On the Occasion of the 70th Anniversary of the Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law Ljubljana

1   Criminology in Trying Times

In an era characterised by an accelerating pace of life and increasingly blurred boundaries between work and leisure, when scientists are expected to generate ever-larger volumes of knowledge as though they were "machines", and where machines themselves have become integral to the process of knowledge creation; where scientific summaries are no longer composed by librarians and research assistants but by sophisticated language models, and where traditional typists have long been replaced by computer-generated transcription, I have chosen not to begin with the history of the Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law Ljubljana (hereinafter Institute). Instead, I wish to start by reflecting on three pressing issues that define our present moment and context.

1.1 Multipolar World

Our situation in Europe and Slovenia today is defined, first and foremost, by the end of a unipolar world. The post-Cold War dominance of the United States, which upheld the global liberal order, has come to an end. We are now transitioning into a multipolar world, where no stable equilibrium has yet been established. This unsettled multipolarity is reflected in the growing number of conflicts, spanning Myanmar, Sudan, Iraq, and Afghanistan to, more recently, the very doorstep of Europe – in Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as Israel and Palestine, with tensions also escalating in the Western Balkans.

In our neighbouring Balkan region, we are witnessing a resurgence of nationalist dynamics reminiscent of the period of Yugoslavia's dissolution, a precarious situation in Kosovo, and constitutional changes in Republika Srpska that remain "in the drawer", poised to redraw borders in a still profoundly traumatised Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the context of this multipolar world, the Balkans has once again become a focal point of geopolitical interests, attracting the attention of the European Union, the United States, Russia, China, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. The Balkans, much like it did on the brink of the First World War, mirrors the global situation.

This geopolitical shift towards multipolarity has undeniably brought an end to the previous sense of security. This change is also evident in the structural conditions influencing crime and the responses to it, which lie at the heart of criminological inquiry. The global liberal order, established after the Second

World War and expanded across the Global North following the fall of the Berlin Wall, created a balance and interdependencies that encouraged cooperation among competitors and strengthened "connecting nations" on the periphery of great powers – nations such as Taiwan, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Mexico, which have attracted investments that benefit, for instance, both Chinese and American economies. While globalisation is increasingly giving way to deglobalisation, this transition is not inherently problematic. Indeed, the inclusion of a greater diversity of voices in shaping the planet's future is to be welcomed, provided these voices propose sustainable alternatives to established global supply chains and solutions that avoid simplistic populism. Yet today, relations between the United States, Europe, and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) are fraught and complex.

Criticism of globalisation and the many challenges of the global liberal order is, unfortunately, being most effectively capitalised on by populists from the political right. Right-wing populism is accompanied by attacks on civil society organisations, including scientific institutions, the judiciary, and the independent media. The inward turn towards nationalism and away from globalisation is regrettably bolstered by the creation of the "Other", e.g., migrants, those with different sexual orientations etc., which needs to be excluded from the supposedly "clean" monolithic "nation".

The turn towards populism in the West is accompanied by a lack of respect for or outright instrumentalisation of the law, disregard for international agreements, such as the Paris Climate Agreement, the UN Human Rights Council, and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the attacks on the judiciary (with glaring systemic examples in Poland, Hungary, and Slovenia – here the justice system is systematically labelled as "the injustice system"), assaults on media freedom, and a resurgence of patriarchal values (exemplified by the revival of the "*Kinder, Küche, Kirche*" slogan and the "tradwife" portrayals picked up by social media algorithms).

Populist criticism of the global liberal order and its associated platform-based capitalism offers no genuine alternative. Instead, it deepens hostility, polarises society, and lacks a fundamental respect for human dignity as the basis for peaceful coexistence. Populists, full of rage – which sells best on social media – represent a significant threat to global peace. Criticising the liberal legal order is an easy task and populists skillfully exploit the fact that financialised elites have impoverished a large portion of the population – a situation hig-

hlighted annually in reports from organisations like Oxfam (Thériault, 2023). However, offering something new that allows diverse nations and communities to coexist peacefully is far more challenging. The fight against independent media, vocal civil society members, and the judiciary paves the way for a descent into illiberal democracy, general chaos, and, in the worst case, war.

1.2 Digitalisation, Big Data and Artificial Intelligence

Secondly, our present context is profoundly shaped by digitalisation. This encompasses three key dimensions: firstly, the datafication of a vast array of activities, involving the storage and analysis of immense quantities of information – so-called "big data"; secondly, the algorithmisation of processes, i.e. the use of artificial intelligence and automation, which generate actionable insights from large datasets to enable more informed decision-making; and thirdly, the global connectivity of devices and accessibility of digital services, which amplifies the "soft power" of dominant societies and disseminates their cultural production to all corners of the globe.

Over the past decade, we have become increasingly aware of the detrimental effects of digitalisation. At an individual level, it has introduced new forms of social injustice, such as the digital divide, digital addiction, online harassment, and cybercrime. At the state level, we are witnessing intense competition for dominance in artificial intelligence, contributing to geopolitical tensions – most notably between the United States and China over Taiwan, which is home to leading producers of critical artificial intelligence (AI) components such as semiconductors and graphic processing units. This competition is also evident in the digital realm, where cyberspace has become a new battleground. Here, attacks on critical information infrastructure and the deliberate dissemination of fake news further distort already fragile democratic political processes.

Emerging AI tools are fundamentally reshaping mechanisms of social control, centralising power within the framework of "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff, 2019) and introducing unprecedented risks. For the first time in history, human-created tools have the potential to act independently, beyond our control. States and corporations – or their alliances – with access to vast processing power and extensive datasets hold the capacity to manipulate citizens, shape aspirations, and redefine the concept of *res publica*, that is, what is considered important in public discourse, politics, and science.

