

Radical right populism and the sociology of punishment: Towards a research agenda

Punishment & Society
2023, Vol. 25(4) 888–908

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DOI: 10.1177/14624745221114802
journals.sagepub.com/home/pun



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Abstract

The recent populist ‘explosion’ in the US, UK and Europe has pushed radical right populist movements to the centre of western politics. Given criminology’s long experience of penal populism in the 1980s and subsequent decades, these developments raise important questions as to the role of sociology of punishment, and the wider discipline of criminology, in responding to far-right populism. This article aims to take stock of the existing literature on this phenomenon with a view to proposing a tentative criminological research agenda that may contribute to our understanding of the recent rise of authoritarian politics in Europe, the UK and US. While highlighting the continued salience of the emotions in contemporary ‘security populism’, the article cautions against what has been described as a ‘pathologising’ approach to research in this area. Building on this, the paper advances an argument for a criminological research agenda based on a post-dualistic understanding of political affects that seeks to move the analytic focus beyond negativity.

Keywords

radical right populism, penal populism, affects, emotions, pathology, negativity

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Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that populism has now become one of the bywords of our age (Mudde, 2017). Following hot on the heels of the overtly populist Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom and the shock election of Donald Trump in the United States of America, a series of significant electoral successes in Europe, ranging from the sudden rise of the far-right Vox party in Spain to the joint rule of two populist parties in Italy, have pushed populist movements to the centre of western politics. Some of the biggest advances have been made in central and eastern Europe where far-right parties have now come to power and established autocratic regimes. With the vote share of populist parties in national elections for European countries now at its highest level since the early 1990s (Rooduijn et al., 2019), this populist ‘explosion’ (Judis, 2016) is widely regarded as a very real and grave threat to democracy in general, and the rights of minorities in particular. Latterly, while the Covid-19 crisis is often said to have created a difficult environment for populist parties, it has also created opportunities, through alliances with anti-lockdown protestors, and appeals to those who have borne the brunt of the pandemic’s economic effects (Katsambekis et al., 2020).

These developments raise important questions as to the role of sociology of punishment, and the wider discipline of criminology, in responding to far-right populism. Criminologists might be expected to offer something of a unique perspective on the phenomenon, having adopted the label ‘penal populism’ or ‘populist punitiveness’ to describe the emergence of increasingly harsh criminal justice policies and rhetoric in certain western jurisdictions in the 1990s. As Loader (2018: 7) puts it, ‘criminologists have, after all, been engaged for some time with problems that are animated by anger-fuelled populism and authoritarian rhetoric’. Moreover, as will be discussed below, analyses highlighting the continued salience of crime, punishment and security in contemporary populist discourse have now been joined by a growing body of empirical research linking these issues to (radical right) populist success. This article takes stock of the existing literature on this phenomenon with a view to proposing a tentative criminological research agenda that may contribute to our understanding of the recent rise of authoritarian politics in Europe, the UK and US. It unfolds in three parts. The first part examines the shared characteristics, causes and effects that criminologists have identified between penal and political populism, including important work that has recently emerged on the emotions and various forms of ‘hostile solidarity’. The second part takes a brief digression into the political science and wider literature to illustrate the dangers of the irrationalisation of affect and what has been described as a ‘pathologising’ approach to far-right populism. Building on this, the third, and concluding part advances an argument for a criminological research agenda based on a post-dualistic understanding of political affects that seeks to move the analytic focus beyond negativity.

‘The Dam Bursts’?: The shift from penal to political populism

Criminology has a long history of critical engagement with various forms of populism, ranging from the ‘authoritarian populism’ (Hall, 1979) of the 1970s, to the ‘populist

punitiveness/penal populism' (Bottoms, 1995) of the 1990s. 'Authoritarian populism', associated with the Nixon and Thatcher eras, was understood to denote 'a new regime of social discipline and leadership *from above* in a society increasingly experienced as rudderless and out of control' (Hall, 1988: 84, emphasis added). Its distinguishing feature was therefore the deliberate mobilisation of public opinion around penal questions as a mechanism to support its harsh social and economic policies in the late 1970s and 1980s. In similar vein is 'populist punitiveness', a term first coined by Anthony Bottoms (1995: 40), to describe one of a number of emerging trends in the 1990s, namely, 'the notion of politicians tapping into, and using for their own purposes, what they believe to be the public's generally punitive stance.' While often used interchangeably with 'penal populism', a term later adopted by influential sociologists of punishment (Newburn, 1997), the latter connotes a much more cynical exploitation of crime for political purposes than Bottoms's concept, ostensibly excluding those sincere penal hawks holding a *genuine* belief that tough penal policies work (Green, 2008: 20–21). This is made explicit in the definition of 'penal populism' provided by Roberts et al. (2003: 5), namely, 'in our view, policies are populist if they are advanced to win votes without much regard for their effects. Penal populists allow the electoral advantage of a policy to take precedence over its penal effectiveness.' Further refinements are offered by Pratt (2007) in his extensive treatment of the phenomenon, notably, the distinction he draws between authoritarian populism/populist punitiveness, on the one hand, and penal populism on the other. In this regard, Pratt speaks of 'a new axis of penal power' that emerged in the 1990s and subsequent decades where politicians act *in conjunction with* the people rather than *on their behalf*. From a contemporary perspective, the parallels between penal populism, and its shift from an elite-led to a 'bottom-up' phenomenon, and the recent rise of authoritarian populism via social media, among other platforms, appear striking (Pratt, 2020a).

