Beyond penal populism: complexifying justice systems and security through qualitative lenses

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In the global political landscape, as far-right parties gain prominence, populist rhetoric advocating for harsher justice and security policies is becoming increasingly prevalent. Proponents of this rhetoric base their discourse on "alarming" violence and crime rates and discredit more liberal approaches, as well as research that deconstruct those Manichean visions. In this introduction, we ask what tangible contributions qualitative and ethnographic methods can offer to the field of justice and security studies. We explain why and to what extent qualitative methods are essential to accurately represent the reality of justice and security and to help deconstruct overly simplistic interpretations of justice and security. Ultimately, this article contends that these methodologies are crucial, now more than ever, for dismantling narratives driven by penal populism.

KEYWORDS: qualitative methods; ethnography, justice, security, penal populism.

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THE MORE THAN EVER NEED FOR QUALITATIVE METHODS IN THE PENAL POPULIST ERA

Far-right parties are gaining increasing prominence on the international political scene. Recent examples include Argentina, where Javier Milei became president in December 2023; the Netherlands, where the Freedom Party, represented by Geert Wilders, won the parliamentary elections in November 2023; and Finland, where the nationalist True Finns movement won a record 20.1% of the vote in the parliamentary elections of April 2023. In many other countries, while these political players have yet to win the votes needed to reach the head of state, they are winning more and more seats in other political decision-making arenas. For instance, in Portugal's legislative elections of May 2025, the six-year-old far-right party secured 60 seats in parliament, making it the second largest and representing almost 23% of the votes.

"National populism", "right-wing populism", "populist radical right", and "extreme right" are some of the terms used in the literature to refer to the rise of far-right parties and movements worldwide. This movement has been studied in the literature for quite some time, notably since the mid-1990's. While there is no consensus on a single definition to describe this phenomenon, academics urge a more nuanced understanding, rather than treating these terms as synonymous. Cas Mudde, an internationally renowned scholar on political extremism and populism, introduces the term "populist radical right" (2007). According to Mudde, while it is necessary to acknowledge the specificities and differences, most political parties and movements that combine or display principles and values of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism can fall under this designation (Mudde 2016). Over the years, scholars have attempted to explain why and how these movements are emerging and growing worldwide (Abdoul-Bagui 2021; Gozgor 2021; Kalb 2021; Kapferer and Theodossopoulos 2019; Rodrik 2021; Weisskircher 2020). Some researchers explore their evolution over time and space, as well as their diffusion and translation (Mondon and Winter 2020; Chryssogelos 2013; Rydgren 2005). Others examine the consequences for society and democracy (McKee *et al*. 2021; Muis and Immerzeel 2017).

Among these notable consequences is the way in which issues of security and justice are addressed by political actors and debated in the wider public arena. Security and justice have traditionally been a divisive and strategic topic for political parties, with conservative parties typically favoring an increase in law enforcement personnel, improved working conditions for officers, and stricter measures to address security threats from terrorism, common delinquency, or social movements, for example (Wood 2016; Reiner 2010; Ren, Zhao and Lovrich 2008). In contrast, progressive parties often advocate for law enforcement reforms and acknowledge limitations within the justice

and security systems, particularly in terms of human rights. It is essential to understand that these general orientations reflect the discourses of politicians and party representatives, not necessarily the policies they actually implement. Progressive programs may indeed promote liberal values and ideals in their platforms while, in practice, implementing more conservative policies and vice versa. Despite these general trends, the distinctions between conservative and progressive stances on security have blurred over the past few decades. Increasingly, leftist parties use "tough on crime" rhetoric to appeal to a broader and more divided electorate (Müller 2018; Egan 2013; Walgrave, Lefevere and Nuytemans 2009). This is not surprising since adopting an adversary party's messaging is a common strategy for electoral gains (Holian 2004). However, the trend of leftist parties embracing more radical repressive approaches to security and justice, extending beyond traditional resource allocation and penal policy discussions, is relatively recent and can be partly attributed to the rise of "penal populism" (Bonner 2019).

