

International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy



Book Review

Leanne Weber, Jarrett Blaustein, Kathryn Benier, Rebecca Wickes and Diana Johns (2021) *Place, Race And Politics: The Anatomy of a Law and Order Crisis*. UK: Emerald Publishing

ISBN: 978-1-80043-046-4 (hbk), 978-1-80043-045-7 (eBook)

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Geopolitical and environmental instabilities are displacing communities at a scale unseen since the Second World War. Concurrently, the human rights frameworks set up after that war to protect people fleeing from the ravages of conflict and dislocation are vulnerable to exceptionalism. Migrant communities whose political status is insecure are prone to mainstream media demonisation and the amplification of that stigma by politicians seeking to leverage law and order politics as an electoral strategy. As such, *Place, race and politics: The anatomy of a law and order crisis* is a timely documentation of a local story with global relevance.

The book presents an integrated analysis of the social and political processes that combined to construct a more than 32-month-long law and order 'crisis' in Melbourne, Australia, between 2016 and 2018. The cause of this supposed crisis was 'African gangs', who had been framed by the mainstream media as responsible for an outbreak of violence in 2016 between police and a crowd of young people at Melbourne's annual whole-of-community event, the Moomba Festival. Despite police reports of feuding groups involving young people from a variety of backgrounds, the conflation through media framing of the violence at the 'Moomba riot' with the 'Apex gang' took hold in the public mind. The consequences of this framing took a huge toll on Victoria's African communities, the South Sudanese community in particular.

In the tradition of *Policing the crisis: Mugging, the state, and law and order* (Hall, Critcher et al. 1978/2013), *Place, race and politics* contributes to comprehensive explanatory narratives of highly racialised law and order 'crises' that document the causes and consequences of racial and material inequality. Each of the authors independently conducted empirical research directed towards an aspect of the law and order 'crisis' around 'African crime', including sustained collaborations with members of the affected communities. As such, three of the four main chapters are based on primary research data

and cover ‘the core topics of media representation, political communication, policing, racial hatred and the impacts of these processes on affected communities’ (Weber, Blaustein et al. 2021: 19).

The collaborative writing process for *Place, race and politics* reflects the spirit of *Policing the crisis*. At the same time, the authors acknowledge that the book does not lay claim to the grand theorising of *Policing the crisis*; instead, it illuminates some of the underlying processes at play. In doing so, the book clarifies the role that institutions and key political actors and commentators can play in the ‘dangerisation’ of particular groups and the consequences for minority youth, such as the South Sudanese community in Melbourne.

‘Dangerisation’ refers to the ‘... tendency to perceive and analyse the world through categories of menace ... to continuously scan and assess public and private spaces in terms of potential threats by other people’ (Lianos and Douglas 2000: 267). This ‘dangerisation’ speaks directly to the episodic and durable mainstream media framing and amplification of youth as ‘deviant’ and a threat to societal values. Weber, Blaustein, Benier, Wickes and Johns situate the crisis within the broader context of a ‘crisis of multiculturalism’. They note that the ‘African gang crisis’ petered out only after the return of the incumbent government in the 2018 Victorian election, and it was notable that the ‘crisis’ occurred in a city proud of its diversity, multicultural image and heritage.

In addition to the comprehensive documentation and analysis of law and order politics now playing out in a digital media environment with varied and sometimes unexpected and dramatic consequences (e.g., the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum in June 2016 and the United States Capitol riot in January 2021), the book effectively integrates demographic data to contextualise the challenges that migrants can face in building collective efficacy in new environments. Not least among these challenges can be a range of discrimination, including vilification by legacy media and through social media, and over-policing. The in-depth case study documented by the book shows that the political outcomes of media-framed ‘crises’ are by no means predictable and need to resonate with voters to secure electoral gains. The policies that did resonate with voters leading up to the 2018 Victorian state election—a compassion agenda dedicated to women, youth and minorities and a renewables-based industry policy to address climate change—seemed to have an inverse relationship to the media framing of a law and order ‘crisis’ (see Lee et al. (forthcoming) for a deeper analysis of the protective factors that might contribute to mitigating the empty rhetoric of law and order politics).

