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The Criminalizing Power of Ideological Rhetoric: Empirical Considerations on the 'Formal' and the 'Informal'

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the complex relationship between crime and the criminalization of people and actions that are not criminal but that are stigmatized and represented as such because they are not or cannot be made to be functional to the rhetoric and interests of the dominant élite. Arguing that a contemporary and diachronic analysis of the Southern Italian situation offers insights that reach beyond the local level, I draw on long-term anthropological research to examine the complex relationship between morality, norm and action focusing on the way in which the dominant élite respond to expectations, demands and entrepreneurialism of ordinary citizens and on the way in which they address the problem of reconciling their ideology of what is or is not moral and legitimate with the values and lifestyles of ordinary people. Then I examine key connections between an inadequate understanding of 'illegitimate' behaviour, the impact of networked political, economic and criminal groups on local economic life, and the effects of a selective morality in the drafting and application of policy and the law.