Although there is no consensus on a single definition, penal populism generally refers to "the way in which criminals and prisoners are thought to have been favored at the expense of crime victims in particular, and the law-abiding public in general. It feeds on expressions of anger, disenchantment, and disillusionment with the criminal justice establishment." (Pratt 2007: 12). In practice, this often manifests in a discourse that portrays people suspected or accused of criminal activity, or those already imprisoned – commonly amalgamated with immigrants, refugees, or those who don't fit the image of a "pure native", even if they are born in the country – as benefiting from the judicial and political system (Osuna 2024; Özer and Aşcı 2021). At the same time, crime victims, who are typically perceived and presented as natives, are doubly harmed – first by the criminal or delinquent act itself, and second by a system that fails to adequately protect them. Those who support this discourse argue that repressive, tough-on-crime policies are the solution to redressing these perceived injustices (Boda *et al*. 2014; Newburn 2007). Several academics consider that the rise of the populist radical right in the political landscape is partly responsible for this penal populism movement (Garland 2022; Kenny and Holmes 2020; Pratt 2007). According to them, the emergence of populist radical right parties has been accompanied by a shift, or a deepening, toward a security discourse rooted in fear, also referred to as "politics of anxiety" (Curato 2016), and on the (re)construction of internal enemies (Loperfido 2021).

Proponents of this rhetoric not only criminalize certain groups of society that are already targeted by discrimination, and propagate fear, but they also discredit liberal approaches to justice and security. These liberal approaches are sometimes labeled as "soft on crime" (Newburn 2007) or depicted as "in favor of criminals" (Unnever, Cullen and Fischer 2007). However, many researchers

have shown that these liberal measures can have a greater impact in enhancing the sense of security and promoting social integration compared to "tough on crime" approaches (Dias Félix 2022; Mauer 1999). These studies generally use qualitative methods to collect data. By contrast, penal populists often rely on a distorted use of metrics and statistics to emphasize the "alarming" state of insecurity in the country, highlighting the inequalities and injustices experienced by crime victims, law-abiding citizens, and crime perpetrators (Frois 2013). Common strategies include presenting a narrow perspective without providing the broader context – a hallmark of the "post-truth era" (Wodak 2021; Montgomery 2017) – or making inappropriate comparisons to support qualitative assertions.

In the context of the expanding penal populism movements, what tangible contributions can qualitative and ethnographic methods offer to the field of justice and security studies?

This special issue aims to address this question, suggesting that qualitative methods are crucial for providing a nuanced understanding of the complexities within justice and security systems – perspectives that might remain obscured through other research approaches. Ethnographic methods, in particular, play a pivotal role in expanding and deepening our comprehension of these dynamics. With their holistic perspective and focus on multiple actors and contexts, ethnography allows for an in-depth exploration of justice and security issues. This special issue advocates for the use of these methods to inform political decision-making, especially as penal populism gains traction. Ultimately, we argue that qualitative methods are essential to accurately represent the reality of justice and security, helping to deconstruct penal populist narratives and overly simplistic interpretations of justice and security.

ETHNOGRAPHY AS A GATEWAY TO THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF JUSTICE AND SECURITY

Ethnography as a method of observing and analyzing politics gives access to the ordinary experience of politics in all its complexity. The ethnographer embeds themselves into the *milieu* of their object of study and poses as an observer – sometimes a participant – of the dynamics, interactions, social codes, unspoken rules, practices and cognitive logics specific to this *terrain*. This position enables us to grasp the Goffmanian "order of interaction", defined as "an order of physical co-presence between bodies, whose participants [exercise] a form of control over each other and over the things in their environment, in conformity with rules of interaction" (Cefaï 2011: 548). Ethnographic fieldwork offers the possibility of understanding how those involved in a policy make sense of the practices and interactions that shape it on a daily basis. (Shore, Wright and Però 2011; Vicent 2010). Thus, despite the opaque, closed, and at

times violent nature of justice and security systems, an ethnographic approach allows us to make visible what would otherwise remain hidden (Melhuus, Mitchell and Wulff 2009), through the direct relationships it implies between researcher and research participants (Schatz 2009; Scott 1990).