Chapter 1, ‘Introduction: The foundations of a law and order crisis’, situates the case study within the literature on moral panic, law and order crises and theories on risk, security and ‘othering’. The chapter explains how political and media elites use ideology and culture to construct social problems as criminal threats to reinforce their legitimacy and uphold the status quo. In doing so, the chapter articulates the relationship between media framing and the preoccupation with ‘security’ at the individual, community and national levels (often through the unqualified invocation of national security as a justification for secrecy), potentially displacing other values, such as due process or fairness.

Chapter 2, ‘From “Apex” to “#AfricanGangs”’, charts the currents that ‘converged into a stream of antipathy and demonisation that was fuelled by media distortion and exaggeration, the politicisation of crime control and its connection to immigration debates and the resultant sense of public unease’ (Weber, Blaustein et al. 2021: 23). In doing so, it traces the roots of the ‘law and order crisis’ that peaked in the days leading up to the 2018 Victorian state election and its origins in the so-called ‘Moomba riot’ of 2016.

Chapter 3, ‘The racialisation of crime: “African gangs” and the media’, with Chloe Keel, Greg Koumouris and Claire Moran, ‘charts the ascendance of the “African gangs” theme in media reporting following the Moomba events and examines how the tone and content of news media reporting contributed to the production of a sense of crisis’ (Weber, Blaustein et al. 2021: 20). The analysis in this chapter is based on a Factiva search of relevant news reports from 2007 to the end of 2020. The mixed-method media content analysis shows that media ‘articles consistently included coded language that both reflected and

reproduced narratives emphasising the link between blackness and criminality and the perceived societal risk posed by humanitarian migrants’ (Weber, Blaustein et al. 2021: 42).

In Chapter 4, “No-one thinks you are innocent”: Policing the “cimmigrant other”, the authors consider ‘how local police both responded to and reproduced the perception of African Australians as “cimmigrant others” in one highly multicultural area of Melbourne’ (Weber, Blaustein et al. 2021: 20). The chapter emphasises the uncritical nature of much news media reporting that relies on the police as primary definers, and the authors make clear the potential risks for migrants of police surveillance and discretion in relation to the cancellation of visas. The material in Chapter 4 is from focus groups and interviews with youth workers and South Sudanese Australians in south-east Melbourne.

Chapter 5, ‘Impact on the South Sudanese and wider Australian communities’, the last substantive chapter, ‘examines the detrimental effect of these sustained exclusionary processes on community attitudes towards African Australians and the lasting impact on the sense of security and belonging experienced by South Sudanese Australians in particular’ (Weber, Blaustein et al. 2021: 20). The data informing this chapter come from focus groups and interviews with Melbourne-based South Sudanese young people and mothers, which were conducted for a study with the Melbourne-based Centre for Multicultural Youth.

Place, race and politics meets its aim of advancing understanding of the ‘contradictions inherent in the search for collective security in a political and social climate that promotes social division, including along racial lines’ (Weber, Blaustein et al. 2021: 19). A few points came to mind regarding some of the continuities of the literature. In particular, *Cultural criminology and the carnival of crime* (Presdee 2000) to articulate the significance of the family-friendly nature of the Moomba Festival and the dramatic contrast through media framing of the ‘dangerisation’ of South Sudanese youth that took hold of the popular imagination. The role of social media in amplifying and/or ameliorating mainstream media framing of the ‘crisis’ could have been explored in more depth, especially as a factor in mitigating the fear-based content generated by major political parties and amplified through mainstream media—and the incongruity of reductive political messaging on multi-directional platforms, such as social media (see (Ellis 2021; Lee et al. Forthcoming). More on the networked aspect of hateful conduct against politically vulnerable communities in hyper-partisan times (Ellis 2022) would complement the rigorous mainstream media content analysis. In terms of the news values drawn upon, Jewkes’ (2015) notion of cultural proximity perhaps reflects the durability of the law and order politics frame as a political organising strategy, but with unpredictable results as political communications strategists come to grips with the evolving digital media environment.

Place, race and politics will appeal to academics and students, as well as to a broader general audience interested in media, crime and politics. The authors note that multiculturalism is likely to come under further criticism in coming years as dislocation continues across the globe. They are well situated to individually and collectively respond with research on how the crisis of multiculturalism unfolds.

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Please cite this book review as:

Ellis JR (2022) Review of *Place, race and politics: The anatomy of a law and order crisis* by Leanne Weber, Jarrett Blaustein, Kathryn Benier, Rebecca Wickes and Diana Johns. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 11(2): 243-246. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.2389>

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ISSN: 2202-8005

