CRIMINOLOGICAL ENCOUNTERS

Vol 7(1) 2025
ISSN 2506-7583
DOI 10.26395/CE.2025.1.22

In Memoriam: Vincenzo Ruggiero (1950-2024)

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Keywords: Ruggiero, critical criminology, criminology of war, political violence, democracy

A Radical and Visionary Scholar

Vincenzo Ruggiero stood out as one of the most original voices in Italian critical criminology and was undeniably a remarkable thinker within wider criminological field. He referred to himself as an "anti-criminologist," rejecting the conventional aims of the field, which he saw as inevitably tied to state and corporate definitions of crime. In contrast to the narrow scope of traditional administrative criminology, Ruggiero championed a broader vision rooted in social justice.

During Italy's politically turbulent "Years of Lead," Ruggiero critically examined the role of prisons through an abolitionist lens. Driven by his political activism, he began by creating and supporting alternative narratives—most notably founding the publishing house "Senza Galere" ("Without Jails"), which released poetry and literature written by inmates or recently released individuals, revealing the harsh realities of incarceration. This initiative can be viewed as an early form of convict criminology—not so much an academic perspective, but rather a counter-narrative aimed at reaching and influencing a broader audience. Following this period, Vincenzo relocated to the UK, where he joined Middlesex University, a leading centre for critical criminology, and immersed himself in the vibrant, multicultural life of London.

Vincenzo's extensive body of work spans a wide range of topics, including prison abolition, drug policy, organized crime, human trafficking, corruption, corporate crime, crimes of the powerful, political violence, terrorism, and war. While it's difficult to single out his most remarkable contribution, he is perhaps best known for his groundbreaking analyses of the relationship between criminality and the economy. In these works, he compellingly challenges the notion of a clear divide between legal and illegal activities, arguing that the system itself promotes and sustains certain practices and blurred boundaries. Notable books such as *Economie Sporche* (1996), *Dei Delitti dei Deboli e dei Potenti* (1999), *I Crimini dell'Economia* (2013), along with the English editions *Crime and the Markets* (2000) and *Crime and Literature* (2004), and his award-winning *Dirty Money: On Financial Delinquency* (2017) — which earned him the Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Society of Criminology — showcase his influential scholarship. His writing reflects a vast and diverse intellectual background, drawing on classical Greek and modern literature, political theory, history, economics, and multiple languages.

Vincenzo's legacy extends beyond his rich and original body of work to encompass his deep passion for social justice and vibrant intellectual exchange—often accompanied by a shared love of good food and wine. Perhaps because of this warmth, he was a regular presence at the Annual Conferences of the European Group of the Society of Deviance and Social Control, where many of us had the privilege to raise a glass with him while benefiting from his profound insights. His radical perspective consistently uncovered the hidden political and economic structures underlying both criminality and its definitions. Committed to challenging common assumptions, he explored issues through their historical origins and ongoing processes. In his later years, his writing took a strong stance against war and militarization. It is this final dimension of his vast scholarship that we will focus on here, in line with the theme of this special issue.

On Political Conflict: Of Democracy and Terrorism

Ruggiero's focus on political criminality and crimes of the powerful naturally led him to examine war and conflict. He served as editor for Ruth Jamieson's influential 1998 work on "war in criminology" (see her interview in this special issue) and soon began developing his own critical analysis in response to the "war on terror" following 9/11. Early in his writings on this subject, Vincenzo identified how cosmopolitanism and liberal values became intertwined with militarism and imperialism, facilitating predatory exploitation by corporate and industrial interests in distant regions (see 2007; 2016).

While not wholly rejecting the term "terrorism," Ruggiero recognized its inherently political character and posited that terrorism may originate both "from below" and "from above." He conceptualized terrorism as a manifestation of democratic failure and inequitable resource distribution within political systems. Regarding the events of 9/11, Ruggiero contended that they were the result of political dynamics in distant regions, wherein certain groups endeavoured to challenge the prevailing social order under Western liberal hegemony, coupled with a fundamental communicative impasse among the involved actors (2003). He argued that the de-escalation of such conflicts necessitates deliberative processes. Subsequently, Ruggiero (2017) further highlighted the reciprocal shaping of actors engaged in political

conflict and armed struggle, noting that terrorism and counter-terrorism practices mutually reinforce and escalate one another. He articulated that power operates by "cloning" the enemy—constructing it in rigid, fixed terms—which both solidifies the adversary's identity and legitimizes the application of military force in response.