Social sciences, especially Anthropology, have a long-standing tradition of debating ethnography and qualitative methods. Some of these discussions focus specifically on ethnography in the field of justice, security, and violence (*e.g.* Auyero, Bourgois and Sheper-Hughes 2015; Goldstein 2010; Maguire, Frois and Zurawski 2014; Nordstrom and Robben 1996). While our special issue does not claim to break new ground, we aim to contribute to these ongoing debates and add new perspectives.

Etnográfica has published several special issues and articles exploring the intersection of ethnography with violence, justice and security. In a 2011 special issue titled "On the meanings of security: reductions and ambiguities", Manuela Ivone Cunha and Susana Durão highlighted the complex relationship between insecurity and crime (2011). They emphasized that the sense of insecurity, along with the discourse of penal populism, often finds greater resonance among people and groups who are not necessarily those who face crime directly in their daily lives or who have been crime victims. It is among people who feel subjectively or are objectively more vulnerable that the threat of crime – and consequently, the fear of crime – gains more prominence in the realm of imagination, leading to greater calls for state intervention in security matters. This might include expanding the mandate of security forces, increasing the role of justice in the courts, and imposing stricter punishment through incarceration. Consequently, it is crucial to note that "security" and "justice" can mean different things to different people based on their gender, age, or other factors. This diversity in interpretation also applies to various stakeholders, such as members of security forces, political party representatives, and average citizens, each of whom has distinct values and beliefs (as noted by Frois 2013). These distinctions carry further implications when considering contexts with high rates of violent crime, areas where the formal and informal economies overlap, or situations where the "rule of law" is ambiguous, ambivalent, or even non-existent (Yonucu 2018; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2003).

Qualitative methods, especially ethnography, have been embraced by various disciplines beyond Anthropology to explore the lived experiences, discourses, and practices that shape the social fabric, extending beyond formal categories and theoretical or conceptual models. Numerous studies highlight the significance of qualitative approaches in examining security and justice, from both multidisciplinary angles and through the unique insights offered by ethnographic methods. For example, the volume *Ethnography and Law* (Darian-Smith 2007) compiles texts from leading scholars in legal anthropology, underscoring the critical need for legal ethnographers to focus on the sensory aspects of legal

meaning and the "ethnographic emergences" that reveal how legal practices are experienced by ordinary people in different cultural settings. This approach reflects the evolving methodologies, strategies, and concepts required to navigate the complexities of law, justice, customs, norms, and values in a globalized 21st-century world.

In the context of studies related to imprisonment, the *Palgrave Handbook of Prison Ethnography* (Drake, Earle and Sloan 2015), for example, brings together more than 20 authors from various disciplines to emphasize the importance of on-site study in understanding the subjectivities within contexts dominated by intense security measures. In prison environments, security and justice are continually negotiated and contested, both in the interactions among various stakeholders in the present and in evaluating past events while considering future outcomes. In such settings, only through observation, sustained contact with others, and presence during key moments in the daily lives of inmates, prison officers, and correctional staff can one uncover the unique characteristics of the state apparatus at multiple levels: from welfare systems to judicial processes to social inequalities and power imbalances.

As Hanson points out, disciplines like Sociology and International Relations must "step back to consider how security practices and logics span across institutions (the military, but also prisons, schools, families, and communities) and social worlds – and the unintended consequences these practices and logics may have" (2018: 136; see also McCluskey and Charalambous 2022). By doing so, scholars can better grasp the inherent complexity involved in studying security.

The existing literature has also discussed the importance of ethnography in settings that require special attention to the vulnerability of not just the interlocutors, but also the researchers themselves (Frois 2021; Parnell and Kane 2003; Sausdal and Vigh 2019). Ethnography, as a method, is a crucial tool for observing and understanding everyday interactions, contexts, and actors, particularly those on the margins and often marginalized from hegemonic norms, both in terms of practices and discourses. However, social scientists are also subject to emotions, subjectivity, and self-awareness. When faced with inequality, racism, discrimination, abuse of power, police violence, and criminality, researchers often find themselves in situations where the pressure to take a side can be overwhelming (Beek *et al*. 2023; Fassin 2015). The line between empathy and detachment can be thin and permeable, requiring us to balance the closeness and empathy typically associated with fieldwork with the need to distance ourselves emotionally when confronted with scenarios, descriptions, or narratives that conflict with our own ethical and moral beliefs.

