

## SECURITIZATION, REPRESSION AND THE CRIMINALIZATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S DISSENT. AN INTRODUCTION

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## SECURITIZACIÓN, REPRESIÓN Y CRIMINALIZACIÓN DEL DISENTIMIENTO JUVENIL

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The implementation of harsh austerity and neoliberal policies has radically transformed the everyday life of a significant proportion of Europeans (Giugni and Grasso 2018). In some cases, austerity has meant decreasing social protection and a generalized worsening of life conditions. More broadly, it has led to greater employment insecurity for larger groups of workers, destined to find their way amidst greater deregulation, and increasing inequalities. Austerity has had important political consequences as well. These include a radical transformation in political attitudes that intensifies the defense of populist views together with the strengthening of negative views regarding politics (and politicians). Also, new political parties build on citizens' dissatisfaction to impeach traditional political parties and propose supposedly more direct ways of interfacing with 'the people'. Finally, the fight against austerity lies at the heart of a new cycle of contentious mobilization across Europe that is proving highly efficient in mobilizing citizens with very different backgrounds, ideologies and needs.

Unsurprisingly, young people are at the forefront of anti-austerity mobilizations: to a great extent, they have been bearing the brunt of hardship caused by ongoing cuts in public spending, in the form of ris-

ing tuition fees, labor market reforms, higher levels of unemployment, and precarious working conditions (Pickard and Bessant 2018a; Loukakis and Portos 2019). Examples of contentious mobilizations led by young people in a context of austerity abound: from the Arab Spring to Indignados in Spain, from the mobilizations for global justice to #Nuit Debout in France, a new generation has joined contentious politics, contributing to the development of creative ideas for a more just and inclusive society (della Porta 2019; Pickard and Bessant 2018b). As della Porta argues, "empirical research indicates that, especially in those countries that have been hit harder by the financial crisis, a substantial number of young citizens are reacting with increased political and social mobilization, choosing predominantly intermittent, noninstitutionalized, horizontal forms of political participation, performed across hybrid public spaces" from the Web to town squares (della Porta 2019, 1408). Many young people across Western countries feel aggrieved, and their discontent regarding their economic circumstances, prospects, and the political status quo has contributed to increase outrage. More than other social grounds, young people experience austerity through narratives of inter-generational injustice, broken futures and ruined expectations.

In Spain and elsewhere, Governments, media, the penal justice system and, also, security communities are perceiving juvenile political engagement as a threat (Bessant 2017, 206). Youth activism has traditionally been the site of intense regulation and monitoring by state authorities, reflecting concerns about the threats to social cohesion, revolutionary impulses and urban disorder. Western societies are constantly investing in new modes of governing youth politics, that accommodate technological discoveries with the traditional goal of limiting youth's full expressive capacity. At the same time, most Western societies are experiencing a generalized punitive turn as demonstrated by growing incarceration rates, ubiquitous examples of penal populism or growing investment into public and private forms of policing and security. Amidst the anxieties brought about by a neoliberal system of social and political relations, which involve rising inequality and advanced modes of marginalization and social and political exclusion, punishment emerges as a main site for nation-state's self-redefinition and validation. While perceptions of social injustice and grievances spur new waves of unrest and discontent, states reinvent punishment as a mechanism of societal regulation and control, which invariably include strenuous new legislation in the fields of security and crime, but also new inroads into mass surveillance and the monitoring of large groups of citizens. The consequences of these dynamics are well-known: on the one hand, an enormous rise in prison population steered by the fast expansion of criminal punishment at the individual level. On the other hand, increasing repression and criminalization of protesters on the part of governments of all political orientations (Oliver, 2008), which appears particularly harsh when it comes to repressing youth political mobilization. Spain is a case in point (Calvo and Portos 2018). The 2015 "Law for the Protection of Citizen Safety" (often nicknamed the "Gag Law") represents the backbone of an emerging regime of governance of young people, which is also defined by securitization, new forms of policing and soft repression combined with enhanced surveillance. Criminal law experts as well as social science scholars, human rights organizations, and even international media outlets criticized this legal change for contributing to criminalizing political dissent and the right to protest.<sup>1</sup> Under the 'Gag Law', authorities can perform indiscriminate identity checks and impose discretionary penalties on some forms of political dissent, including '*escraches*', but also the permanent occupation of public spaces for the purpose of protesting or the organization of protest activities within the premises of bank branches .

