



Book Review

Valeria Vegh Weis (ed) (2022) *Criminalization of Activism: Historical, Present and Future Perspectives*. London: Routledge

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‘285 eyes. These many were lost at the hands of police brutality in Chile at the end of 2019’ (Vegh Weis: 1). Valeria Vegh Weis’s *Criminalization of Activism: Historical, Present and Future Perspectives* begins with a statement that establishes the importance—and the violence—ingrained in the criminalisation of activism. The topic could not be timelier. For instance, in 2020, terrorism police in the United Kingdom listed the global environmental movement Extinction Rebellion (<https://rebellion.global>) as an extremist group (see Dodd and Grierson 2020). In 2021, 54 environmental defenders were killed in Mexico alone (see Lopez 2022). And in 2022, the Iranian climber Elnaz Rekabi was put under house arrest after she competed in South Korea without wearing a headscarf. Her action was intended to express support for the wave of protests in the aftermath of Mahsa Amini’s death while in custody for attempting to assert her rights as a woman (see Wintour 2022). Given recent global events and in an effort to illustrate the extent of the criminalisation of activism (see also Clement 2016), Vegh Weis’s book adopts an intersectional and interdisciplinary approach and employs several frameworks or orientations, including southern criminology, green cultural criminology, feminist criminology and Indigenous studies. In so doing, it incorporates the perspectives of authors with different backgrounds, nationalities and approaches, which, I believe, is the key strength of this volume. The book is divided into five parts to make it all come together.

Part I, ‘Theoretical Approaches on the Over-Criminalization of Dissent’, introduces theoretical approaches and conceptual tools to better understand the criminalisation of activism. However, this edited volume does not limit itself to offering a theoretical orientation; it also provides a historical and empirical one. Through the presentation of a diverse range of case studies, Parts II, III and IV delve into the criminalisation of dissent across time and space. Part II, ‘Historical Experiences on the Over-Criminalization of Dissent’, integrates a historical perspective to illustrate the longstanding use of the criminalisation of dissent by elites to retain power. In contrast, Part III, ‘Current Cases of Over-Criminalization of Dissent in the Global North’, and Part IV, ‘Current Cases of Over-Criminalization of Dissent in the Global South’, present a wide range of contemporary case studies of the criminalisation of activism that have taken and continue to take place in the Global North and South, respectively. And Part V, ‘Challenges for a Critical Agenda on the Over-Criminalization of Dissent’, brings into the discussion some challenging issues within the study of activism and its criminalisation, such as the increasing use of artificial intelligence to target activists.

Each chapter in the edited volume can be read as a standalone essay but also as connected to the rest of the book. If they are read independently, each chapter presents a valuable case study and illuminates key aspects of the topic set in a specific time



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and context. However, when read as a whole, the volume not only provides a comparative analysis where lessons can be learnt from the past but also allows readers to identify similarities and differences across locations and causes. Moreover, through the wide range of regions covered by the volume, the numerous examples of causes that are being criminalised and the extent of the harms emanating from the criminalisation of dissent, the book successfully articulates the relevance of the issue within criminology. In so doing, this edited volume underscores what Vegh Weis (2017) has argued previously—that those who challenge pre-established parameters are over-criminalised, while state, corporate and law enforcement actors evade responsibility. As illustrated throughout the book, although ‘the state approach to dissent differs according to the socio-demographic features of the protestors’ (Vegh Weis 2022: 2), strategies of over-criminalisation of dissent and decriminalisation of police violence appear to be used across the world, from those defending the environment in Latin America or Europe to those defending human rights and democratic values in Australia, Catalonia or the United States. Essentially, while the social actors who are victims of the criminalisation of dissent are as ethnically and racially diverse as their causes and nationalities, the interests that are being protected through the employment of over- and under-criminalisation strategies have remained the same. That is today’s neoliberal legal and social order.

As stated above, what is crucial to the book is the fact that those challenging state-corporate interests and those of other powerful actors are the ones whose actions are being over-criminalised. As reflected through the historical lens adopted in Part II, this is not new. However, nowadays, the practice is even more pervasive. Within neoliberalism, corporate entities and other powerful actors are increasingly taking control over the state and its laws to benefit their interests (see Pons-Hernández 2022). As demonstrated throughout the book, powerful actors are designing the law and using and abusing crime control strategies to protect the status quo. As Alida Szalai puts it in her chapter (‘A Social Control Perspective for the Study of Environmental Harm and Resistance’) (2022: 35), ‘upholding the privileges, including impunity, requires the extension of certain control mechanisms, including criminalization, especially when dissent and resistance arise’.

The state-corporate entanglement stands at the core of the criminalisation of activism because social dissent is, in many situations, the only democratic tool left to challenge the neoliberal social order. As a result, the state and other powerful actors are continually working together to limit and criminalise this right, and the case studies employed in *Criminalization of Activism: Historical, Present and Future Perspectives* illustrate this phenomenon. Not only are environmental defenders and Indigenous communities, who are working against development projects, being targeted by states in the name of corporations to assure the continuity of their shared political and economic agenda (see Heydon 2019), but so, too, are climate activists challenging the modes of production and consumption, alongside those fighting to protect individuals from corporate exploitation in Italy and elsewhere.

Overall, Vegh Weis’s volume dissects the criminalisation of activism across time and space. By providing a collection of essays that bring together theoretical, historical and empirical approaches, the volume successfully highlights the prevalence, prominence and significance of such criminalisation. Within the current polycrisis, protest movements are likely to increase and, therefore, so, too, will the criminalisation of their activities. This makes this topic—and this edited volume—key for today’s criminological agenda. Accordingly, the book is a must-read for anyone interested in how and why strategies of criminalisation have been, are being and will be used to protect the state and other powerful actors from those threatening the status quo and their institutions and neoliberal policies.

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