



Global Mobility and Penal Order: Criminalizing Migration, A View from Europe

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Abstract

Globalization has increased the flow of people across Europe, bringing economic expansion and ethnic diversity. Open political borders have enhanced European integration and interdependence, creating a cosmopolitan European Union full of transnational citizens. Alongside this increased mobility, state coercion has been quietly on the rise. Since 1990, nearly every European democracy has increased incarceration, locking up common criminals and those perceived to be outsiders. Foreign nationals are overrepresented in nearly every European prison, making up over 50 percent of the prison population in Greece, 35 percent in Spain and Italy, for example, or 28 percent in Sweden. At the same time, the intensification of border control – the regulation of both territory and group membership – has subjected a growing number of people to detention and expulsion, as immigration itself has become, in part, criminalized. The controversial expulsion of the Roma, EU citizens, from France in the summer of 2010 and the large scale detention of North African migrants in Lampedusa, Italy during the Arab Spring of 2011, among other events, graphically illustrate the rise of state coercion, directed particularly against those perceived to be foreigners and mobile. This article analyzes the current state of the literature that brings us closer to understanding how and why European democracies resort to the criminal law and penal sanctioning to resolve broader conflicts over globalization, national identity, and economic restructuring by excluding others and by desperately trying to control and contain mobility.

Global mobility and the rise of state coercion

Globalization has increased the flow of people across Europe, bringing economic expansion and ethnic diversity. Open political borders have enhanced European integration and interdependence, creating a cosmopolitan European Union full of transnational citizens (Sassen 2006). Alongside this increased mobility and political freedom, state coercion has been quietly on the rise. Since 1990, nearly every European democracy has increased incarceration (European Sourcebook 2009, 2011), locking up common criminals and those perceived to be outsiders. Foreign nationals are overrepresented in nearly every European prison, making up over 50 percent of the prison population in Greece, 35 percent in Spain and Italy, for example, or 28 percent in Sweden (Tonry 1997; World Prison Brief 2011). At the same time, the intensification of border control – the regulation of both territory and group membership – has subjected a growing number of people to detention and expulsion, as immigration itself has become, in part, criminalized. The controversial expulsion of Roma, EU citizens, from France in the summer of 2010 and the large scale detention of North African migrants in Lampedusa, Italy fleeing the Arab Spring of 2011 (Campessi 2011), among other events, graphically illustrate the rise of state coercion, directed particularly against those perceived to be foreigners and mobile. The pressing question for sociologists is why and how did this happen?

Sociologists have developed four main approaches to explain increased reliance on criminalization and penalization in the contemporary period: (i) globalization of punitiveness with a focus on how existential insecurity drives demands for harsh and broad penal sanctioning; (ii) political economy with its emphasis on how the structure of the labor market creates vulnerable and criminalized populations; (iii) enemy penology with its focus on how racism underpins the criminalization of foreigners; and (iv) state governance with its emphasis on how state sovereignty is being reaffirmed and citizenship is being reconfigured by the criminalization and exclusion of perceived others. Each approach, although limited in its own way, brings us closer to understanding how and why European democracies resort to the criminal law and penal sanctioning to resolve broader conflicts over globalization, national identity and belonging, and economic restructuring, and do so by excluding others and by desperately trying to control and contain mobility.

