



Philipp Müller, *Auf der Suche nach dem Täter : die öffentliche Dramatisierung von Verbrechen im Berlin des Kaiserreichs*

Frankfurt am Main, Campus, 2005, 423 pp., ISBN 978 3 593 3 7867 1

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/1453>
DOI: 10.4000/chs.1453
ISSN: 1663-4837

Publisher

Librairie Droz

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2013
Number of pages: 152-155
ISBN: 978-2-600-01776-3
ISSN: 1422-0857

Electronic reference

Anja Johansen, « Philipp Müller, *Auf der Suche nach dem Täter : die öffentliche Dramatisierung von Verbrechen im Berlin des Kaiserreichs* », *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* [Online], Vol. 17, n°2 | 2013, Online since 10 December 2013, connection on 22 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/1453> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chs.1453>

This text was automatically generated on 22 September 2020.

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- 1 The present monograph is the published version of Müller's PhD thesis from the European University Institute. The scope of the study is intellectually ambitious. In his introduction Müller describes his approach as a "historical-anthropological inquiry placed in the cross-road between several histories : of the police and the press, of the city of Berlin and its public sphere ; as well as the history of mass-culture" (p. 26).
- 2 Müller's study is part of a growing literature on the relationship between police and public in its cultural context in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when police forces around Europe, mainly big city police, sought to engage with the public to increase popular acceptance and cooperation (See Funk and Jessen for imperial Germany ; Emsley and Taylor for England and Berlière for France). Because this study focuses primarily on the public engagement of the Criminal Investigation Department (Kriminalpolizei), Müller identifies relationship characterised by much greater positive engagement, compared to studies focusing on the ordinary street policing in charge of enforcement of petty ordinances and occasional riot policing (Lindenberger, Johansen). Müller thus provides a very welcome readjustment to the impression of police-public

relations in Berlin being primarily confrontational. Müller's study also follows a wave of interest in cultural representations of crime and criminals in the popular press in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in the German context through the studies by Peter Becker, Peter Fritzsche and Benjamin Hett. The study by Dominique Kalifa, *L'encre et le sang* (1995) which looks at Paris of the *belle époque* and covers much of the same ground as this study, is not considered by Müller – probably because Kalifa's work is only available in French. The studies by Sage Elder on the Weimar era and the edited works by Judith Rowbotham and Kim Stevenson on Britain were published too late for being considered by this study.

- 3 The study touches upon many themes: media constructions and popular representations of the criminal; the relationship between police, press and the public; the involvement of the public in crime investigation and apprehension; and the “crime theatre” of the urban public space. The text is well written; an enjoyable read with engaging narratives on individual cases of police and public “searching for the culprit”. Although the research is concerned with Berlin of the imperial era, there is a distinct feel of Fritz Lang's classic “M – Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder” in the narrative, Müller acknowledges himself (p. 28). Müller's interests lie in the complex and multi-layered interactions between police, press and the public; in the police-public relations as mediated through the press; and in the shaping of the criminal's persona, both by the police and the press, but also by the criminals themselves.
- 4 Part One sets out the broader framework of the press, the police (ie. the criminal investigation department) and the public. Chapter 1 ‘Die Zeitung, die Polizei und die Vielen’ focuses on the changing landscape of the Berlin press, and analysing the liberalising impact of the new Press Law of 1874. As Müller repeatedly stresses, the police needed the help and cooperation from the press and the public in the crime investigation process, as ordinary people constituted the eyes and the ears of the city. Yet it was an exchange the police could not control. They could issue descriptions of wanted criminals, but could not rely on accurate press.
- 5 In Chapter 2 ‘Polizei und Presse: Die pressepolitik der Kriminalpolizei.’ Müller describes the difficult relationship between police, press and the public which was characterised by mutual dependency as well as suspicion: the Kriminalpolizei had good reasons for not trusting the press to faithfully report the information provided by the police, as their primary interest was to increase sales with the hunt for criminals being a means to that end. Müller analyses how police information was turned into sensationalist ‘News’ and kept boiling for days or weeks on end, and how the image of the criminal and the victim as ‘types’ was shaped both by the police, by the press and by the popular imagination. Müller concludes that from the 1890s the police increasingly entered in a dialog with the public, but in the eyes of the police this was not a conversation of equals and the police remained the ultimate arbiter in defining reality (pp. 148-149).
- 6 In Chapter 3, Müller switches the focus to the public: how ordinary people interpreted the information released by the Kriminalpolizei. Müller provides many, often very amusing, examples of how people reported their observations to the police, often in exaggerated and distorted accounts. By denouncing strangers and neighbours alike, individuals sought to settle private scores or hoped to provide the essential clue that led to the arrest of the criminal and thereby gain publicity, were it even for a brief moment, and perhaps some reward. On their side, the police distrusted the information