Of course, criminological writing has moved on considerably since the heyday of 'penal populism' and the 'new punitiveness' (Pratt et al., 2005), with many scholars rejecting such concepts as 'totalising trends' (Aaronson, 2022), and Pratt (2008) himself acknowledging the limits of penal populism.¹ Times have also changed. To adopt the 'heat metaphor' employed by Loader and Sparks (2010), the politics of crime have 'cooled' considerably since the 'law and order' crime control climate of the 1990s and early 2000s (Bell, 2018). Yet, it is undeniable that crime retains its close relationship with politics and political actors, not least through the traditionally privileged position that 'law and order' play in a conservative/right wing understanding of reality (Loader, 2020). Reflecting on these themes, Loader (2018: np) notes the reduced salience of crime in elections, legislative programmes and public discourse, but then goes on to observe how the populist genie may have escaped the bottle entirely:

Calls for tough action and authoritarian solutions are no longer limited to crime; 'strongman' leaders are being elected across the world, and political scientists uncover disturbing evidence of democratic 'deconsolidation' (Foa and Mounk, 2017). Scepticism towards experts, and the trashing of 'liberal elites', is no longer a local distaste targeted at judges, the Parole Board, or criminologists; it has become a structuring feature of politics marked

by fake news, post-truth and tribal epistemology (we have our facts, you have yours). ‘Fear of crime’ may have receded as an object of enquiry and policy; but fear and its attendant emotions – anxiety, resentment, anger, blame, hostility – have found new referents (notably migrants) and are ripe for political exploitation.

In an effort to explore these connections further, and to provide a sketch of current debate in this area, the below section examines in more detail the shared characteristics, causes and effects of these two forms of populism.

Characteristics

Loader’s description raises questions about how we can best characterise the more recent phenomenon of ‘political populism’ (Pratt and Miao, 2017: 1) and the features it may share with its criminological cousin. Despite its ubiquity in popular and academic discourse, the term ‘populism’ is not well defined and has been described as an ‘essentially contested concept’ (Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2017: 2). While far from hegemonic, much of the literature has now come to favour the ‘ideational approach’, conceiving of populism as a thin-centred ideology or worldview ‘that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde, 2004: 543). On this account, populism qualifies as an ideology or belief system (respecting popular sovereignty at any cost), but one that operates within a ‘limited range’, thereby attesting populism’s malleability and ‘contextual sensitivity’ (Mackert, 2019) while also clearly demarcating it from its opposites: elitism and pluralism.² Reflecting the concern with right-wing ‘exclusionary populism’ (Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2017), the focus here is solely on far-right populism as espoused by populist radical-right parties (PRRPs).³ Comparing the two definitions, it is not difficult to discern the similarities between these two forms of populism, one penal and one political. As Loader observes above, a common thread clearly uniting the two is populist distrust of the ‘establishment’ and expert knowledge, together with the rise of populist ‘common sense’ in political discourse. This ‘politics of simplicity’ (Taggart, 2002) also forms the focus of John Pratt and Michelle Miao’s (2017) essay on ‘Penal Populism: The End of Reason’ which views penal populism as the harbinger of a new, more virulent form of populism that has become rampant on the political stage. For them, the attack launched by penal populism on the long-established link between reason and modern punishment formed ‘only the prelude to the way in which a much more free flowing political populism now threatens to bring an end to Reason itself, the foundation stone of modernity’ (Pratt and Miao, 2017: 3). Notably, this positions contemporary populism as a resurgent force of ‘anti-reason’, driving negative emotions such as ‘anger and resentment’ towards the ‘construction of a magical politics... promis(ing) to eliminate at a stroke all the demons and devils it identifies’ (Pratt and Miao, 2017: 23). This perspective is mirrored in several emerging accounts of contemporary populism and its relationship with criminology, with a number of scholars expressly framing populism as antithetical to rational decision-making (Sitarz, 2021: 1, 4; Szafrńska, 2021: 7).

In contrast, Chamberlen and Carvalho's (2019) writing on the recent 'politics of hostility' and the emotions of punishment, emphasises the need to challenge traditional thinking that positions emotions or affects as 'the other' of rational politics. Arguing that the connection between 'hostile solidarity', insecurity and identity can aid in understanding the recent rise of authoritarian politics in Europe and the US, their work (and that of others such as Hörnqvist, 2021) examines the 'emotional release', 'pleasure' and sense of belonging that comes through the act of punishing. In examining the application of such punitive logics to other social fields such as migration, however, they see the false dichotomy between 'rational' and 'emotional' approaches to populism as an important obstacle to fuller exploration of these drivers. Their work finds a resonance in earlier writing by Karstedt (2011), Sparks (2011), Loader (2011) and others whose observations on the paradoxes of 'emotional reason' and 'rational emotions' in criminal justice are drawn on below. As we shall see, the need to overcome 'the false opposition between reason and passion' (Baillie, 2000: 13) forms an important plank in formulating an effective scholarly response to populism.

