

IN DEPTH

# Ethics of care for greater security and justice

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**Few topics come up more regularly in both public and private conversation** than security. In a changing, increasingly diverse society, in which little is certain, feelings of insecurity and fear emerge organically and frequently among citizens. To an extent, this is a predictable reaction to a state of permanent change. But contexts rife with uncertainty also provide fertile ground for new risks.

## **(In)security in the age of immediacy and complexity**

The problems we collectively face open the door for certain violent extremist tendencies to break out and spread. Such actors, from a range of ideological strands, legitimise the use of violence against their declared enemies and base their discourse on a Manichean vision of reality. In today's European societies the far right poses the greatest risk, but other violent extremist movements, either already existing or yet to emerge, will also look to take advantage of the social situation. It is, thus, perfectly possible that perceptions of insecurity can be taken advantage of and even fomented by those with extremist worldviews who pinpoint those to blame for people's fears and, declaring them enemies, make them legitimate targets for violence. Already a concerning situation, this is only likely to worsen as fear and the need for justice increase.

Social networks play a particularly important role in this perception of instability. They spread and amplify narratives that contribute to toxic polarisation, curtail the lifespan

of facts and generate greater uncertainty, while laying the foundations for the age of immediacy. In this new communications landscape, the mainstream media also often enter the spiral of message simplification and superficial analysis, both of which contribute to the social inertia of seeking quick and easy solutions to complex multidimensional situations.

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We live in one of the safest periods of human history, and yet the perception of insecurity is growing. Today, our fear, anxiety and uncertainty come from many sources, and if we lack the resources to bear them, they can greatly alter our everyday perceptions and undermine our well-being far beyond any actually existing risks. After all, however we conceive of it, security conditions freedom.

### **Public insecurity management**

We worry more about insecurity in terms of crime and antisocial behaviour, than about security in general terms.<sup>[1]</sup> That is why we tend to see security – at both public and private level – as citizen management of crime, and focus less on personal lives, emotional networks, job insecurity, the food crisis, illness and war, and so on.

A number of potential strategies exist for managing insecurity and developing policies from a comprehensive perspective. Unfortunately, the prevailing tendency is to respond to public fears by making serious threats that have the paradoxical effect of provoking fear while promoting a culture of punishment.

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The measures in this model seek to strengthen strictly punitive and retributive courses of action - “the Penal Code and punishment will save us from all evils, our own and those of others”. This is traditional security politics based on a binary friend/enemy system. It does not humanise or consider multi-causal complexity or relationships and therefore establishes a highly ineffective basis for improving people’s quality of life. On the contrary, it accentuates inequalities and segregation, as well as increasing polarisation in ever more areas of domination. It constructs an artificial reality of black and white and good and bad, and sketches out a world that appears simple, even as it simultaneously complicates everyday life and coexistence.

This punitivist model of “you do the crime, you do the time” shows institutions and systems becoming provocateurs and perpetrators of violence that tend to feed back into each other. It also means abdicating collective responsibility and the possibility of preventing and managing violence by identifying and addressing its diverse causes, particularly the social. It is a model that promotes individualism over a care and mutual aid-based approach, a paradigm that denies shared construction and refuses to look at those who should be at the very centre - the victims. These observations lead us to propose alternatives to the merely retributive (or revenge) model, to opt for models whose main and real objective is to offer opportunities for constructive socialisation.

The mere application of punitivist forms of “exemplary” punishment as means of deterrence reflects the impotence of leaders in the face of the situations described. It reveals decision-makers who are unable to take a comprehensive approach to complex social phenomena and who - voluntarily or involuntarily - end up legitimising perceptions of fear and insecurity. Public authorities that bend to the voices calling for more and harsher penalties, who will not tolerate any level of risk in their lives, abdicate

responsibility for wide-ranging and positive social construction. Provoking and following punitive demands drains all depth from the analysis of the problems and is an implicit acceptance of a degree of infantilisation of citizens, promoting false beliefs about societies that are completely protected from all dangers.

