

Sebastian Huhn:

Kriminalität in Costa Rica. Zur diskursiven Konstruktion eines gesellschaftlichen und politischen Problems

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◆ ‘Criminality’ currently counts among the most discussed topics on Latin America. Especially in Costa Rica, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico crime, violence, and (in)security constitute extensively debated phenomena. They are object of constant contentions in the social sciences, in the media, in political speeches as well as in everyday conversations of families, neighbours and friends. However, in the case of Costa Rica one can depict a peculiarity: Even though within large segments of the society the fear of crime is higher than in other Latin American countries, the Central American “Switzerland” in fact shows a much smaller official quota of criminality than many other states of the region.

In his book “Kriminalität in Costa Rica” the historian and political scientist Sebastian Huhn, currently a post-doctoral researcher at the Institute for Research on Conflict and Violence at the University of Bielefeld, takes this peculiarity as a starting point for his research on the importance of criminality in the Costa Rican society. The book is based on Huhn’s PhD thesis for which he undertook field work in Costa Rica in 2006 and 2010. The author claims that fear of crime is not necessarily a causally determined effect of criminality itself. Criminality and its

problematization according to Huhn rather constitute, two social problems that need to be analytically separated. However, while criminality is a much analysed topic, e.g. as a threat to democracy, the discourses of criminality are widely ignored in social sciences.

Thus, in contrast to the present mainstream of security studies, Sebastian Huhn does not ask how politicians, the police or the civil society try to manage with supposed increasing violence and criminality. He is rather interested in a historically contextualized analysis of the predominant discourses of criminality as a social and political problem. Another aim is to explore the social functions of fear of crime, and how and why prevalent perceptions of criminality have changed over time.

The author therefore takes a historical perspective and develops a moderately constructivist approach to criminality: He defines predominant discourses of criminality as a contingent “socially valid knowledge” that is connected to other topics such as the state of democracy and co-produces a ruling imaginary of social reality. Important theoretic references are Chris Hale’s (1996) as well as Stephen Farrall’s et.al (2007) publications on fear of crime and the so called *risk-fear*

paradox. These works point out that not only criminality but also fear of crime causes nameable social and political impacts. These impacts affect communality, convert the public space into *no-go-areas*, and advance popular calls for more punishment. And indeed many of these negative consequences such as the popular demands for the strong hand of the state (*mano dura*), the ‘armament’ of residential middle-class buildings or the avoidance of public places can be observed in present Costa Rica.

Huhn claims that these impacts of the fear of crime need to be contextualized within the economic and social liberalisation policies such as privatisations of public supply companies and foreign trade policies focused on free trade. Similar to the U.S. and Europe, these policies have been launched in Costa Rica since the 1980s but, in the Costa Rican case, did not lead to larger transformations until the first decade of the 21s century (303).

This assumption is conceptualised by drawing on David Garland’s body of literature on the post-Fordist transformations of discourses of criminality during the governments of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the U.S. According to Garland (2008) after the election victories of Thatcher and Reagan the welfare state model of “economic control and social freedom” was replaced by a neo-liberal state model of “economic freedom and social control”. Within this context social rehabilitation was replaced by retribution and imprisonment, and welfare was replaced by crime prevention. From now on, as Garland notes, the predominant discourses present criminality as a problem of discipline, the absence of self control and social control, and of degenerated individuals.

Based on Foucault’s concept of neo-liberal governmentality Garland speaks of the politization of criminality. The term highlights the fact that policing criminality – and fear of crime – is not necessarily a reaction to criminality itself but a systematic form of governance on its own (60).

In order to analyze the changing discourses of/on criminality in Costa Rica, the only Central American welfare state, from the 1950s to the present, Sebastian Huhn applies Garland’s approach to a wide selection of material: daily newspaper articles, documents of governments and political leaders, historical texts about the Costa Rican nation, crime statistics as well as students’ essays about fear of crime. This allows for a solid reconstruction of how Costa Rican politicians have dealt in different ways with the continuous perception of a “criminality problem” within the population over the past 60 years. The author states in this regard: “Since the 1950s the popular call for drastic state measures against criminals has been predominating. Up to the 1980s Costa Rican governments have resisted this demand by stressing that criminality was a problem of social inequalities that needed to be resolved first. Then, from the 1990s on, politicians started to promise and implement the publicly demanded strong hand of the state [...] and thus to contribute to the stigmatization of criminals as the outside standing ‘others’” (299). Huhn also points to the heavy notions of xenophobia and classism present in the Costa Rican versions of fear of crime since non-European foreigners, especially citizens from the impoverished neighbor country of Nicaragua, have always been perceived as a threat to the ‘peaceful nation’.

Huhn concludes by stating that the changes in the predominant discourses of criminality in Costa Rica over the past 20 years comply with the features of Garland's idea of the politization of criminality and the transformation of the field of criminality control in the late modern age, that is, above all, the replacement of the rehabilitation principle by the punishment principle. This is clearly shown for instance in the program of the current Costa Rican president, Laura Chinchilla, who was elected in 2010. In contrast to the presidents' inaugural speeches between the 1950s and 1980s, Chinchilla's manifesto emphasizes reinforced punitive measures "in the name of the victims" (Garland 2008). According to Huhn, the politization of criminality in Costa Rica has the same functions for the social order as in the U.S. and the UK: "It legitimizes the cutback of welfare state institutions [...] by saying that these policies – as the symptom of criminality showed – had rather created than resolved social problems" (304). The author then finally advises against the possible transformation of Costa Rica to a "securitized democracy" (Pearce 2010).

Huhn's book constitutes an important contribution to Latin American Studies focusing on security, violence and crime. However, following up this case study on Costa Rica both to draw on other constructivist approaches to security studies like the so called Copenhagen School as well as to reflect on the 'postcolonial' differences between politics of securitization in metropolitan and peripheral countries could be fruitful for further research. This does not narrow the merit of the book to question the familiar claim that Latin American democracies are threatened by increasing

criminality. The case of Costa Rica rather makes clear that the relation between democracy and criminality is much more complex. The author himself sees it as follows: "It is less criminality that constitutes a threat to justice as a democratic principle. It is rather more a specific discourse on criminality that legitimises the perpetuation of social inequalities that the Latin American elites pretended to overcome" (307). ♦

Bibliography:

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