Causes

This leads on to a second, critical, issue, namely, the role of crime and punishment in *sustaining* far-right populism. Loader's reference to populism finding new referents such as migrants is no doubt correct but the degree to which traditional concerns around 'fear of crime' are implicated in the contemporary 'politics of fear' remains an open question. Authoritarian attitudes relating to crime, law and order are often viewed as constituent features of populist radical right ideology (Mudde, 2010). Moreover, as border criminologists have been at pains to point out for some years now, the line between the criminal law and immigration has become increasingly 'indistinct' (Stumpf, 2006: 376), with punitive and exclusionary strategies now being employed against migrant populations (Bosworth, 2014). Perhaps it is more accurate to say, following the security/preventative justice literature (Ashworth and Zedner, 2014; Zedner, 2007) and Pratt's (2020b) recent work on the 'security sanction',⁴ that in contemporary times, the political focus has shifted to *security* over *crime* (Huysmans, 2006). Certainly, it is undeniable that in a number of western jurisdictions anti-migrant sentiments are often packaged in the language of national security, public order and fighting crime (Hogg, 2021). In Poland, for example, despite the very low prevalence of Islamic terrorism, security threats have been invoked by the radical right government as a justification for initiating far-reaching political changes, such as sweeping new surveillance powers against foreign nationals (Hamilton, 2019). Huq (2018: 481) goes so far as to say that the spectre of terrorism and pursuit of security, including through restrictive measures on migration, have provided 'the fuel for populism's ascent' in the post 9/11 era (see also, Alston, 2017). This is often made explicit in the self-branding of radical right parties, as in the Polish 'Law and Justice' party and the French Rassemblement National's description of itself as the 'party of justice and order' (see further Haney (2016) on the connections between penal populism and penal nationalism). Indeed, Lazarus and Goold (2019) have even coined a term, 'security populism' to describe the ways in which populist

politics and state-craft recognise and stoke public fear of, for example, the ‘dangerous’ foreign Other, with important consequences for rights and the rule of law (Effrat et al., 2021).

Of course, conventional wisdom holds that it is the economic anxiety experienced by the so-called ‘losers of globalisation’ that has translated economic grievances into votes for right-wing populist parties (see, e.g., Bornschieer, 2010). This argument is reflected in Pratt and Miao’s (2017) writing which understands *penal* populism as precipitated by neo-liberal restructuring from the 1980s onwards, and the further entrenchment of economic insecurity in the aftermath of the financial crisis as giving rise, together with fears over mass migration, to the broader phenomenon of *political* populism. Thus, while in earlier decades crime proved a useful way of generating consensus and solidarity and restoring an authority that appeared to be lacking in the social fabric, the austerity policies that ensued in the aftermath of the Great Recession served to further deepen insecurity and distrust of establishment elites and supranational organisations such as the IMF, EU, etc. In similar vein, the symbolism of traditional victimhood, so potent in the ‘law and order’ decades, is joined in the contemporary era by fears for the state itself (a ‘new’ victimhood) as mass migration is seen as corroding its values and identity. In short, Pratt and Miao (2017) contend, international events in the first decades of the twenty-first century have resulted in the ‘dam’ (penal populism) that had been constructed by neoliberalism ‘to store all its waste products ... overflow[ing] and spill[ing] its toxic contents right across the social body’ (Pratt, 2020a: 285). Theirs is therefore a view of populism largely rooted in crisis, attributing the electoral salience of the right to the collateral damage of multiple ensuing crises – debt, security, refugee – a position which, for reasons elaborated below, is not without its problems.

Another difficulty for this line of reasoning is empirical research calling into question economic insecurity as an explanation for the present populist wave in favour of the so-called ‘cultural backlash’ thesis (Huq, 2018). This school of thought, simply stated, views the rise of populist radical right parties as a reaction against progressive cultural change, with older, less educated, white voters in particular actively rejecting the rising tide of progressive values on the environment, human rights, gender equality, etc. Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2016, 2017; see also Norris and Inglehart, 2019), for example, drawing on European Social Survey data, while acknowledging that it may not be an either/or question, suggest that cultural backlash theory has more empirical support than economic explanations for populism’s appeal. Similarly, in their analyses of the 2016 US Presidential election and the Brexit vote, Sides et al. (2018) and Margalit (2019) demonstrate that the electorates of the (populist) radical right in Britain and the US are most concerned about questions of community and identity (possibly linked to other issues such as the economy and security) rather than economic insecurity *per se*. In both cases, according to Margalit (2019: 153): ‘economic insecurity affects the electoral outcome on the margin, sometimes in a highly consequential manner, but the overall explanatory significance for the level of support for populists is modest’ These conclusions are echoed by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017, 2018) who surmise that, at least in so far as the rise of radical right populism (as opposed to populism in general) is concerned, the debate between the ‘economic anxiety’ and ‘cultural

backlash' camps has been resolved in favour of cultural backlash. The focus on cultural factors returns us once again to the links between political populism and crime, which, as Hogg (2021: 12) argues, 'works well in culture wars'. In this regard, it is helpful to note that Inglehart and Norris's (2016, 2017) study identified security-related concerns⁵ as one of five 'cultural' factors which they found to be *independently* predictive of populist sentiment. Research has also linked punitive attitudes on crime, sentencing and capital punishment to voters' age, race and ethnicity, and their level of support for populist parties (Kaufmann, 2016).