**“Designing public policy based on anxiety and victimisation is not recommendable and nor should it be acceptable. The evidence tells us that it neither increases the perception of security nor improves objective indices”**

This overreaction by public authorities is a form of management that renounces the long-term approach and accepts being a merely reactive actor, conditioned by the basest emotions of certain groups. Designing public policy based on anxiety and victimisation is not recommendable and nor should it be acceptable. The evidence tells us that it neither increases the perception of security nor improves objective indices. On the contrary, it threatens peaceful coexistence and social cohesion.

The alternative, which is inclusive and looks beyond the short term, requires radically different strategies. Responsibility, courage, education and shared construction are all necessary when courses of action are unpopular. Letting oneself be carried away by feelings and desires for revenge when faced with security and justice challenges can strengthen models that contribute to curtailing and shrinking rights and freedoms. Our diverse, changing and accelerated society requires complex and comprehensive approaches that include all social actors, not only the police. All magical or simple solutions are either mis-steps or traps.

### **The need for policy co-production based on the culture of peace**

Public policies must aim to strengthen and improve support networks, interrelation and recognition among neighbours, and the work towards equal rights and

opportunities. To achieve this, a multi-agency policy should be promoted, in which political and social action go hand in hand. A commitment must be made to collective protection based on the culture of care, as opposed to the culture of punishment that feeds the politics of “social control” and moral judgment.

Working towards a comprehensive and collaborative model in our streets, towns and cities means giving a special role to co-production and coordination in matters such as environmental design, leisure projects and repairing physical damage. It is essential that citizen participation takes place in various direct and indirect ways, and that it promotes valid tools such as exploratory walks,<sup>[2]</sup> involvement in public spaces and qualitative research. This means working with the most vulnerable people, because of the challenges that remain, such as increasing the democratisation of voices, redefining power relations and correcting citizen representativeness biases, both when determining indicators in surveys and when spreading real and systematic collaborative tools across neighbourhoods.

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A larger and more consistent social cohesion model would extend the paradigm of cooperation based on difference, and reduce the individualism and competition to which various influential actors often subject us. Societies with increased networks and stronger internal cohesion tend to have lower levels of the factors that trigger insecurities, on the one hand, and, on the other, they tend to be more resilient to adversity and less prone to subjective perceptions of insecurity.

In moving towards this scenario, there is a real opportunity to start from the local level, because of the key role it plays in providing security and justice by, for example, using

coexistence and civic behaviour ordinances as tools of transformation, and not as subsidiary extensions of the criminal code, as has long been the case.

The starting point for this commitment should to take a feminist perspective, which has for decades pointed out the links between the local and the global and between the personal – the everyday – and the political. Feminist approaches argue that issues related to intimacy “are of great political significance in that their form and nature are determined by relations of power that play out in a variety of different contexts – from the household to the global political economy”.<sup>[3]</sup> In the same way, feminist foreign policy theory developed from international relations has also a lot to say about internal and local security.

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Conducting responsible public policy means working with the aim of strengthening communities and networks in order to build safe, caring societies with the capacity to deter a great deal of insecurity and damage. It is not a matter of handing too much responsibility to citizens, but rather of committing to a culture of engagement, and to a society that has the resources to transform conflicts into opportunities, that promotes genuine rootedness and the construction of shared egalitarian identities. By way of example, neighbourhood improvement policies that have coordinated redistribution and community action have been shown to have positive impacts on security levels.<sup>[4]</sup>

It must be borne in mind, however, that losing sight of the ethics of care and the culture of peace while promoting citizen involvement could increase vigilantism,<sup>[5]</sup> neighbourhood patrols, and groups like the *sometents*.<sup>[6]</sup> This type of behaviour is often based on principles of discrimination and revenge, or confuses coexistence conflicts

with issues of violence, and ends up becoming a tool for maintaining moral order.

### **A new approach to security and justice**

There is a need for public security and justice policies that take a holistic view, paying attention to causes and not limiting ourselves to reacting to visible consequences. Without worrying about the short term, we need to take a long view.

