The Policing of Protest in Late Neoliberalism: Contextualizing Situational Explanations
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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Soziopolis
Gesellschaft beobachten

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Contextualizing Situational Explanations

The "Mapping #NoG20" project report on the dynamics of the escalation of violence in Hamburg during the G20 summit makes a very important contribution to the academic and political debate on the policing of transnational protests. It does so by zooming in on the situational dynamics of the events, with particular attention to some of the most crucial moments during which violence emerged, perpetrated both by protestors and the police. It emphasizes, in particular, the way escalation evolved as a "self-fulfilling prophecy": violence was expected by the police, who acted in anticipation of it, eventually fueling some of its main dynamics. By and large, the report presents, in fact, an interpretation of violence as unplanned and, to a large extent, unwanted—at least in the form and scale in which it took place—by both parts.

There are certainly elements of miscalculation, misunderstanding, and over-reaction that contribute to the powerful escalatory dynamics of interaction between police and protestors in tense and complex situations during the policing of summits and counter-summits. Certainly, both the protestors and the police entered situations that they eventually could not control, and in which the sequences of choices made in the heat of the moment closed the possibility for negotiations, de-escalation, or withdrawal. After all, it is to be expected that, when a preventive show of force fails to prevent, it ends up contributing to escalation and disorder rather than maintaining order.

Yet, the analysis of the dynamics of situational interactions and the unintended escalation of specific encounters needs to be complemented with—and embedded in—a longer-term analysis of protest policing, in which similar "mistakes" were continuously repeated, and by taking into account actions and considerations that are highly strategic. Or to put it differently: conditions that facilitate escalation are also shaped by deliberate strategies of protest policing and the way they have evolved during the past decades. The policing of the NoG20 protests in Hamburg is, after all, just one episode in a long trajectory of transnational counter-summits that in several cases ended in violence. Therefore, to fully understand the patterns of escalation in Hamburg, they need to be analyzed in the context of a long series of counter-summits, which became most visible—even if they did not start there—in Seattle in 1999 and saw several instances of violent escalation with the anti-G8

protests in Genoa in 2001 one of the most dramatic moments.

The escalation of violence during the anti-G20 protests in Hamburg in 2017 was in so many respects similar to instances of violence during the policing of other counter-summits that it is hard to believe that a violent escalation was not foreseen as a potential scenario and as a possible outcome of a particular strategy of policing. One cannot but assume that this strategy was ultimately preferred over alternative police strategies that would have implied tolerating limited rule-breaking or civil disobedience. While policing in Hamburg was certainly more "civilized" (no demonstrator died, torture was not perpetrated by the police), an incomplete list of the similarities in the police tactics that triggered escalation in Genoa and Hamburg includes:

- The establishment of "special zones" around the sites of summits, where a kind of state of emergency is put into effect, with specific restrictions on civil rights such as freedom of movement and expression;

- The (unequal) militarization of spaces, with tight control by heavily armed police in some parts and temporary retreat from others;

- The use of heavy equipment including non- (or less) lethal arms, such as water cannons and tear gas, combined with a continuous show of force;

- The very limited role given to negotiation, especially in relation to some of the protest milieus, which are considered a priori to be dangerous and not worthy of participation in a dialogue;

- The spread of alarmistic rumors about the potential for violence, particularly from "bad protestors" from outside of the country (German and Greek anarchists in Genoa, Italian ones in Hamburg);

- The use of intimidation with preventive intervention even vis-à-vis legal expressions of dissent in addition to the creative use of police power to disrupt the logistic of protest events, including legal ones (for example by banning protest camps or the use public spaces for eating and sleeping);

- Difficulties in coordinating a broad array of actors involved in the provision of security to heads of states and maintaining public order (from police to secret services of

various states).

The topography as well as the local political history of some sites can fuel escalation even more. How can this repetition of similar conditions and patterns of escalation, counter-summit after counter-summit, be explained?

One explanation lies in the very characteristics of international summits and transnational counter-summits, as the normal tasks of the police to ensure public order while allowing for some disruption through non-conventional protest can conflict with the need to ensure the safety of foreign dignitaries and protect them from material but also symbolic challenges. As the summits per se are a show of force by the "powerful on earth", muscled policing is considered necessary in order to confirm that narrative. Politically, the symbolic display of strength and determination seems to increase as the legitimacy of the summit itself is contested (as in the case of the informal G8 or G20, including the presence of heads of state with little to no democratic credentials) and expectations about its potential outputs are declining. A strategy of preventive show of force has therefore become path-dependent and is reproduced with only marginal adaptations, summit after summit and counter-summit after counter-summit.

These very characteristics of the policing of transnational summits have indeed opened a debate among protestors about whether it is opportune to continue with the strategy of organizing counter-summits, which implies adapting to choices (of time and space) made by the protestors' political adversaries. While we can expect that counter-summits will continue as a form of protesting against international summits, it is more than coincidental that they have already become less central in the repertoires of left-wing protest.

Beyond the specific challenges of policing counter-summits in particular and transnational protests more generally, escalation is also triggered by a broader trend in the evolution of relations between state and society in late neoliberalism. In fact, beyond counter-summits, the Great Regression that accompanied the Great Recession brought about a general decline in the protection of civil rights, including the right to dissent. While social and political conflicts, resulting from, inter alia, growing inequalities and the decline of social protection, have increased and taken on unexpected and variable forms, the response of nation-states as well as supra-national institutions is oriented towards reducing citizens' participation and further polarizing said conflicts. In fact, criminalization is a strategy increasingly used against not only "radicals" but also moderate civil society organizations. In a time in which even expressions of solidarity with refugees or other marginalized social groups are

declared illegal, the policing of protests tends to follow principles of a "criminal law of the enemy". The strategy of demarcating and fortifying space reflects the relevance of a conception of prevention as isolating danger—and "the dangerous ones"—by curtailing civil rights (the rights of assembly, expression, movement, privacy) of those citizens that are considered potential enemies. A situation defined as an emergency is confronted by deploying strategies of control and maintaining public order that have been developed to counter petty crime or hooliganism or to control migration. Intelligence-led policing of protest is facilitated by the expansion of preventive powers of the police (for example in controlling football stadiums) and includes the widespread use of wire-tapping and video cameras (originally intended to counter organized crime and terrorism). In several countries, anti-terrorism or anti-crime policies more generally have introduced new associational crimes (membership in or moral support of subversive or terrorist associations), or crimes against the state and heads of state, with the effect of directing repression against entire categories of people rather than against perpetrators of specific crimes.

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Dieser Beitrag wurde redaktionell betreut von Stefan Malthaner, Paula Bradish.
Artikel auf soziopolis.de:
https://www.soziopolis.de/the-policing-of-protest-in-late-neoliberalism.html