Effects

As discussed above, Pratt and Miao are clear in their assessment of populism and its effects as overwhelmingly illogical and negative, both in terms of tougher punishment but also as part of a broader, exclusionary agenda. In his later writing, Pratt (2020a: 294) delivers a dire prognosis of the future of criminal justice under populism: 'the fundamental expectations of and limits to punishment in democratic society are likely to crumble still further – in the name of a security and sense of well-being and safety that becomes ever more elusive and distant'. Carvalho and Chamberlen (2018), as we have seen, deliver a more circumspect assessment of populism and the 'punitive logic' they argue has seen it migrate to other social contexts. Notably, they see reasons for optimism in the emotionality of crime and punishment, meaning 'that these emotions are complex and enduring, but are also pliable and potentially changeable' (Chamberlen and Carvalho, 2019). Where they move closer to Pratt and Miao is in their problematisation of emotion or affect, and, more specifically, in their arguments about populism's role as a 'coping strategy'. Thus, they write of the ability of punishment to 'allow anxious subjects to repress their *feelings of insecurity and anxiety*, by giving or reinforcing illusions of control and order', while at the same time '[providing] a channel through which to *express their frustration* by projecting *hostile feelings* toward criminalised others' (Chamberlen and Carvalho, 2019). The picture thus painted, at least in so far as the *status quo* is concerned, is one of expressions of hatred, mobilised by largely negative feelings. This is made explicit in their discussion of whether their key concept, 'hostile solidarity', 'should be considered a pathological phenomenon', a question which they appear to answer guardedly, but in the affirmative:

'researchers of punishment should more actively reflect on the role of scholarship in not only observing and analysing such phenomena, but also in opposing the expansion of the penal state and the exacerbation of *negative emotions* in the criminal justice field (emphasis added)'.

Summary

As we have seen, the limited criminological scholarship examining the links between penal and political populism has thus far placed crime, security and various forms of

‘hostile solidarity’ at the core of radical right populist mobilisation in western jurisdictions. Reflecting the wider literature, negative emotions such as anger and resentment are seen as key to the affective appeal of radical right groups, although positions differ somewhat on whether emotions/affects should be viewed as oppositional to rational politics. Causes, where explicated, tend to be understood in terms of conventional accounts around globalisation, migration and the economic insecurity generated by the 2008 financial crisis, linking the desire for punishment to weaker forms of social solidarity. Connected with this view of populism as rooted in *crisis* (financial, refugee, etc.) the scholarship thus appears to comprehend the politics of the new right as pathological, or at least predicated on a view of far-right support as based on ‘structurally determined pathologies’ (Scheuch and Klingemann, 1967: 18). Drawing on valuable insights into this phenomenon from the political science and political sociology literature, the next section cautions against just such a view of populism.

Beyond populism as pathology?

Despite an unprecedented proliferation of articles on the topic, particularly since the tumultuous events of 2016, populism enjoys a rather uncomfortable relationship with much of the academy. Central to this, as Hogg (2021) contends, are the pejorative connotations attached to the label itself, more often *ascribed* than *chosen*, and as such deployed ‘less as an analytical tool for understanding politics than as a rhetorical weapon in political combat’. This moralising approach to populism has been observed by well-known political theorist, Margaret Canovan (2005: 81), who laments both the scholarly tendency to treat populist movements as ‘pathological symptoms of some social disease’ and political scientists’ inability to treat such movements as ‘political phenomena to be understood on their own terms’. Such a view has a long history. Traced by Mudde (2010) to Scheuch and Klingemann’s (1967) influential theory of right-wing radicalism in postwar Europe, what Mudde (2010: 2) refers to as the ‘normal pathology thesis’ holds that ‘the radical right constitutes a pathology in (postwar) western society and its success can only be explained by crisis’. Consistent with this view of populism as outside of ‘normal’ politics, he adds that, ‘authors working within this paradigm often consider the radical right in psychological terms and regularly use medical and psychological concepts’ (ibid). Mudde detects strong resonances of this line of reasoning in the contemporary literature which, as discussed, tends to focus on the exceptional economic circumstances (eg globalisation, the Great Recession, etc.) that have catapulted radical right wing parties to power, and therefore assumes mediocre public support in more ‘normal’ times.

Perhaps the existence of this normative current among political scientists should not surprise us. Academics, as creatures of the Enlightenment committed to the ideals of reason and reasonable discourse, may be wary of legitimising such groups (and the politics of exclusion) through mainstream concepts and theories. Certainly, criminologists have long been suspicious of emotions provoked by crime and justice (Karstedt, 2011) and the ‘mercurial nature of public opinion’ (Morris and Tonry, 1990: 222), resulting in various efforts to ‘insulate’ crime policy from the ‘heat’ of public demands (Loader and Sparks, 2019). The dominance of the pathology thesis in the literature is nonetheless problematic for a number of reasons.