This special issue looks for the invisible, but robust, threat that connects repression, as conflictual practices developed by public and private actors against organized forms of political dissent, mobilization and youth politics. Not every instance of conten-

tious mobilization has a discernible generational element, neither does youth shape the experiences of all forms of collective mobilization. Similarly, 'repression', being commonly defined as "the attempt by a regime or its agents to end movement challenges through physical control" (McAdam and Tarrow 2018, 26), is not exclusively inflicted on organized forms of juvenile activism. As carefully explained by critical criminology, many expressions of urban juvenile life have traditionally caused great anxiety among certain social groups, resulting in control, surveillance and punishment. Ultimately, any comprehensive account of youth politics will not be limited to an analysis of juvenile protest politics, as the wealth of research on the political behavior of young people confirms. Still, the careful observation of the legacies of austerity makes a compelling case for the intertwining of these three ideas, as austerity has sparked new forms of mobilization with an undisputed generational profile, which are also becoming sites for expanding practices of repression. By pulling together cutting-edge research from leading national and international contributors, this monograph will shed light on how different mechanisms of repression, criminalization, surveillance and control are being deployed to narrow down the scope and room for youth political engagement and participation, and how perceptions of crime and social panics influence such dynamics. Among the mechanisms of repression covered in this special issue, we can find new forms of policing, toughening of penal laws and media framing and coverage. Featuring insights from socio-legal studies, criminology, political sociology, social movement research and youth studies, we hope this monograph will contribute to a nuanced and rich discussion of how, and why, repression and social control are becoming dominant elements in Spain (and beyond)'s daily politics, and how these aspects play out with political engagement.

This special issue brings together seven articles, beginning with the piece by Gema García-Albacete and Javier Lorente that aims at exploring young people's attitudes and behavior in the aftermath of the Great Recession. We know that the post-2008 economic crisis transformed the way in which European citizens relate to politics in general but particularly affected young people, resulting in decreased levels of trust in political institutions and increased levels of political protest. Ten years on, in 'The post-austerity youth: political attitudes and behavior', the authors examine the longer-term consequences of the economic crisis on young people's political interest, political trust and political participation. With a quantitative empirical approach based on longitudinal survey data used for descriptive purposes in 16 European countries, they come up with a threefold comparison of young people over time (before, during and after the economic crisis), young people to adults, and young people across countries. Their robust and

compelling results support the idea of the emergence of a post-crisis youth that is more engaged and participative than adults and young people before the crisis. However, the results do not show radical differences among countries that were to greater or lesser degrees affected by the economic crisis.

This special issue discusses the repression of contemporary forms of collective protest as a tool towards the further criminalization of juvenile political engagement. Social movement scholars have discussed the importance of policing and state repression of mobilization through various means, including legal mechanisms, in order to suppress and keep dissent under control (e.g. Davenport 1995, 2000, 2007; Davenport, Johnston and Mueller 2005; della Porta and Reiter 1998; Earl 2003, 2011; Earl and Soule 2010 and 2006; Earl, Soule and McCarthy 2003; Wood 2007). Despite its obvious relevance, however, repression remains one of the less theorized aspects of contentious politics, as pressing questions remain unanswered. For instance, while we have come to accept that the association between repression and mobilization is interactive and dynamic (Koopmans 1997), we still ignore whether repression in a protest event negatively or positively affects mobilization prospects, or whether this association may be U-shaped (Opp and Roehl 1990). Also, we know little about the relationship between changing patterns of repression and the culture of mobilization, the repertoires of action, organizational strategies, and how age cohorts and generational differences unfold (Nordas and Davenport 2013).

The article by Sarah Pickard offers illuminating evidence about the shifting configurations of repression and policing in contemporary western societies. Repression research has largely focused on the restriction of rights, arrest, detention, torture, and even murder of political challengers (Shen-Bayh 2018, 322). Yet, repression is only one form of the manifold modes of social control to slow down and paralyze protest tactics— by removing the resources for future action others attempt to demobilize dissent (McAdam and Tarrow 2018). The toughening of penal law, and the extensive use of long prison sentences as the dominant form of punishment add to a regime of social control when young people are easily targeted, and persecuted, as criminals (Oliver 2008; Wacquant 2009). In this sense, Sarah Pickard tracks and sheds light on the evolution in policing and the legislative framework pertaining to protests and young protesters in Britain. Drawing on political sociology, political science, criminology and youth studies, the point of departure in 'Excessive force, coercive policing and criminalization of dissent: repressing young people's protest in twenty-first century Britain' is that youth-led protest actions and protests with young people as key protagonists have increased and become more diverse. The article first outlines the main protest ac-