Demonstrating notable prescience, Ruggiero analyzed the contemporary crisis of democracy as fundamentally linked to the growing intolerance of dissent and the increasing secrecy surrounding democratic decision-making processes. He termed this phenomenon "democracy offshore," describing a process whereby political institutions become progressively less accountable to their citizens while simultaneously responding to social mobilization and contentious politics with militarized tactics. This shift effectively transforms policing into a form of internal warfare against perceived domestic enemies, rendering the public sphere into a contested battleground—a dynamic that remains critically relevant today. Ruggiero argued that the criminalization of dissent exacerbates societal distance, which in turn escalates both the violence inherent in contentious politics and the corresponding state responses (2017, p. 11). In sum, the closure of communicative channels and the repression of social movements serve to intensify the violence surrounding political contestation. One might thus wonder how Ruggiero would interpret the current widespread criminalization of some social movements and forms of solidarity.

Criminology Against War: Criminalizing War

As a committed pacifist, Ruggiero unequivocally condemns war as inherently criminogenic (2005). Drawing on the civilizing process—which has successfully outlawed certain forms of private violence such as sexual and domestic abuse—he argues that the use of war to resolve conflicts must likewise be prohibited. Achieving this requires a critical challenge to the prevailing culture of heroism surrounding war, as well as a re-examination of the widely held belief that war can produce transformative effects on power, identity, solidarity, and social integration. In contrast, Ruggiero contends that war exacerbates the most destructive elements of human conflict, functioning as a malignant force within communities, facilitating corporate war crimes. Consequently, it is imperative to recognize the profound harms caused by war and to label it as a crime—specifically, a crime of the powerful.

Ruggiero's view of the crimes of the powerful is set against an articulated theoretical background, which allows to develop a complex view of power relations, as well as to shed a light upon the mechanisms of the production of deviance. His interpretation of the crimes of the powerful unwinds though a long path, that starts from *Delitti dei deboli e dei potenti* (2003) and reaches its peak in *Perchè I potenti delinquono* (2016), with a stopover in *Crimini dell'economia* (2013). Vincenzo Ruggiero rejects all those simplistic, mechanistic views that draws inspiration on dogmatic Marxism. Power, in Ruggiero's view, does not only relate to material wealth. Symbolic and relational aspects must be taken into account. On the other hand, it is not possible to rule out the material dimension and focus solely on relations and symbols.

The powerful can fuel public opinion with a production of imaginary that proposes inspirational models moulded on tycoons and politicians, and make the less powerful identify with them. That is the reason why people keep voting for Trump and Berlusconi, and will turn a blind eye on their crime. Moreover, the relational network of the powerful, will work in two directions: under the symbolic aspect, friendly media either will diminish the seriousness of such crimes as environmental harm, genocide, weapon trafficking, exploitation of workers, while focusing on street crimes. On the other hand, a tightly woven network of relation will manage to pass lenient penal laws on the crimes of the powerful, or even to decriminalise them. It becomes by this token understandable how the production of deviance follows a pattern shaped by class inequalities. A tri-dimensional inequality: material, symbolic, relational.

In his last article on war, Vincenzo reiterated the urgent need to shift from merely situating war within criminological analysis to actively developing a criminology against war. Central to this endeavour is a critical interrogation of traditional justifications for war—namely, just war theory and its principles of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. Ruggiero highlights the problem that states often claim their use of force aligns with these legal frameworks, portraying their actions as defensive or protective (2016). However, they frequently extend the permissible limits on civilian casualties through concepts such as "collateral damage" and "human shields," or constructing their own enemies, or enabling the plunder of resources by corporations and security mercenaries. To counteract war, he advocates for a peace-making criminology that emphasizes robust engagement with civil society and its leaders on all sides of conflict (2023).

Further elaborating on this idea Vincenzo promotes a 'bottom-up perspective able to forge networks and relations processes of legitimation that can replace state promoted or international interventions" (2023, p. 10). While these principles are commendable, Ruggiero does not seem to acknowledge the practical challenges involved: civil society often is deeply committed to the war effort. In this sense, Vincenzo observes that trauma deeply imprints wounds and ideologies upon individuals, making the dissolution of war and its enduring consequences profoundly difficult without substantial healing efforts. The visionary scholar mostly characterizes war as predominantly orchestrated by powerful states pursuing economic interests and focusing on the production of chaos through technological tools that support and sustain private interests and plundering. In his analysis, economic imperatives and power dynamics drive war, and while populations possess the capacity to perceive and resist these state-led agendas, current realities show that, even as corporate interests aggressively pursue militaristic objectives, civil society is not always willing or able to engage in peaceful alternatives.

Vincenzo Ruggiero was among the visionaries who dared to imagine a society where equality prevails over privilege and economic growth, and where abolitionism and peace-making criminology stand as central objectives of contemporary critical criminology. Ruggiero paved the way for an original, multifaceted critical approach to crime and criminology. We hope many others will follow this way.

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How to cite this article (APA– 7th ed.):
Degenhardt, T. & Scalia, V. (2025). In Memoriam: Vincenzo Ruggiero (1950-2024). *Criminological Encounters.* 7(1). 224-228. https://doi.org/10.26395/CE.2025.1.22

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