First, by conceptualising populism as a cancer on an otherwise healthy democratic system, it tends to emphasise the differences between those who support populist parties and those who do not, rather than what they have in common. This is problematic as it forecloses a view of populism as a ‘normal’ dimension of democratic politics, or even, as argued by Canovan (1999), intrinsic to democracy itself. On this view, contemporary populist movements eschew the more pragmatic face of democracy in favour of its ‘redemptive promise’, ‘the promise of a better world through action by the sovereign people’ (Canovan, 1999: 11). Indeed, for all their differences, these two faces of democracy (redemption/populism; pragmatism/technocracy) may have a lot more in common than initially appears, not least a desire to close down the space for political deliberation (Bickerton and Accetti, 2021; Loader and Sparks, 2017). Secondly, the argument doesn’t stand up to scrutiny from an empirical perspective. As already discussed, the ‘losers of globalisation’ thesis (whether defined in terms of absolute or relative deprivation) is, at best, highly contested, casting doubt over explanations largely rooted in crisis (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Margalit, 2019; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Moreover, as Mudde (2010) has shown from his analysis of Eurobarometer surveys, several of the values programmatically associated with the populist radical right – nativism, authoritarianism, etc. – are far from alien to mainstream western ideologies.

A third danger presented by this approach is the tendency to gloss over the demands made by populists as the product of largely ‘irrational’ bouts of negative emotion rather than parallel, interacting processes of feeling and emotion. In both popular culture and the academic literature there is a close association between negative emotions and the radical right. As recently observed by Busher et al. (2018), much of the research into so-called ‘backlash politics’ (including the criminological research to date) has tended to focus on negative emotions such as anger (Cox and Durham, 2000), fear (Wodak, 2015), and hate (Ahmed, 2001; Garland and Treadwell, 2012). The risk, however, is that by leaning too heavily on such ‘loaded terms’ (Müller, 2017: 15–16), we produce a ‘caricatured’ account of the supporters of these parties: ‘the stereotype of mostly angry and fearful “left behind” citizens’ (ibid). Just as anger and fear are not the preserve of radical right groups, these groups may also experience, and be motivated by, ‘positive’ emotions such as pride, excitement, compassion and even love (Henderson, 2008). As Jasper (2011) has written of social movements, ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ emotions such as shame and pride, or anger and hope, often operate as a ‘moral battery’ that motivate protest and energise action. Such an approach also overlooks the important fact that the way individuals *feel* about an issue often affects the way they will *think* about the issue. As Hochschild (2019) observes, when we feel an emotion, we are also appraising a situation, often unconsciously, and that appraisal is based on thought. Emotion can also often precede rational reflection of a given problem or issue, providing the motivation and energising force for action (see, e.g., Simon, 2014).

Building on these critiques, several authors have developed a ‘post-dualistic’ understanding of political affects that extends beyond the traditional dichotomy between emotion and rationality and seeks to emphasise the ambivalence and complexity of affects in political arenas (Ahmed, 2014; Stewart, 2007). Much of this writing has been influenced by affect theory (Clough and Halley, 2007; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010), which seeks to capture the felt reality and embodied experience, and includes

work on the democratic potential of love (Nussbaum, 2013) and the political necessity of affects in general (Mouffe, 2000). Prime among these, Arlie Hochschild's (2016) influential research into 'backlash politics' set out, through a five-year period of intense immersion in the Trump heartland of Louisiana, to discover the 'feeling rules' (socially accepted and tacitly understood emotional responses) and 'deep stories' (deep-seated feelings) of this community (Hochschild, 1979: 561). In deliberately reaching across 'an empathy wall' (2016: 10) (barrier to a deep understanding of another person) to better appreciate the positionality and felt realities of those in the other pole she 'refreshingly avoids the moralistic cul-de-sac' (Deller, 2019: np) so prevalent in contemporary social science research on right-wing populism. As she writes, we mistakenly assume 'that empathy with the other side brings an end to clear headed analysis when, in truth, it's on the other side of that bridge that the most important analysis can begin' (Hochschild, 2016: xi). Such an understanding further allows us to grasp affects in terms of their ambivalences, rather than viewing them as 'positive' or 'negative' *per se*. The focus is therefore on the *functionality* of affects, how they operate and their impact (Leser and Spissinger, 2020).

To be clear, the above argument against a pathologising/psychologising approach to the recent surge in (far-right) populism is not at all to take the claims made by such groups at face value. After all, there are good reasons to worry about the rise of populism and, for minority groups in particular, the stakes may be very high indeed. Yet, as previous research into anti-refugee sentiments in post socialist countries shows, empathy does not need to equal pity, and an attempt to recognise the complex reasons behind far-right success does not need to downplay or overlook the politics of exclusion (Han, 2015). As Leser and Spissinger (2020: 331) have argued in their study of the German far-right wing populist party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), the aim is rather to explore 'potentially overlooked facets of enactment and performance that have contributed to the success of far-right political organisations' and provide insights into its normalisation. Nor is the aim to dismiss the relationship between the emotions, crime and 'hostile solidarity' so convincingly argued for by Chamberlen and Carvalho (2019). Rather the concern is to recognise the agency of these individuals, in effect appreciating that their views (including their views on crime, security, migration, etc.) are their ways of engaging with and changing the world. In short, it is to take these individuals seriously as research participants. As Pasiëka (2017: 28) notes, this a 'demanding and challenging ethical stan[ce]', yet as the same author goes on to argue, one which is necessary if we are to better understand the reasons for populism's appeal. The next section relates these arguments back to the criminological arena and matters of crime, security and punishment, in endeavouring to sketch a way forward for criminological research in this field.

