Crime, Law and ‘the people’: rethinking the populist politics of law and order

Abstract: Over the last 30 years the crime question has become highly politicized in many advanced democracies. From being largely a bi-partisan political issue, crime and criminal justice became a perpetual focus of heated and polarizing popular debate and electoral politics, usually in the form of a contest over who could adopt the most punitive and repressive law and order policies. Criminologists commonly attribute this development to the malign influence of ‘penal populism’, the implication being that the politics of law and order must be rescued from populists.

By contrast, I argue that it is populism that needs to be rescued from its critics, taken more seriously and analysed as a ‘normal’, regular dimension of democratic politics. The paper will track the growing politicization of the crime question across the English-speaking world in an endeavour to show the depth and political authenticity of the populist investments in the issue. But I will also argue that taking populism seriously, as we are bound to do, may lead us to consider the prospects for a progressive populist politics around law and order.

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