Social scientists who conduct research in such settings are also often questioned about the challenging nature of their work. Questions like "How did you manage to gain access?", "Weren't you afraid?", and "Have you ever

encountered any problems?" are commonly asked. These are valid questions that underscore the need for a broader discussion on methodological issues, aiming to deconstruct stereotypes while offering guidance for those interested in conducting similar studies. With this in mind, we asked the authors to reflect on their ethnographic experiences and analyze the challenges – and, conversely, the unexpected positive outcomes – that enabled their research (Drake, Earle, and Sloan 2015; Greenhouse, Mertz, and Warren 2002; Nordstrom 2007).

NAVIGATING COMPLEXITY: ETHNOGRAPHIC ENGAGEMENTS WITH SECURITY AND JUSTICE

As contemporary societies confront ever-evolving security challenges alongside a rise in penal populism, the need for contextually grounded, culturally sensitive research has never been more pressing. The articles comprising this special issue have been carefully selected to offer a diversity of regional, national, and international contexts, allowing for the observation of inherent logics specific to certain settings and actors. They also illustrate how qualitative studies can deconstruct penal populist narratives – whether doing so deliberately or inadvertently – while simultaneously highlighting what is unique and particular about them. These are complex contexts in ethnographic research, as they involve sensitive layers of social, cultural, political, and ethical challenges that complicate the processes of observation, participation, and interpretation. A common complexity lies not only in the difficulty of accessing these contexts; they are also shaped by dynamics of power, control, violence, and vulnerability, which profoundly affect both the participants and the researchers who study them. The methodological strategies vary, as do the associated risks and chances of success (or failure). However, all authors share an awareness of the practical and epistemological challenges they have encountered. In this special issue, we aimed to further explore these reflections and analyses across various contexts of practice and the lived experience of security and justice. We assume that the very nature of ethnographic work and the underlying principles of qualitative research demand that the ethnographer is present, establishes contacts, and develops a close understanding of others – that proximity is essential. In our view, this represents one of the most significant challenges of contemporary society: ensuring that the "other" is not perceived as a stranger and that the "talk of crime", as described by Teresa Caldeira (2001), does not continue to fuel extremist political discourse.

The articles in this volume also explore issues related to conducting ethnographic fieldwork in risky environments, among vulnerable populations, or with actors who wield significant power asymmetries at both state and non-state levels, such as prison officers, police agents, border control officers and private security guards. This work demands particularly sensitive handling –

both in terms of navigating the spaces where ethnographers operate and in building the trust-based relationships required within those spaces. Experienced anthropologists understand that all field sites are inherently sensitive and unique, requiring ethnographers to exercise caution to avoid disrupting the social, symbolic, psychological, and emotional equilibrium within any given context. Nonetheless, the authors in this collection offer unusual examples of the complex practice of ethnography in contexts that might initially seem inaccessible. These challenges arise both in terms of gaining "access to the field" and addressing ethical concerns related to confidentiality and privacy. This notion of "impossibility" is especially relevant given that the topics covered in this dossier include justice, security, crime, and incarceration – areas closely tied to concrete spheres of power, often shrouded in secrecy and confidentiality (de Goede, Bosma, and Pallister-Wilkins 2019). This secrecy sometimes involves activities that straddle the line between the legal and the illegal.

