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Title

Association for Political and Legal Anthropology

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/47q919k3>

Journal

Anthropology News, 47(1)

ISSN

1541-6151

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Publication Date

2006

DOI

10.1525/an.2006.47.1.50.1

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The "P" in APLA

By Susan Coutin (UC Irvine)

The editors' invitation to write a column exploring the "P" in "APLA" arrived at a moment of many



Susan Coutin

intersections. I was in the midst of completing a book chapter about the changing discourse regarding violence in El Salvador. During the 1980s, extreme measures against alleged dissidents were justified by citing the threat that such individuals posed to the nation. During the 1990s and 2000s, security measures (mobilizing troops, declaring gangs "illicit associations") against alleged delinquents have been justified by citing the threat that such individuals pose to public safety. Opponents of such measures, who were previously able to mobilize widespread support for denunciations of human rights violations, have found the wind knocked out of their sails. Crime fighting appears to be merely a legitimate state function, and gang members, who are sullied by their association with criminality, make less sympathetic victims than do dissidents and refugees.

Similar trends have occurred elsewhere. In the US, fear of terrorist violence contributed to both the ratification of the US Patriot Act, which gives authorities greater surveillance powers, and to the broader war against terrorism. US soldiers posted in Iraq sometimes report difficulty distinguishing "victims" from the "enemy." One US soldier, interviewed on NPR, told of her dismay at discovering that, in an effort to discourage an erratically driven and therefore suspicious car, she was pointing her gun at a child. News reports describe the killing of suspected insurgents without detailing how it was determined that the dead were, in fact, insurgents. In Iraq, any sense of public security seems to have been destroyed. In the midst of the news coverage of Hurricane Katrina, there was a story about 841 people who were trampled to death on a bridge in Baghdad. As these pilgrims were crossing the bridge, rumors (false, as it turned out) of a suicide bomber in the crowd ignited a stampede.

And of course, there were the stories about Hurricane Katrina itself, stories of snipers, looters and armed gangs. Amid reports that the security situation was preventing aid from being delivered, some 200 New Orleans police officers turned in their badges and the Louisiana governor warned that arriving National Guard troops "know how to shoot and kill, and they are more than willing to do so." Did fear—of the poor, of criminality, of the residents of particular neighborhoods—magnify assessments of the security problem? Why is the declaration of martial law considered an appropriate and even reassuring response to inundation? What happens when the categories of "victims" and "delinquents" overlap in the popular imagination?

It seems that a shift is and is not occurring. Fear of crime is used to justify increased security measures, a very familiar process. At the same time, as these measures target terrorism, crime and illegality, rather than, say, political opponents, "security" is delinked from "human rights." What do these developments suggest regarding law? Regarding rights? Regarding politics? Is the discursive terrain on which we are standing shifting? Or perhaps not?

Increasing numbers of anthropologists, including John Comaroff, Jean Comaroff, Michael Taussig, Teresa Caldeira, Susan Philips, Daniel Goldstein, Elana Zilberg, Julia Paley, Richard Wilson and others are analyzing such understandings of violence, crime and human rights. Law and politics—if indeed they were ever separated—are increasingly fused in security measures that, while deriving from legal regimes and steeped in politics, appear in some senses to be illegal and apolitical. At the same time, citizens are taking law into their own hands, security is becoming privatized and security forces (whether legal or extralegal) in some instances contribute to broader insecurity. As these trends pose anthropological problems of great magnitude, the "P" in "APLA" is both more diffuse and more vital than ever.

Please send ideas for future columns to the contributing editors: Michelle Bigenho at mbigenho@hampshire.edu and Daniel Goldstein at dgoldstein@anthropology.rutgers.edu.

Association for Political and Legal Anthropology

MICHELLE BIGENHO AND DANIEL GOLDSTEIN,
CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

At the AAA Meeting APLA was pleased to recognize Jessica Greenberg (U Chicago) as the winner of this year's student paper prize. Her essay, "Noć Reklamoždera: Democracy, Consumption and the Crisis of Representation in Post-Socialist Serbia," will be featured in *POLAR, The Political and Legal Anthropology Review*. The editors of this column would once again like to encourage readers to consider submitting manuscripts to this section's journal.

This month our association's treasurer takes up the on-going theme of "the political."