Radical right populism and the sociology of punishment: *Quo Vadis?*

Returning to the question of how criminological research in this area should best proceed, a number of tentative conclusions might be drawn. First, given the contemporary

conflation of crime concerns with difference, ‘risk’ and ‘otherness’, it is perhaps the idea of ‘security’, rather than more conventional notions of crime and punishment, that provides the best conceptual bridge between penal and political populism (Pratt, 2020b). Second, the research agenda tentatively suggested here chimes with many of the arguments advanced by Chamberlen and Carvalho (2019) regarding the ‘inherently affective’ nature of the crime and security sphere, while sounding a note of caution about approaches that seek to irrationalise affect, pathologise or focus exclusively on negative emotions. As Canovan (1984, 1999) has observed, populist politics is not politics as usual. There is a mood, ‘an extra emotional ingredient’ (Canovan, 1999: 6), that draws even normally unpolitical people into the political arena. ‘Security populism’ is not any different in this regard with emotions long considered an integral part of the experience of insecurity (Van Rythoven, 2015). Further exploration of the emotional dynamics at play in the construction of the ‘dangerous Other’ can therefore help us unravel the meanings and experiences of security among supporters of the radical right, as well as the possibilities that might exist for a progressive politics of law and order (Hogg, 2021).

So what of the risk of pathologising? As we have seen, to date much of the criminological literature on radical right populism adopts a dualistic conception of political affects, that is, the commonly held assumption that places the emotions — largely understood in a negative sense of fear, hate and anger — as oppositional to reason and the antipode of rational, trustful and democratic politics (Johnson, 2020). This raises the risk that, as with penal populism before it, criminologists will tend towards a view of populism as pathology, remaining ‘rather tone-deaf to the character of its appeal’ (Loader and Sparks, 2017: 102).

In order to probe effectively security’s role in driving radical right populism, therefore, a further criminological shift is required beyond what Shammas (2016: 15) has described as the ‘Manichean vision of the dependable and rational *cogito* against the unreliable and volatile sphere of the senses’. In this, as we have seen, there is much to be learned from the political science and political sociology literature. Approaches grounded in ‘affective ambivalence’ neither seek to criticise nor celebrate affect; similarly, they do not seek to categorise political affectivity as misleading, or a truthful reality. Rather than dichotomic conceptions of, for example, rational/irrational, objective/subjective or negative/positive emotion, they therefore examine what affects *do* in far-right politics and how they constitute an affective offer that is perceived as appealing.

Towards a research agenda

Assuming that a case is made out for a post-dualist approach, the question arises as to how best to study ‘security populism’ from this vantage point. Despite a large literature on populism, including a burgeoning interest in the role of emotions in populist discourse, thus far scholarly research in this area has tended to take the form of quantitative discourse analysis (Homolar and Löffmann, 2021; Roodujin and Pauwels, 2011). Moreover — and critically — few studies to date have engaged in detailed empirical analysis of security as a ‘keyhole issue’ (Hochschild, 2016: 11) in radical right populism, including *how* representations of security, emotion, and communicative practices

interlink in processes of populist political mobilisation (Homolar and Löffmann, 2021).⁶ Given that, as Alston (2017: 4) reminds us, ‘much of the problem [of populism] is linked to post-9/11 era security concerns’, this represents a glaring omission and an important opportunity for criminological research.

With this in mind, three (related) avenues for further research are suggested below, aimed at investigating the affective resonance of radical right populism at the macro, meso and micro levels of analysis.

Discursive patterns on security (macro level). While quantitative discourse analysis is often used in studies of populism, as noted, to date few empirical studies have been carried out specifically on the issue of ‘security populism’ (Löffmann, 2019). We therefore know little about what emotions are carried within certain message components of right-wing populist security discourse in their media self-representations and the affective power of populist insecurity narratives, beyond appeals to fear (Wodak, 2015). This is problematic given that ‘studying the emotional underpinnings of their insecurity narratives offers insights into how citizens can be potentially cued towards some interpretations rather than others’ (Bonansinga, 2021: 87). In this context, closer examination of ‘affective practices’⁷ and performances by far-right actors could clarify how these agents render their political projects identifiable and appealing (Wetherell et al., 2015). This is not at all to suggest manipulation by political actors, bearing in mind the discussion above, but rather their appeal to *both* reason and emotionality. Given the fundamentally interpersonal dimension of emotional discourse, and the likelihood that implicit expressions of emotion (ie irony or sarcasm, see further Leser and Spissinger, 2020) may be involved, criminological efforts to address this gap in the research should incorporate qualitative readings of such discourses, or even a mixed quantitative and qualitative strategy (Bonansinga, 2021; Breeze, 2019).