The article by Susana Durão and Paola Argentin, "Privatizing urban security: control, hospitality and suspicion in the Brazilian shopping", explores the nuanced workings of private security through the lens of long-term ethnographic research conducted in gated residential condominiums and shopping malls in São Paulo, Brazil. Focusing in particular on the concept of "hospitality security" – a form of security practice that merges elements of care and control – the authors analyze the daily interactions between private security guards and the individuals they monitor. Based on immersive fieldwork in a São Paulo shopping mall, the article examines how inequalities and discriminatory practices are subtly reproduced through what the authors term pre-cases: preliminary and informal assessments made by guards based on intuition, social cues, and racialized perceptions of threat. These forms of suspicion – intuitive, generalized, and specifically targeting child beggars – highlight how structural racism and socio-economic inequality are enacted not through spectacular or violent interventions, but through mundane, everyday gestures of private security operations. The article reveals how security guards, often overlooked in discussions of policing, occupy a dual role: they are both agents and recipients of the power structures they help maintain. By foregrounding these micro-practices of classification, surveillance, and relational management, Durão and Argentin make a compelling case for the value of ethnography in uncovering the quiet, routine forms of control that shape urban life for Brazil's middle classes and marginalized populations alike.

Police abuse and racism are significant problems in contemporary societies. Portugal is no exception as Pedro Varela presents and discusses in the article " 'Abuso policial, todos os dias o enfrentamos': notas etnográficas sobre violência policial racista", around an analysis of his ethnographic experience in the Lisbon racialized territories urban periphery. By embedding within marginalized neighborhoods and engaging with residents, the author reflects on

how historical legacies of state neglect, social and economic inequality, and police discrimination contribute to cycles of violence and mistrust. Shedding light on complex dynamics between local communities and law enforcement agents, rap music emerges as a means to fight discrimination and institutional violence.

Catarina Frois' article, "Marginality, security, surveillance, crime, imprisonment: reflections on an intellectual and methodological trajectory", draws on over 20 years of ethnographic fieldwork across a wide range of Portuguese institutional and social contexts – including addiction recovery groups, urban peripheries, and various prison settings. Frois offers a reflexive analysis of the evolving relationship between anthropological theory, field experience, and methodological practice. The article explores the complex challenges of conducting research in environments characterized by marginality, deviance, surveillance, and incarceration, emphasizing how issues of access, positionality, and researcher subjectivity become central to the production of ethnographic knowledge. Rather than treating moments of disruption, unpredictability, or institutional constraint as methodological obstacles, Frois foregrounds them as epistemologically productive, revealing the contradictions, tensions, and lived realities embedded in systems of security and control. In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing debates in anthropology about the value of long-term, situated, and emotionally reflexive fieldwork in navigating ethically and politically charged research terrains.

This dossier concludes with Lydia Letsch'article. Within the framework of an emergent global security order facing an increasing number of regional and international conflicts, Lydia Letsch offers in her article, "Navigating the labyrinth: qualitative research in the securitized border regions of North Africa", an analysis and discussion on current challenges and dilemmas of conducting fieldwork in highly securitized border areas where researchers face intensive military presence, advanced surveillance and restricted access zones. Based on in-depth qualitative research conducted in the border region shared by Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, her findings highlight the current complexity of border control proposing diverse strategies to overcome the obstacles these contexts present to research.

Taken together, the articles in this dossier aim to shed light on how knowledge is produced in complex and often challenging environments, while highlighting the unique value of ethnographic approaches in exploring security and justice systems, contributing to a renewed reflection on traditional questions raised in qualitative studies. Particularly, the importance of ethnographic epistemological, critical and analytical configuration led researchers to investigate control structures and power relations between individuals, social groups and private and State organizations, in order to propose practical reflections on how to study the problems identified throughout the research.

Such studies are especially crucial in an era of rising penal populism – not only because they help deconstruct half-truths and misinformation spread by penal populist narratives, but also because they expose the often-overlooked or deliberately concealed dimensions of justice and security systems.

In terms of the existing literature within Portuguese academia, our aim was to advance the state of the art of ethnographic practice by deconstructing taboos, breaking down real or imagined divisions and limits, adding texture, and giving voice to subjects and interlocutors often absent from academic, political, and social discussions. It also aims to grant authors and subjects autonomy and agency. Thus, whether discussing North Africa or Brazil's policing and security systems, or the daily experience of racism and discrimination in a Lisbon borough, we invite readers to retrace our research paths, to share doubts, discoveries, concerns, and sometimes innovative strategies for conducting good social science and producing solid ethnographies.

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