Recent research and debates: four main approaches

Globalization of punitiveness

According to the “globalization of punitiveness” account, Europeans increased penal severity in response to heightened anxiety about crime and security. Living in a “risk society,” Europeans have become increasingly aware of and preoccupied with crime and doubts about their well-being in an uncertain future. Tough crime control measures provide a sense of security and certainty, relieving an aching need for order and control in a fast changing world. Europe, like the United States, has come to rely more and more on criminal justice measures rather than social welfare in response to crime, economic retraction, existential angst and social marginality (Garland 2001; Wacquant 1999). Increased incarceration, tougher sentencing laws, expanded surveillance through CCTV, austere prison conditions, sex offender registries, and electronic monitoring are all part of “new punitiveness” (Baker and Roberts 2005). The communications revolution hastened the spread and speed of these developments. As the public found out about penal trends elsewhere, people in England, for example, could now demand American style policing like “zero-tolerance” and stiff sentencing laws like “three strikes and you’re out” (Newburn and Sparks 2004). These tougher penal policies made sense to a global consumer who rejected the expertise and professionalism of criminal justice officials in favor of more intuitive and popular penal responses (Baker and Roberts 2005). Here, common structural conditions lead to similar and highly punitive public policies, policies that are likely to spread across democracies. Although this approach provides a parsimonious account, it focuses exclusively on the general trend towards increased punitiveness and does not account for the particular overrepresentation of foreign nationals, a factor that could be driving penal severity rather than a byproduct of it.

Moreover, some researchers are skeptical about general explanations that are based on the UK and a partial reading of the United States, two neo-liberal political regimes (Barker 2009; Lacey 2008). Despite recent increases in incarceration, important disparities in European imprisonment rates remain: 155 inmates per 100,000 in England and Wales; 87 inmates per 100,000 in Germany; 74 inmates per 100,000 in Denmark (World Prison Brief 2011). And perhaps more important, none have reached the levels of the United States with over 700 inmates per 100,000 population in prison and jail (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2008), where the “new punitiveness” emerged. Additionally, each country’s penal regime is much more complex than the imprisonment rate alone would suggest. René Lévy (2007) points to France’s routine use of presidential amnesties and pardons –

the release of prison inmates en masse – that decrease the prison population. This component adds further variation to the character, meaning and intensity of penal sanctioning that is directly linked to French political culture rather than to any global trends. The continued use of “open” prisons in Sweden, for example, where inmates lock their own doors, walk around the fenceless grounds, and leave prison to go work further belies the trend towards global punitiveness (Bondeson 2005). There is substantial cross-national penal regime variation that is unaccounted for in these kind of general or global accounts.

Political economy: two variants

To explain increased criminalization and penalization, particularly of perceived others, critical scholars have pushed the classic Rusche and Kirchheimer (1939) thesis forward to connect state coercion with the economic imperatives of neoliberalism (Wacquant 2009). Dario Melossi (2003) provides a succinct historical analysis of capitalist control over labor mobility through criminalization, linking 19th century vagrancy laws to contemporary restrictive migration policies which essentially create a new class of criminals and outsiders, *extracomunitario* (Melossi 2003, 386). Alessandro De Giorgi (2010) further explains, the criminalization of migration satisfies the needs of post-Fordist economies by creating a vulnerable, cheap but disciplined workforce subject to de-regulated, flexible, and segmented labor markets. In other words, labor migrants live in a perpetual state of insecurity and deportability, making them by definition exploitable and subject to capitalist control not only of their mobility but well-being.

The second variant of political economy develops the correlation between welfare capitalism and penal severity where more generous welfare states minimize penal sanctioning and stingy welfare states come to rely on it (Cavadino and Dignan 2006; Lacey 2008; Lappi-Seppälä 2007, 2008). How societies structure their economies and political systems create distinctive forms of social integration that vary across capitalist democracies. How well people are incorporated into society, the degree of social welfare provision, and state-citizen relations all shape the discourse on criminal behavior and inform corresponding penal responses. Cavadino and Dignan (2006) develop a typology of political economy (based on Esping-Anderson’s model of welfare capitalism) that includes four types: neo-liberalism; conservative corporatism, social democratic corporatism and oriental corporatism. They then link each type with inclusionary or exclusionary penal regimes and high or low imprisonment rates. In more individualistic neo-liberal societies like the United States, we tend to see more punitive and harsh responses to crime (and high imprisonment rates) because crime (like unemployment) is perceived to be an individual failure and individual responsibility that is met with retributive sanctions. By contrast, in more inclusive and egalitarian societies like Sweden, we tend to see more protections against social marginality (conditions that lead to crime) and more mild penal sanctioning and lower imprisonment rates. Here, mild penal sanctioning (such as short prison terms and minimal security prisons) is intended to limit the social distance between offenders and citizens and ease reintegration. Cavadino and Dignan’s typology provides a useful starting point to map important and structural differences in social organization and penal order.

