

editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue: Pandemics, policing and protest

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Pandemics, policing and protest

After a brief hiatus, this Special Issue marks the relaunch of *Justice, Power and Resistance – the Journal of the European Group for the Study of Deviance and Social Control*. This Special Issue is published against a background of ongoing crisis and controls. In March 2020, The World Health Organisation declared the Coronavirus COVID-19 a pandemic. At the time of writing, 485,275,045 cases of COVID-19 have been recorded worldwide, and 6,133,718 people are known to have died, according to the [Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Centre \(2022\)](#). In addition to these deaths, responses to the virus have created immense harm and suffering. They have facilitated the further growth of solitary confinement in the penal estate and impacted upon the relationship between those detained and the ‘outside world’. Responses have also included further restrictions on freedom of movement and the ‘enhancement’ of border controls, the strengthening of police powers and significant increases in the levels and forms of surveillance.

The management of this crisis has further evidenced the economic violence of capitalism, as more and more people are forced into poverty, insecure and/or unsafe accommodation and homelessness, while the health risks and dangers associated with work and the workplace have also become heightened. Responses to the COVID-19 crisis have also increased and strengthened preexisting social, political and economic inequalities and intersections, particularly in relation to age, (dis)ability, sex, ‘race’ and class. Preventable deaths of older, sick and (dis)abled people have taken place in ‘care homes’, while lockdown conditions preventing people from leaving their homes have contributed

to rising levels of intimate partner violence. Deaths have further disproportionately impacted Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities. Restrictions around access to healthcare, the closing of schools and public transport networks, along with limits on the use of public spaces, have also impacted unevenly across societies. While notions of a 'herd immunity' have continually suggested that some lives are expendable, this has been further reinforced in different ways – particularly as it is frequently those from BIPOC communities who have been categorised as essential workers and disproportionately exposed to the COVID-19 virus in the process.

In a recent media interview with Ava DuVernay, Angela Y. Davis stated that the current moment marks 'a conjuncture between the COVID-19 crisis and the increasing awareness of the structural nature of racism' ([Vanity Fair, 2020](#)). Ongoing inequality, discrimination and state violence can be seen in the high-profile killings by state agents, particularly of Black women and men. The police killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in the US in 2020 further strengthened the social movements gathering under the Black Lives Matter umbrella, and heightened calls for the defunding and abolition of the Police, as well as for a critical questioning of criminal justice processes more broadly. These calls are underpinned by an awareness of both the past and present of criminal justice institutions, with their links to colonialism, the preservation of particular forms of social, political and economic order, and their intrinsic reliance upon violence, repression and control. As Vitale argues in *The End of Policing* (2017: 21) 'the basic nature of the law and the police, since their earliest origins, is to be a tool for managing inequality and maintaining the status quo'.

Research has repeatedly evidenced the harmful biases and inherent violence of the Police as an institution, alongside the absence of any causal relationship between the size of a police force and public safety. While women and men continue to die and are harmed at the hands of 'law enforcement', it is time to rethink the provision of police control, not least beyond the reformist calls for 'community policing', and consider in depth how we can achieve justice, security and safety for all in our communities, both now and in the future through a politics of abolition. Doing so necessarily involves thinking of policing in its broadest terms and widening the focus beyond simply the Police force and towards the inclusion of other agencies of control and repression.

This Special Issue features a range of responses to important questions about policing and protests, which have become even more pressing in recent times. Too often, law enforcement and policing has become 'the' response to various forms of political, economic and social crisis – including health crisis. [Paul Betts' \(2022\)](#) article focuses upon a particular aspect of policing which has come to dominate much work on law enforcement. Known as 'evidence-based policing' (EBP), this approach has become institutionalised within policing, but also within the academy in the UK and elsewhere. Betts' work illustrates how so-called EBP continues to operate as a positivist pseudo-science, where knowledge is selectively chosen, ranked and narrowly defined, produced by approved sources and used for predictable ends which shore up a capitalist, conservative state. The ongoing hegemony of EBP is linked to the managerialism and neoliberalism of late modernity, and the continued primacy given to a 'what works' agenda remains replete with discourses around 'professionalisation' and 'efficiency'. Betts' article highlights the close relationship between academic and policing institutions, with opportunities for funding being increasingly driven by EBP's state-friendly priorities. The neoliberal marketisation of education has also witnessed the growth in 'professional policing' courses, further positioning academia as both

co-creator and messenger for EBP's hegemony. Taken together, Betts' work suggests this relationship marks the narrowing down of both education and police research, leading to the primacy of conservative, acritical outcomes which favour the state and seek to silence dissenting voices. The institutionalisation of EBP operates as a form of silencing, closing down opportunities for a more critical, questioning exploration of not only the nature of knowledge and knowledge production, but also the existence of the police institution itself and the powerful possibility of alternatives.