tions involving young people in twenty-first century Britain. Next, it documents developments in policing tools and methods, to then explain changes to the legislative framework. The author argues that through military-style policing tools and methods, combined with authoritarian laws, successive British governments have developed coercive policing, the monitoring of protesters and the criminalization of dissent. This runs counter to official discourse claiming there has been a return to policing by consent with greater attention to human rights and dialogue following criticisms from various official bodies. Thus, in reality, an ostensibly liberal democratic state is wielding excessive force and coercion, as part of a securitization process, in a bid to regulate and repress young citizens' protest actions construed as a disruptive threat to the political status quo. In this way, Pickard claims that young citizens are being deprived of their democratic and human right to peaceful protest with fundamental implications for Britain and elsewhere.

The article by Ignacio González, along with the one by Judith Bessant and Maria T. Grasso, frame the discussion about repression as a palpable instance of criminalization of juvenile dissent. In 'Security and the Liberal-Democratic State: Criminalizing Young People's Politics', Judith Bessant and Maria T. Grasso study governmental responses to suppress these movements by criminalizing political dissent in cases such as the 'Maple Spring' student strikes in Quebec, Canada, and the Indignados movement in Spain. While Canada can be described as a 'mature liberal-democracy' and Spain might be better described as an 'emergent liberal-democracy', both states criminalized young people exercising their democratic and constitutionally guaranteed rights to free expression and assembly by engaging in various forms of political protests. Notwithstanding inherent contradictions in liberal-democracies, the authors consider criminalization also reflects certain long-standing prejudices directed at young people. Indeed, young people have traditionally attracted disproportionate attention from police and legal systems when they are involved in 'conventional' criminal conduct. Bessant and Grasso's account of the 'civilizing offensive' highlights the influence of ageist assumptions about young people that 'young people' require close management. This provides interesting insights into state responses to young people's engagement in politics when it goes beyond the conventional mode of 'youth participation' prescribed by states committed to managing electoral party politics.

In 'Symbolic Violence and the Penalization of the Protest', Ignacio González-Sánchez discusses the use of law and order discourses, agents and institutions in the management of the protest. Combining insights from social movement studies and sociology of punishment, the author tackles the processes of penalization. A complex vision of punishment

is used to question the widespread understanding that there is now less violence involved in protest management. By turning to symbolic violence, González-Sánchez contributes to a shift of paradigm, understanding spectators as interpreters of penalization. In order to illustrate how this conceptual toolkit might be used to an empirical example, the author analyzes the dynamics of mediated political discourse, police action and presence, and the modification and application of legal texts during the anti-austerity wave of protest in Spain.

Discussions on the punitive turn in Spain are understandably paying extraordinary attention to the consequences of the aforementioned 'Gag Law'; the article by Juan García and Kerman Calvo, however, explore security legislation as the dependent variable, inquiring about the structure of opportunities that favor the criminalization of protest. In 'Repressing the masses: newspapers and the securitization of youth dissent in Spain', the authors study the discourses of conservative commentators and journalists who produced critical items against 15M mobilizations between 16 May and 30 September 2011 in three right-wing dailies. Their analyses show there is a strategy by which conservative media outlets, collaborate with conservative political parties, the police and some segments within the criminal legal system. The conclusion is that the 'Gag-Law' is the outcome of a previous process of *securitization*. Securitization refers to "the positioning through speech acts (usually by a political leader) of a particular issue as a threat to survival, which in turn (with the consent of the relevant constituency) enables emergency measures and the suspension of 'normal politics' in dealing with that issue" (McDonald 2008, 567). The effort on the part of conservative journalists to deride and frame 15M mobilizations as a threat should be considered as a form of repression of youth dissent.