On an empirical level the political economy approach is limited in its appreciation for and analysis of ethnic diversity and how major changes in immigration in Europe inform the processes of social integration and subsequent penal order. Lacey (2008) offers a brief account of how highly coordinated market economies in Scandinavian countries and to some extent Germany may be better at protecting insiders from social marginality but less

effective in incorporating outsiders into the labor market. As a consequence, Sweden and Germany maintain higher proportions of foreign nationals in prison than the UK with its open economy and better integration of immigrants into the labor market. Lacey taps into a very important but subtle difference: some penal regimes may be more mild or lenient to insiders but more punitive toward outsiders. More work is needed to investigate and explain these patterns.

Enemy penology: the new racial threat hypothesis

To the extent that questions of increased immigration have been addressed in relation to European penal sanctioning, researchers have for the most part, taken up the “racial threat” hypothesis, and very recently, the “enemy penology” approach. The racial threat hypothesis, developed in the American context, helps to explain how and why African-Americans are overrepresented in the criminal justice systems (Blalock 1960). As blacks gained economic and political power, the white majority, feeling insecure about their status, supported the criminalization of blacks and demanded more punitive measures in response to rising crime to restore social order and social hierarchies. Some researchers have interpreted mass incarceration in the United States as a backlash against the civil rights movement (Beckett 1997).

In the European context, migration scholars have found increased anti-immigrant sentiment where native populations felt threatened politically or economically (review in Ceobanu and Escandell 2008). Loïc Wacquant (1999) ties this anti-immigrant sentiment and anxiety about economic relations to increased penal severity across the European Union. He explains that increased imprisonment followed significant rises in unemployment and major structural changes to labor markets between the mid 1980s and mid 1990s. Here, imprisonment has been used to regulate and control the lower end of the labor market where many foreigners have found themselves in their host countries. The battle for scarce resources has led to the “criminalization of immigrants” where immigrants become the “symbol of and target for all social anxieties” (Wacquant quoting Christie 1999, 219). Similarly, Kitty Calavita (2005) in her book length treatment of immigration law in Spain and Italy, found immigrants, particularly labor migrants from third world countries, to be excluded, marginalized and constructed as a “class of pariahs” despite government rhetoric of integration. This type of criminalization process makes immigrants and others perceived to be outsiders more vulnerable to social control and harsher enforcement. Foreigners in France, for example, are two to five times more likely to be sentenced to prison than nationals (Pager 2008; Tournier in Wacquant 1999), with foreign nationals making up over eighteen percent of the prison population (World Prison Brief 2011). Moreover, Pager (2008) found that increased ethnic heterogeneity, particularly increased immigration from North Africa, increased penal severity in France across municipalities.

The “enemy penology” approach (Fekete and Webber 2010; Krasmann 2007) seeks to explain the harsher treatment of foreign nationals in European criminal justice systems as a result of the rise of far-right politics and their xenophobic campaigns. The term, *Feindstrafrecht*, was initially proposed by a German criminologist to conceptualize the differential treatment of foreigners in the criminal justice system, treating aliens (non-citizens) explicitly as “criminal enemies,” deemed particularly “dangerous” and subject to extraordinary security measures, disproportionate to convention (see discussion in Zedner 2010, 391). The term has since been picked by critical criminologists to explain differential treatment of foreigners in reference to racism. Fekete and Webber (2010) illustrate not only how foreigners in Europe have been subject to harsher penalties than natives within

varying criminal justice systems, but how migration status itself has become subject to criminal law and criminal penalties. They then track the trend towards increased deportation of criminal aliens in Germany, the UK, France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Sweden, among others, a move that challenges the authority and integrity of international human rights law. In a related approach, Katja Aas (2007) argues that the criminalization of migration can be understood as a reassertion of cultural essentialism, a contemporary form of racism. Here, European societies are deeply engaged in the process of identifying, segregating, and punishing the “stranger” in Simmel’s terms, marking and stigmatizing outsiders from those who truly belong and reasserting some idealized or essentialized notion of national belonging.