The dangers of microtargeting individuals based on psychological traits harm democratic processes, as starkly revealed globally over the past decade – most notably in the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Moreover, the tailoring of content threatens to unravel the social fabric, eroding shared cultural references. Cultural artefacts risk becoming hyper-personalised and hardwired to the idiosyncrasies of individual brain neuroplasticity.

The potential for mass manipulation and societal polarisation has now reached previously unimaginable levels. This is further compounded by advances in remote brain-reading technologies, which pose significant new challenges to "neuro privacy". These developments open up uncharted territory for human rights infringements, highlighting the urgent need to address the profound implications for individual autonomy and societal cohesion.

The question of "who truly governs in the present day" has transitioned from a purely theoretical inquiry to a pressing practical concern. AI-driven platforms now recommend content designed to exploit human emotions and vulnerabilities, provide strategic advice to politicians on where and how to act to maximise voter support, and even influence decisions regarding initiating or ceasing wars.

The long-term impact of digitalisation and algorithmisation on younger generations remains uncertain. However, existing evidence already highlights significant harm, of which the platforms themselves are fully aware. For instance, whistleblower Frances Haugen revealed that Facebook was cognisant of Instagram's detrimental effects on teenage girls' self-esteem. Despite this, states equipped to regulate major technology platforms often face challenges in enforcing binding rules. While the Chinese government imposes restrictions on access to what it considers "online garbage", children in the West frequently spend excessive time in front of screens, forsaking a creative, self-determined, and fulfilling future.

The algorithmic shaping of news consumption has contributed to significant societal polarisation, with the potential for these divisions to spill over from the digital realm into the physical world. This is driven by platforms that prioritise outrage and user retention over the safety and well-being of their users. The capacity for manipulation has reached a level of "surgical precision." For instance, researchers highlight the use of "dark patterns" in technology – intentional designs that exploit our desires, fears, and tendencies, effectively leveraging the mental schemas conditioned by our evolutionary history, as demonstrated by Nobel laureates in behavioural economics. With the advent of advanced AI tools, decoding humans as biological entities inevitably paves the way for human manipulation. As Harari (2018) succinctly puts it, we are increasingly becoming "hackable animals".

1.3 Planet's sustainability

Thirdly, our current position is ultimately shaped by the planet's capacity to sustain an equilibrium that supports the existence of humans as biological beings. While there is no need to fear for the Earth itself – nature will quickly recover in humanity's absence – the primary concern is safeguarding a natural environment that remains hospitable for future generations. Climate change and environmental degradation pose profound existential threats to our societies, giving rise to individual anxieties, interstate tensions, and even militarization. Water conflicts, for example, are emerging as emblematic struggles of our increasingly dystopian present, as evidenced by tensions between India and Pakistan or Ethiopia and Sudan/Egypt.

Human suffering is further compounded by the plight of environmental migrants, with Europe experiencing mounting migratory pressures even as the continent warms at an above-average rate. The European Green Deal's vision of a just transition towards climate neutrality by 2050 offers a hopeful prospect. However, the implications for economic transformation and everyday life remain uncertain.

For criminology, these developments necessitate the application of accumulated knowledge on capitalism's anomalies, social harm, and structural violence. Discussions surrounding global warming and the green transition have already been ideologically co-opted, as the pursuit of climate neutrality inevitably creates new "winners" and "losers". This shift raises numerous criminological concerns, including concealment, state capture, and fraudulent practices such as greenwashing.

2 The Institute in the Trying Times

At the Institute, we are proud to employ over 30 dedicated researchers and administrative staff. Our scientific contributions have been recognised with some of the most prestigious accolades in Europe, including the "Best Book Award" from the British Society of Criminology in 2023 (Arnež, 2023) and the "Best Article Award" from the European Society of Criminology in 2021 (Završnik, 2021). We regularly publish in the world's leading journals, ranked in the top quartiles of SSCI indexes (e.g., Badalič, 2021), and with esteemed international publishers such as Princeton University Press, Springer, Routledge, and Palgrave Macmillan. Two of our distinguished researchers, Academician Professor Alenka Šelih and Academician Professor Renata Salecl, are full members of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts and recipients of the prestigious national "Zois Award" for scientific excellence.

Our Institute undertakes numerous high-profile studies for prominent clients, including the Council of Europe and the European Commission (e.g., Mihelj Plesničar et al., 2023). We also collaborate with leading European research institutions and excel in competing for the most prestigious research funding opportunities, such as the European Research Council grants. We coordinate projects within European programmes dedicated to scientific excellence, positioning ourselves competitively within the European research space and beyond. Our researchers maintain strong international collaborations, publishing scientific work globally and actively contributing to shaping both Slovenian, European and other countries' research agendas.

We hold ourselves to the highest standards in selecting our researchers, a process undertaken with the utmost care and deliberation. Many of our researchers hold master's and doctoral degrees from both national universities and renowned universities abroad, reflecting the excellence we strive for.

As is customary during anniversaries, it is fitting for those directly involved to reflect on their work and achievements. As Pečar (1974), the longest-serving director of the Institute, once self-reflectively remarked, this is often a challenging and thankless task that may fail to capture the true value of what we aim to express and remain deeply committed to. Nevertheless, we hope this brief overview conveys the breadth of our contributions and our steadfast dedication to advancing knowledge and research, and critical thinking.

Congratulations to all colleagues on the occasion of our 70th anniversary!

We extend our deepest gratitude to all external collaborators and end users of our research in ministries, the judiciary and law enforcement agencies for their invaluable support throughout our journey.

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