Finally, this special issue pays attention to the repression of youth activism in the particular context of Catalonia. On October 15<sup>th</sup> 2019, the Spanish High Court sentenced seven high rank former members of the Catalan regional government (including a former vice President), and also to two high profile members of the Catalan independentist civil society organizations to long imprisonment terms. The issue at stake has been the involvement of both public officials and civic leaders in the organization of an independence referendum on October 2017, which was part of a broader cycle of secessionist contestation (della Porta, O'Connor, Portos and Subirats 2017). The majority of the accused members of the pro-independence *avantgarde* have been found guilty of sedition, a criminal category that punishes acts of mutinous rising against public authorities. On the day after the issuing of the verdict, at least 200.000 people marched through the streets of Barcelona to show support to what many Catalan independentists

see as politically motivated punishment. Mass response to the ruling also included a great deal of disruption as well as outright violence. On the one hand, 'Tsunami Democratic', a shadow online platform that operates with high flexibility and master command of technology, has organized the occupation of key local infrastructures in Barcelona and other Catalan cities, including the international airport. In disrupting train stations and airports, Tsunami Democratic has adopted and adapted to Hong Kong's protest tactics, mobilizing against decreasing autonomy from China, and further limitations in their democratic rights and practices. More strikingly, groups of radicalized protesters in Barcelona have engaged in violent clashes against the police for at least six consecutive nights.

Two articles included in this issue offer relevant insights into the foundations of these recent outbreaks of collective violence and escalating dynamics of repression. On the one hand, T. Jeffrey Miley focuses on a dialectic of repression and resistance at work in the most recent wave of contentious politics in Catalonia. In the wave of contentious politics that has swept the region over the past decade, since the onset of the so-called Eurozone crisis, the author revisits the discursive and performative repertoire recollecting Catalonia's revolutionary past. 'Repression and Resistance in Catalonia' provides an illuminating interpretation of the region's recent cycle of contentious politics through the lens of state repression. It hones in on an emblematic moment, from the spring of 2011, associated with the Indignados movement. It pays focus on their violent removal by the police from the Plaça Catalunya in May, and the attempt to surround the Catalan Parliament to disrupt the budget debate the following month. Miley argues that the violent repression of the Indignados movement in Catalonia by the "regional" authorities is best understood as a reflex response to an incipient challenge to existing constellations of hierarchical and oppressive social relations. A challenge that echoed, indeed threatened to revive, long-suppressed memories of the region's revolutionary past, to, in the words of Benjamin, "blast" this past "out of the continuum of history," to "appropriate its memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger". According to the author, this moment of violent repression by the Catalan authorities proved the precursor, the condition of possibility, for the subsequent re-channelling of contentious politics within the more comfortable confines of hierarchically-structured, nationalist imaginaries.

On the other hand, as the article by Donatella della Porta, Francis O'Connor and Martín Portos in this issue shows, the Catalan secessionist movement is particularly complex, consisting of formal structures of mobilization that co-existed with various forms of localized social and political activism but also with highly mobilized institutional actors and allies, including local and regional level elites. In

'Protest cycles and referendums for independence: closed opportunities and the path of radicalization in Catalonia', della Porta, O'Connor and Portos seek to shed light on the trajectory of radicalization in the Catalan *procés*. Contrary to what some theories of protest would predict, when political opportunities are closed down at national level, and repression toughens, violent escalation leading to fragmentation and ultimately demobilization does not necessarily ensue, at least in the short term. The authors argue that, in the case of the Catalan secessionist mobilizations, the combination of appropriation of opportunities, downward scale shift and movement convergence has mitigated escalation processes between the mid-2000s and late-2018. A dense network of local and grassroots assemblies, displaced the previously dominant, major civil society organizations that led mass protests especially during the 2012-2015 'diadas'. These grassroots actors prioritized the organization of dissent through more direct, more disruptive but mostly peaceful forms

of action. This in turn facilitated movement convergence, based upon solidarization, as it opened local spaces where the activists from across the spectrum could mobilize together, pre-empting a clear violent escalation and the emergence of violent splinter groups until late 2018. Whether the violent encounters following the prison sentences for the political leaders of the *procés* will be turning points marking an enduring pattern of violent escalation leading into 2020 or merely a violent upsurge remains to be determined. The 2019 events demonstrate that radicalization remains and open-ended and relational process.

Finally, as editors of this special issue, we are grateful to the editorial team of the Revista Internacional de Sociología, reviewers and authors for making this special issue possible. We hope this special issue will meet the expectations of the readers, encouraging debate about the timely and relevant topics it deals with.

## NOTES

- [1] See e.g. <https://www.es.amnesty.org/en-que-estamos/noticias/noticia/articulo/espanaley-mordaza-una-media-de-80-multas-diarias-contra-la-libertad-de-expresion/>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/23/opinion/spains-ominous-gag-law.html>

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