Although there is growing empirical support for the racial threat perspective, some researchers have raised doubts about its generalizability and question its underlying dynamic. First, there is substantial variation in immigration itself, including variation in motivation, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, that has varying implications for social incorporation. Labor immigrants, political refugees, migrants seeking family reunification, and former colonial subjects each migrate for different reasons and are incorporated or received differently in the host country. The racial threat, enemy penology, and political economy approach write about foreign nationals, migrants, aliens, refugees, to a certain extent, as if they were all the same and equally threatening to the native population. Political refugees from war-torn countries like the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, and Iraq, for example, make up an increasing proportion of migrants to Sweden and have had more difficulty integrating than earlier generations of labor migrants from southern Europe, in part because they are not allowed to work until their asylum cases are cleared. This condition highlights their status as a humanitarian case (and welfare case), emphasizing the state’s charity rather than the migrant’s agency or work contribution. Although their human rights are recognized, their immediate identification with the national population is diminished, increasing social distance. By contrast, temporary labor migrants, despite ethnic differences, may be better able to participate in the host society.

Second, in his work on anti-immigrant attitudes in Sweden, Mikael Hjerm (2009) found the opposite pattern predicted by the racial threat perspective. He found that municipalities with higher percentages of foreigners, from Africa, Asia, and South America, had lower anti-immigrant sentiments. This is an important finding because it suggests increased knowledge about and familiarity with social groups perceived to be “other” may decrease insecurities, anxieties, and prejudices about social difference. Increased social interaction across diverse social groups can mitigate negative attitudes rather than enhance them. Lauren McLaren’s (2003) work on anti-immigrant prejudice in Europe supports this idea as she found that increased and intimate contact, especially friendships between natives and immigrants, decreased willingness to expel them. Marc Hooghe et al. (2009) further dispute the argument that increased ethnic diversity, particularly through immigration, increases social animosity and decreases social trust. Taken together, this work challenges the idea that increased immigration inevitably leads to anti-immigrant sentiment or increased social control.

To summarize, the current literature on European penal sanctioning identifies an important aspect of the exclusionary process: weak integration leads to increased social control. As noted above, the first three accounts all point to the economic realm as the driving force behind increased incarceration and the criminalization of migration. The implicit emphasis on how economic factors – whether it be globalization, the structure of labor markets and social welfare, economic retraction, welfare chauvinism, anxiety over scarce resources – means that the literature cannot quite handle all the sources of variation

and complexity that do not conform neatly to predicted outcomes. Perhaps more important, it may be missing the key driving force of penal sanctioning in the context of globalization: the protection of national sovereignty and conflicts over group membership and national belonging.

State governance: borders, sovereignty, and membership

That said, there is a very promising literature just beginning to take shape that develops a political theory of penal order. This literature goes beyond party politics or penal populism to link the structure of governance, specifically the structure of sovereignty and the dynamic process of group membership, to penal outcomes (Aas 2011; Barker 2011; Bosworth 2008; Bosworth and Guild 2008; De Genova 2010; Huysmans 2006; Stumpf 2006; Tham 1995; Zedner 2010). In other words, increased penal severity (internal and external) is more likely the result of a crisis in governance and conflicts over national belonging rather than labor market demands or existential insecurity.