Of course, discourse analysis examining the affectivity of crime, security and punishment often throws up broader and deeper questions around community, nationality, identity and belonging. To date, many criminological scholars seeking to make sense of strong public support for restrictive measures on migration, what Koulisch and van der Woude (2020) term the ‘*why*’ of immigration and border control, have drawn heavily on the literature on penal populism, particularly the strand concerned with its ‘conditions of emergence’ (Loader and Sparks, 2017: 102). Thus, Bosworth and Guild’s (2008) arguments about ‘governing through migration control’ draw on Jonathan Simon’s (2007) theory on ‘governing through crime’ to argue that the politics of national identity in the UK now largely reside in the exclusion of a large number of people. In later work in this journal Bosworth et al. (2018) take some of the sociology of punishment’s central concepts and examine how they might be adjusted and rethought in the context of mass migration. As they rightly observe, criminologists may recognise much in the ‘familiar emotionally charged language and symbolic politics’ of contemporary populism, which often relies on ‘old racial, gendered and religious tropes’ (ibid: 44, 45). Similarly, in endeavouring to understand governmental discourses on ‘bordered penal populism’ in Norway, Todd-Kvam (2019) revisits some of the milestone texts (Garland, 2001, etc.), to assess the extent to which the narrative of the Norwegian government embraces these trends. In all these instances, it is worth noting that the sociology

of punishment literature forms a starting point, rather than a final destination, for analysis with many of these accounts usefully challenging the assumptions and limits of existing criminological scholarship (such as its narrow focus on imprisonment rates; see, e.g., Barker, 2018; Bosworth et al., 2018; Franko, 2020).

Security Cultures (meso level). While discourse analysis may capture the emotional *potential* of narratives around security, crime and punishment, the emotions associated with security populism are always felt within a given cultural context, and they are shaped by how we are socialised (Van Rythoven, 2015). Culture therefore plays a crucial mediating role in framing how security is understood and responded to, conditioning which emotions are reinforced and reproduced in particular settings (Bleiker and Hutchinson, 2008). Todd-Kvam's (2019: 305, 309) research in Norway speaks to this when it talks of a dramatic populist shift being 'too difficult and controversial for the Progress Party', unlike 'bordered penal populism', which taps into broader cultural narratives about protecting the Norwegian welfare state ('what we have worked hard to build up'). In extremis, this can extend to practices of denial and selective interpretation. As Hogg (2017: 108) notes, citing the work of Stan Cohen (2001), 'the cultural disposition of the nationalist involve[s] a particular way of seeing the world and apprehending/framing social reality such that only certain things could be "known" and other inconvenient events might be rendered invisible.' Building on earlier work on the meaning and usage of security in different jurisdictions (Zedner, 2003), criminology can provide important insights into such situated dispositions, addressing questions such as how culture mediates both the 'supply' (by populist leaders, parties, etc.), and the 'demand' for populist ideas (among the public, or certain sections thereof) (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018).

One example of this type of research (on the 'demand' side) can be found in Loader's (2007) work on the 'cultural lives' of security and rights. Loader (2007) examined five idioms that are commonly mobilised by the English public in response to crises in security and detects in them a much more fertile 'cultural soil' for security than for rights. What is most interesting about these idioms is how certain of them (eg, 'You wouldn't think that if you lived round here') articulate with populist conceptions of the authentic (pure) 'low culture' of the people over the unauthentic (corrupt) 'high culture' of the elite (Ostiguy, 2017). As he goes on to observe, however, snapshots such as this are no substitute for in situ, empirical research, 'comprised of close observation and [in] depth interpretation' (Loader, 2007: 29) for a better understanding of 'the deep emotional satisfactions to be obtained from fantasies of absolute security' (Loader, 2007: 40). The latter point concerning the need for interpretive analysis is especially important in untangling the variable, and highly context sensitive (Mackert, 2019), workings of security populism, particularly given the (rather limited) focus of populism research to date on single country case studies (Homolar and Löfflmann, 2021).

'Feeling rules' on security (micro level). Perhaps the best antidote to the pathologizing impulses discussed above concerns ethnographic research into the security politics of the far right and how emotional messages are received and felt by supporters. As Arlie Hochschild did in the Trump heartland of Louisiana so criminologists must engage with the political and criminological 'Other' about their *own understanding* of their lived realities and concerns on crime, punishment and security (Pasieka, 2017). Integral to this, and the key conceptual and methodological challenge, is *direct* and

respectful engagement with the worldviews of supporters of right-wing populist groups on issues relating to crime and security. While such challenges should not be underestimated, particularly when elements of the far-right may not be willing to extend that same courtesy to parts of the criminological community, serious researchers should at least *try* to make such connections, drawing on interdisciplinary research into racism and extremist groups (see, e.g., Blee, 1993). As with most other things, ‘repugnant social others’ are at least partly constituted by hegemonic social discourses (Harding, 1991) and, as Hochschild (2016) discovered in Louisiana, the growing political divide in western societies may be something that troubles those on the right too. Indeed, it is worth noting Hochschild’s work finds a resonance in the work of scholars such as Ian Loader and Richard Sparks who have long argued for better, more empathetic, interrogation of Criminology’s ‘Other’ (Loader, 2020; Loader and Sparks, 2019).