A different form of engagement with policing can be found in [Greg Martin's \(2022\)](#) work exploring the criminalisation of everyday life and the policing of protest during the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily in the Australian context. The article asserts that the preemptive security approach to policing, often witnessed during the pandemic, subverts the 'negotiated management' model of protest policing, which itself assumes a fiction of equality between police and protestor. Martin argues that while courts in New South Wales, Australia, may have occasionally acted as a bulwark against the blanket prohibitions of protests, the police themselves have retained a large degree of power and autonomy to act against protests using a range of repressive and violent methods. These methods have included militarised forms of policing involving the use of mass arrests, bringing people into close proximity with one another – clearly against advice regarding social distancing – and the use of chemical weaponry through tear-gassing, which causes victims to remove their masks in respiratory distress, typically coughing and sneezing violently. Both of these approaches render the transmission of COVID-19 far more likely, thus raising further questions about the suitability of such policing responses to what was and remains a significant health crisis.

Against this backdrop of police violence and the limited potential of the law to secure safety, [Thalia Anthony and Vicki Chartrand's \(2022\)](#) article offers some semblance of hope for the future, by calling our attention to the potential of anti-racist and anti-carceral activism, and the strengthening of links between the two, that have taken place both at the theoretical and practical level. While recognising the wider violence(s) of criminal justice systems and processes in the areas officially labelled Australia and Canada, Anthony and Chartrand's work centres on the prison as a systemically racist, overcrowded and dangerous site of disease transmission, marked by inadequate healthcare and inequality, which disproportionately impacts upon the lives of people from First Nation backgrounds. They show that, while the pandemic has contributed to some slight shifts in sentencing and release decisions, conditions for those detained in prisons have further deteriorated, with restrictions on visits, the curtailment of activities, and lengthy in-cell lockdowns widening and deepening peoples' experiences of the violence of incarceration. Anthony and Chartrand's work illustrates how colonialism, racial capitalism and white supremacy are interwoven in the fabric of criminal justice institutions at every level, and argues that the continued investment in these approaches will not and cannot achieve safety or accountability. The article highlights the ways through which anti-colonial abolitionist voices have become amplified, and evidences the powerful solidarity and cooperation occurring between anti-racist and anti-carceral communities both outside and in.

While Anthony and Chartrand's article focuses primarily on the overtly naked and coercive violence of criminal justice institutions, [Joe Sim and Steve Tombs' \(2022\)](#) work in this issue illustrates how 'state talk' seeks to construct a consensus which mystifies preventable harms and obfuscates responsibility for them. The article identifies the ways in which the UK Government socially constructed a particular 'reality' around

the COVID-19 pandemic that sought to deny the state's role in preventable deaths and illness. It examines how multiple and multifaceted harms emerge from the Government's mismanagement of the pandemic from its very outset, and how these avoidable harms particularly impacted upon already vulnerabilised communities. The article deconstructs the 'state talk' which sought to portray the Government as a heroic victor engaged in battling an (allegedly) soon-to-be-vanquished foe via a discourse of 'war', partly facilitated through a theatre of carefully choreographed press briefings, Union Jack flags, the selective anointing of 'heroes of the nation', and participation in highly visible public rituals. Sim and Tombs' work sheds light on what has been mystified in all of this performance and rhetoric, while in turn evidencing the clear harms experienced by the public. These include, but are not limited to, failures around the provision of adequate personal protective equipment to frontline workers; the appropriate management of UK borders; the testing of people moved from hospitals to care and residential homes; the stopping of all but completely essential work; and the development and maintenance of adequate testing, tracing and isolating strategies and systems. As such, the article forms a challenge to 'state talk' and calls for a serious reckoning with the neoliberal violence, corruption, degradation, deceit and delusions which have evidently failed to secure safety for all.

The mystification of state practices, and their failure to secure safety for all, is further explored in [Sam Hanks' \(2022\)](#) discussion about the policing of sex work. Focusing primarily on Wales, UK, the article draws a distinction between the current rhetoric around 'safeguarding' and 'vulnerability' and the lived reality of sex workers' experiences of policing. Narratives from sex workers highlight the frequent monitoring of premises, the violence of raids, and the fear which results from these forms of police activity. Sex workers whose testimonies feature in the article describe the lack of support experienced and their resulting reluctance to engage with police forces, including when subjected to assault and intimidation. Hanks argues that the seemingly low rates of arrest for offences linked to sex work also disguise the ways in which other aspects of areas of law are used to police those involved, such as through immigration controls and border violence. Hanks' article suggests that, despite rhetoric which claims to prioritise sex worker welfare and safety, much of the approach actually taken operates as a form of social control, continually exposing workers to violence, dangerous conditions, labour exploitation, border harms, police impunity and repression. The work illustrates that the failure to provide support for sex workers – or even to acknowledge their needs – during the COVID-19 pandemic further sheds light on the differences between rhetoric and reality when it comes to securing safety and wellbeing for all, including for some of the most marginalised in our societies.