This body of work examines how immigrants, foreigners, and ethnic minorities have been caught in conflicts over global integration, neo-nationalism and multiculturalism, conflicts that are often expressed through the criminalization and penalization of perceived others. The criminalization of migrants, particularly through confinement and expulsion, enables member states to reassert sovereignty, control borders and regulate group membership, especially as the very authority of the nation-state is under threat and being reconfigured. Penal sanctioning is one of the oldest and most powerful expressions of national sovereignty – the legitimate use of force is the very definition of a nation-state (Weber 1965). Increased penal sanctioning (e.g. the provision of internal security) is one way to reassert political authority under threat (Garland 1996). As European governments struggle over economic and political interdependence, authorities are likely to use highly expressive policy instruments such as the prison to shore up public trust and confidence in government. By doing so, governments dramatically display their power over citizens and subjects but they also reaffirm their responsibility and capacity to provide internal security, fulfilling the most basic condition of the social contract (Lappi-Seppälä 2007, 2008). Border control has increasingly become a part of this penal strategy (Bosworth 2008).

Similarly, nation states reassert or redraw the boundaries of group membership through the criminalization process, identifying, classifying, and claiming who belongs while segregating and separating those who are questionable, “unworthy,” expendable or deportable. And as Lucia Zedner (2010) explains citizenship itself has become key to policing and crime control as the police (criminal justice agents) are drawn increasingly into the realm of immigration control, checking and regulating identity. The centrality of citizenship and national belonging in a global or postnational world becomes apparent when we realize that only non-citizens can be deported, treated like enemies of the state, mechanisms that impinge upon, if not undermine, their human rights.

Future directions

Despite many insights and gains made by the current literature on increased criminalization and penalization, more work is needed to tease out and explain sources of variation in this dynamic process. Most of the current research has tended to focus, so far, on the general trend rather than probe divergence and variation. And most has tended to rely more on theory than on grounded empirical detail: there is a major gap between theory

in this field and empirical studies. This means that our current explanations are too limited and may even be misspecified, collapsing different processes into one unified trend. This is an oversight that can be corrected.

On a related point, there is a pressing need to bring gender into the analyses. Most of the literature does not adequately thematize gender, a weakness which seriously limits its ability to explain and understand the dynamics of migration control. The feminization of migration is a major global trend in which large numbers of women, particularly women from developing countries, migrate to fill low paid domestic work in affluent industrialized societies, (Parreñas 2001). Likewise, the increase in family reunification as a source of immigration has put more women into motion, entering new countries with different customs and culture. How these women are incorporated, regulated, and/or controlled will be a key issue in explaining how their partial inclusion for labor extraction or family reunification may minimize or maximize the criminalization process.

Together the literature presents and predicts a rather grim future for Europe based on the exclusion and contained mobility of foreigners, halting the large scale democratization process in the post cold war period. However, important differences across Europe remain to be explained, differences that may be more closely related to variation in conceptions of national belonging and multiculturalism as well as variation in immigration itself. Broader notions of belonging and rights may weaken demands for harsh enforcement against “outsiders.” By contrast, in democracies with narrow notions of belonging and limited immigrant integration may make immigrants more vulnerable to crime and harsher enforcement.

And as noted earlier, much of this literature conceptualizes the migrant as a somewhat passive subject of exploitation or racism or exclusion, a body to be disciplined, displaced, or dispossessed. But migrants, immigrants, and even *sans papiers* are active subjects making demands and protesting violations of their human rights, now normalized. More research is needed to investigate how immigrants, migrants and aliens participate and constitute this process of incorporation and exclusion.

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Short Biography

Vanessa Barker is Associate Professor of Sociology at Stockholm University where she teaches courses on punishment, comparative criminology, immigration, and ethnicity. Her research on the United States has focused on imprisonment, the crime victims' rights movement, the death penalty, the crime decline, including *The Politics of Imprisonment: How the Democratic Process Shapes the Way America Punishes Offenders* (Oxford University Press, 2009). In Europe, she is currently working on a comparative political analysis of globalization, immigration, and penal order.

Note

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