In the same vein, (in)security cannot be conceived of as what happens when a victim is produced. Addressing security involves managing personal and social issues at the same time, both of which often have systemic and institutional roots. Following the same logic, much of what comprises security and the subjective perception of it relates to what we as a society do with people who have committed crimes, how we prevent recidivism and how we promote resocialisation, beyond custodial sentences. In other words, much of the perception of security rests on what we do in the field of justice with those who have breached the criminal code.

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As noted above, we live in an eminently retributive setting, perpetuated despite the knowledge that a greater threat of punishment does not guarantee fewer crimes. We also know that reintegration into society based on a deprivation of liberty whose exclusive focus is punishment is enormously difficult. The urgent need to manage violent incidents must not come at the expense of the long view politics requires. It must be borne in mind that a single-minded focus on temporarily neutralising possible dangers (imprisonment for a limited term) ends up restricting the chances of both genuine reparations for the victim, and the true, progressive reintegration of the perpetrator into society.

For all these reasons, there is a need to rethink the currently dominant security and justice paradigm and to transition from the politics of hate to the politics of love, in both public and private senses.

First, the culture of peace must become a point of identification and should be spread. This culture facilitates an alternative approach to handling conflicts and commits to restorative justice. No existing empirical study or experience shows that the world will be made safer only with more punitiveness, more retribution, more iron fist policies and more prisons. It is absolutely essential that we move away from this model and towards a restorative one, in order to progress towards a more cohesive, humanist society in which the values of care permeate everything: from prevention to management and intervention.

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Second, in our society security should not be a competence that falls to the police alone. Security in its fullest extent is the joint responsibility of all fields that affect people. Particular emphasis should be placed on preventive activity that works to ensure the circumstances exist to promote healthy personal development that is linked with the society around them. To this end, investments are required in social policy and strengthening other institutional and community actors who work on a daily basis with the people most affected by violence.

Third, victims must be at the centre of the system. This means identifying the most effective ways to listen to them and redress the harms they have suffered. Does punishing the perpetrator have a restorative effect on the victims? The evidence shows that it does not. When criminal activity takes place, action should prioritise restorative justice in which the victim takes centre stage and the emphasis of the action shifts towards reparation, rather than retribution. This framework of action focuses on



personal needs, and at the same time promotes and provides opportunities for empathetic development that increases the likelihood of people who have committed crimes being reintegrated. Processes of mediation, facilitation and community action are needed for the widespread implementation of this approach.

Taking these three pillars of individual and collective security as a starting point, it is necessary to focus on insecurity prevention and conflict “provention”<sup>[7]</sup>, on root causes, while considering human rights and global justice. This approach is founded on ethics, but criteria of responsibility for all citizens are also needed in the search for an effective means of collectively building more secure and just societies.

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[1] ICIP 2022 survey “Coexistence and cohesion in Catalonia”, published on March 2023.

[2] Exploratory walks are a dynamic, participative feminist methodology. The aim is to detect features of an urban setting that affect perceptions of safety or insecurity, along with other more general parameters, in order to analyse urban quality, and how the design and management of public space can improve our daily lives. The concept of exploratory walks was developed in Canada in 1989 by Toronto’s Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC). <https://equalsaree.org/>

[3] Conway, M. “National security and care work: two sides of the same coin” a *Peace in Progress* “Redirecting Security from Feminism”, ICIP, 30, January 2021.

[4] Harada, M., & Smith, D. M. (2021). *Política distributiva i delinqüència*. Available at: SSRN 3392733.

[5] When citizens confer on themselves the authority to judge or determine whether certain behaviour is appropriate or not and act accordingly, instead of notifying the security forces.

[6] The *sometents* are farmers who organise themselves to monitor and prevent theft from their fields. The name comes from a historic paramilitary civil self-protection organisation that defended the land in wartime.

[7] Providing people and groups with the necessary skills to face a conflict. Differs from conflict prevention in that its goal is not to avoid conflict but to learn how to deal with it.

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## About the author

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## Photography

An unrecognizable crowd in the street. Author: Aleksandr Ozerov (Shutterstock).