specific protest events to critical analyses of broad social issues. The special issue examines the strategies used by governments to suppress dissent, the relationship between moderate and radical protest actions, and the ways in which marginalized groups challenge the designations of illegality by immigration regimes. The articles also discuss theoretical issues surrounding the recent trends in global policing and how criminalization processes are affecting public authorities. Overall, these contributions shed light on the complexities of social activism and the challenges faced by those who engage in it.

Mathew Abbey’s contribution focuses on how activism and art disrupt the necessity of queer migrants having to perform the role of the “good,” law-abiding migrant who desires to be included into the nation. Abbey examines the #Rockumenta activism by LGBTQIA+ Refugees Welcome and the photography series I Am Illegal by an anonymous artist to understand how queer migrants challenge the designation of illegality by immigration regimes. The analysis indicates how performing crime and illegality challenges the necessity for queer migrants to claim asylum to adhere to stereotypes of vulnerability in order to be seen as deserving of legal status.

Robyn E. Gulliver and colleagues’ text addresses the strategies used by a democratic state to suppress dissent by criminalizing social protest activities. They compile and tabulate new legislation in Australia affecting protest rights from 2010 to 2020, and examine connections between climate change protest and protest criminalization in Australia between 2010 and 2019. They demonstrate that Australian governments have criminalized climate protest via large-scale arrests by introducing laws curtailing protest freedoms and expanding police and corporate discretionary power in the application of those laws.

Hedy Greijdanus and colleagues investigate how anti-Trump Democrats managed their options to protest prior to the 2020 election, focusing on when moderate collective action predicts more radical intentions to protest. They examine the relationship between moderate action involvement and effectiveness and radical action intentions. They demonstrate that although moderate action involvement correlated with radical intentions, the effectiveness of moderate action negatively related to radical intentions. They explain this radical use of political violence as protest using social-identity-based collective action models.

Finally, Matt Clement discusses theoretical issues relating to the recent trends in global policing. Clement argues that the growth in the
scale of anti-police and anti-government protests since 2019 is an intensification of the repercussions of the global crisis of political economy since the 2008 crash and subsequent austerity measures. The police/public consensus is becoming increasingly fragile, and this phenomenon is something that the governing institutions—state and police—are finding increasingly difficult to accept.

The articles in this special issue provide a rich and nuanced perspective on the complex and contested relationship between crime and protest. By highlighting the diverse and interdisciplinary nature of this field of inquiry, this issue aims to contribute to research in this area by generating new insights, challenging assumptions, and opening up new avenues for exploration.

One of the key themes that emerge from the articles is the importance of the social context in understanding the relationship between crime and protest. How crime and protest are linked is complex and depends on a range of factors, such as the nature of the protest, the level of police response, and the broader social and institutional contexts. Another important theme is the role of the media in shaping public perceptions of crime and protest. Media coverage can distort or sensationalize events, leading to misunderstandings and misrepresentations of both crime and protest. This has important implications for policy, as public perceptions can influence how authorities respond to protests and how they frame policies related to crime and justice.

Overall, the articles in this special issue demonstrate the need for more research on the complex and multifaceted relationship between crime and protest. By bringing together scholars from different disciplines and perspectives, this issue provides, we hope, a valuable contribution to this important area of inquiry.
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References