The subjection of the most marginalised to further forms of violence is a theme which also features in [Imogen Richards' \(2022\)](#) article. It argues that neoliberal governments across the world have sought to hold their citizens responsible for governmental failings during the pandemic. The article suggests that already marginalised groups were framed as sites of danger and threat by both governments and far-right non-government organisations. Richards explores how scapegoating was used to distract from public health failings and the erosion of public services which further fuelled the pandemic. The article alleges that the response to COVID-19 from many neoliberal governments and non-governmental actors can be collectively viewed as representative of a 'far-right social turn', in which manifestations of state power

provide an ideological context for the flourishing of exclusionary sentiments. Richards' work also examines the role of the media in disseminating propagandist narratives about the alleged causes and consequences of both COVID-19 and various vaccines. They argue that, in many instances, this narrative frequently contained messaging which sought to dehumanise and demonise those deemed 'other', and typically featured white nationalist rhetoric and imagery. The article argues that the far-right social turn both encourages and is encouraged by racist violence, the obfuscation of structurally determined devastations which led to and emerged from COVID-19, and the suppression of public understanding about the neoliberal mismanagement which continues to further the harmful effects of this crisis.

Returning to Australia, [Emma Ryan, Ian Warren and Bree Carlton \(2022\)](#) document the theoretical relationships between biopolitics, control and the broad idea of pandemic policing. Their article shows how emerging forms of preemptive control have inextricably been tied to a pre-crime securitisation logic that sought to curtail the spread of COVID-19 throughout both urban and regional communities in Victoria. Their discussion is framed in light of the Victorian Ombudsman's inquiry into Operation Benessere, which involved a sudden, hard lockdown in nine high-rise public housing estates in North West Melbourne. Their analysis of this inquiry highlights the controversies of emergency pandemic enforcement and the implications for police organisational accountability. It also reveals how biopolitical notions of control strengthened formal police powers under a state of emergency that targeted the urban poor, while immunising police from conventional forms of public accountability.

[David Whyte's \(2022\)](#) work delves deeper into the determinants outlined in the latter sections of Richards' article. Whyte argues that the presence of clear regimes of accumulation can be seen across the four aspects of the development of COVID-19 and responses to it. These four moments are summarised as 'release', 'amplification', 'spread' and 'medical intervention'. The article illustrates the role played by regulation in creating and maintaining conditions for diseases to 'leap' from one species to another (towards humans in this instance), before moving to outline how industrial agricultural production makes the risks of disease transmission far more likely than before, and its scale far greater. Whyte's work also identifies how regulatory regimes seek to secure accumulation at the cost of worker safety, and shows how the risk of COVID-19 exposure is not shared evenly across all in society, particularly since many of the most 'at-risk' jobs are carried out by those from minoritised backgrounds. The article also highlights how responses to the pandemic have shown most clearly how state-corporate relationships work to maximise profitability and pass on risk in the production and sale of vaccines. The article ends with a stark warning that future pandemics will continue to emerge if we remain so tied to regimes of accumulation which inevitability generate vast amounts of avoidable harm, death, disease and destruction.

Exploring the responses to the pandemic in Italy, [Vincenzo Scalia \(2022\)](#) traces their roots in the hyper-neoliberalism of the right and of the repressive attitude of a centrist Italian left, developed since the 1970s. This article explores the emergency measures enacted, and examines how the neoliberal hegemony of the last 40 years infiltrated 'the common sense' to such an extent that even critical thinkers have taken for granted the role of the state in regulating social relations on behalf of a fully-fledged market economy. This passive acceptance of the 'state-market match', the article suggests, not

only accepts the restriction of liberties and the extreme privatisation of life, but also provokes the withering of a critical thinking that could promote alternative policies, as well as outlining long-term prospects for political and social change.

This Special Issue furthermore provides a book review, by Elin Bengtsson, and an intervention by Karl Nafstad. In Bengtsson's review of 2019's *Justice Alternatives*, edited by Pat Carlen and Leandro Ayres França, we are introduced to a range of alternatives to the current state of policing and carceral practices, ranging from utopian and abolitionist alternatives to reformist ones, all with a perspective on contemporary struggles for social justice. Such a perspective is reflected here, as, in addition to journal articles and book reviews, the *Justice, Power and Resistance* journal features an intervention section, which includes campaign updates, reflections, biographical accounts and social movement contributions. In this issue's intervention, Karl Nafstad, from the Norwegian organisation, *Normal*, fighting for drug law reform, connects the Black Lives Matter movement and police abolitionism to the ongoing political debate about drug policy reform in Norway.

Taken together, this issue of *Justice, Power and Resistance* seeks to challenge dominant discourses around power which frames harms as unavoidable outcomes or unforeseeable consequences. It hopes to raise questions about the use of the police during a health crisis, but also about the use of policing more broadly as a response to problems. This issue demands that we critically interrogate inequality in all its forms, and the institutions and discourses that perpetuate it. Forthcoming editions will continue to explore these aspects and their significance for justice, power and resistance. This includes reference to technologies of power, and the potential for algorithmic (in)justice with regard to criminological work and activism in Latin America.

With the greatest of thanks to all involved in producing this and previous editions of *Justice, Power and Resistance*,

In solidarity,

Jon Burnett, Ida Nafstad and Lisa White

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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