An ethnographic lens and analytical focus on the affective politics of far-right supporters and politicians *beyond negativity* can reveal what emotions underlie the security-related issues that are so often the target of populist ire. How are security ‘threats’ such as terrorism and migration more generally understood and felt by supporters of far-right groupings? What are the consensual ‘feeling rules’ of those who support far-right groupings on these issues? How do these differ by sex, gender and sexual orientation? Here, the criminological literature is a valuable resource for what it tells us about the complex range of emotional states— both positive and negative — associated with matters of crime and punishment. Social analysts of punishment have (somewhat sporadically) (Loader, 2011) observed the complexity and ambiguity of penal politics and the need for close attention to how combinations and sequences of emotions relate to punitive policies. A recent example is Loader’s (2020) research into the ‘emotional component’ of what he terms ‘the two faces’ of British conservatism, namely, the role of negative (blame, censure, condemnation, stigma) and positive (mercy, forgiveness and redemption) emotions in motivating enhanced penal control and sceptical penal restraint respectively. Another concerns the emotional cadences associated with the ‘rise of the victim’ as part of the late twentieth century’s ‘punitive turn’ (Garland, 2001). Richard Sparks (2000, 2011) argues that punitive sentiments arise, at least in part, as a form of intuitive sympathy for victims, a seemingly obvious point often overlooked by criminologists (Seale, 2012). In similar vein is the work of Lesley McAra (2011) who has argued against binary categories of punitive/exclusionary and welfarist/inclusionary in discussions of penal populism. As she observes:

‘the victim focus in contemporary penal policy ... can be read as expressive of: a trend towards greater marketization in punishment (victims thereby becoming a consumer in the penal process); *the need for greater connectedness and intimacy which forms the obverse of contemporary narratives of risk ...*; as well as tapping into deeper, more visceral sentiments’ (emphasis added).

This argument around punitiveness being driven by a need for connection or intimacy is echoed in references to the populist ‘performance of cultural intimacy’ in the work of Leser and Spissinger (2020: 334), and may therefore form one of a number of possible avenues for further research.

Conclusion

The recent populist ‘revolt’ took many by surprise, not least the more international form that it assumed post-2016. As we wait and see whether this populist ‘moment’ will turn into a populist ‘age’ (Mounk, 2018), the central role played by security as a driver of resurgent right-wing populism, and the links between penal populism and a more wide-ranging authoritarian populism, urgently demand criminological attention. Harnessing existing criminological arguments around emotion, crime and punishment, this paper has argued for further empirical research on the affective politics of security while stopping short of an approach that irrationalises affect, pathologises or focuses exclusively on negative emotions. As we have seen, much of this argument is not new, at least in the political science literature, yet the framing of emotions in negative terms and the perpetuation of a false dichotomy between reason and emotion strongly persists in emerging criminological work in this area (Pratt and Miao, 2017; Pratt, 2020a; Sitarz, 2021: 1, 2; Szafrńska, 2021: 7). Tempting as it is to herald ‘the end of reason’ (Pratt and Miao, 2017) and retreat into ‘left melancholia’ (Brown, 1999), such a moralising approach misses much about *why* and *how* security became a core theme within contemporary populist politics (Hogg, 2021) while reinforcing the idea of far-right supporters as the ‘others’ of society. In the alternative, it is suggested that, in exploring the dynamics of security populism, the best way for criminology and the sociology of punishment to proceed is by adopting a post-dualistic understanding of political affects that seeks to move beyond problematic dualisms such as rationality/emotion, negative/positive, etc. and to embrace the ambivalence and complexity of affects. While the research agenda outlined above remains tentative, as we have seen, many of its orienting features – empathy, engagement and the role of positive as well as negative emotions – articulate well with some of the best writing to date in the sociology of punishment. Indeed, in their (long) understanding of the discourse, origins and ‘cultural lives’ of security and populism, criminologists can bring important contributions to these conversations.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Professor David Nelken, Dr Lynsey Black, Dr Hubert Smeckal, and Dr Joe Garrity, as well as the anonymous reviewers, for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. All errors remain the author’s own.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. Drawing on the New Zealand example, Pratt (2008) argues that the limits of penal populism reside in its tendency to breach the bounds of morally acceptable punishment thereby impacting the level of legitimacy that it enjoys amongst the public.
2. For further discussion of the advantages of this approach see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2018: 1669–1672). For discussion of the differences between populism and elitism/pluralism, see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017: 7–8).
3. We follow Mudde (2007: 26) in defining PRRPs as denoting ‘political parties with a core ideology that is a combination of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism’.
4. This is defined by Pratt (2020b: 2) as a sanction ‘intended to protect the public from those who put their security at risk, even if this is at the expense of the rights of individuals to be protected from arbitrary or excessive use of criminal law.’ Core to the security sanction are strategies of ‘immobilization’ which can be imposed on an individual based on their potential to commit an offence in the future.
5. This was a question on physical ‘safety’ taken from the European Social Survey. Respondents were asked for their views on whether it was ‘Important to live in secure and safe surroundings’.
6. This is of course not to dismiss in any way the significant literature on the politics of law and order accrued over the past half-century but rather to highlight the fact that insufficient consideration has been given to security as a ‘keyhole issue’ in the specific context of *political* populism.
7. These are defined by Wetherell et al. (2015: 57) as efforts to identify ‘patterned forms of human activity articulating, mobilising and organising affect and discourse as a central part of the practice’.

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