they got from the population – or at least certain sections of the population – and preferred to rely on forensic evidence rather than witness statements. The identification and occasional chase of a suspect on the run became a public spectacle in which the population took a very active role, and the chase as well as trial was treated in the press as public entertainment.

- 7 Part Two of the book groups together the Chapters 4 to 8, and focuses on two highly publicised cases to illustrate the cultural construction of ‘the criminal’ : Müller analyses the details of press reporting and public reactions to the murder of a waiter by Rudolph Hennig in December 1905 (at page 180 the date is erroneously rendered as “December 1906”, but this is clearly a blip, as all other dates related to the case are correct). The second case under scrutiny is the almost proverbial case from October 1906 of the military imposter, Wilhelm Voigt, better known as the Captain from Köpenick. This part provides a wealth of interesting and engaging details about the two cases, on how they were presented to the public and how the characters of the two criminals were altered and reinterpreted in the course of the investigation. Yet Müller also demonstrates that Hennig and Voigt were not only passive objects, but both actively employed a pre-existing cultural repertoire to shape their public persona.
- 8 The broad intellectual scope of the research is both its strength and its weakness. The attempt to bring together several types of history without prioritising any of them as the main focus leads to a certain fuzziness, with the analysis going in many different directions without clarifying the underlying argument. Another problem is the structure of the book. This is particularly problematic for the Second Part, with five chapters of very varying length : the longest, Chapter 6, covers ninety pages which is followed by Chapter 7 comprising only two pages. As it is often not clear why the material is presented in this particular order, one cannot help wondering whether there was not a better way of presenting the material.
- 9 Moreover certain sections of the analysis get lost in intricate details. Do we really need to know that much about the changes in pricing of individual newspapers (pp. 65-67), particularly since all these details are available in the appendices ? Or is it necessary to render every little – apparently trivial – fact relating to the cases Hennig and Voigt ? If that amount of detail is indeed justified, then the author needs to make a stronger case for their inclusion and link them more explicitly to an overarching argument. Unfortunately, it is not entirely clear what Müller wants to conclude on the basis of these two case studies. I would have liked some clarification on whether the case studies illustrate the essence of the repertoire both for creating a media villain and for criminals to construct their own (anti)hero status. The Captain from Köpenick is an extremely entertaining story in its own right, but it is also a highly unusual case, and while its protagonist Wilhelm Voigt skilfully played on contradictory cultural perceptions of himself as a villain and a victim of the criminal justice system, it seems to show more about what was possible at the margins of Wilhelmine media culture than what was norm.
- 10 This leads me to the other problem with the study : the lack of wider contextualisation. Müller’s focus is firmly on Berlin. Yet as reader I need some explicit contextualisation : How does the repertoire for criminals to shape their public persona in Wilhelmine Berlin fit into similar phenomena in the 18th and early 19th centuries with criminals’ autobiographies and dying speeches at the scaffold ? I am not suggesting a whole new research project, but some thoughts about what was ‘modern’ about the media

construction and self-construction of the criminal persona in Wilhelmine Berlin would be useful. It would also be relevant to know whether Berlin should be seen as typical or untypical for imperial Germany, and how developments in Berlin reflect general trends elsewhere in Europe and North America towards increasing press commercialisation of crime and increasing involvement of the public in crime investigation. Except for one passing note referring to inspiration from parallel developments in the American press (p. 57) there is very little attempt to draw any connections to the world outside Berlin.

- 11 Overall Philipp Müller's study is an engaging read which provides a detailed picture of the complex interactions between the criminal investigation department of the Berlin police, press reporting of crime and the Berlin public. The book constitutes a very important complement to the study by Kalifa on Paris of the same era and of Sage Elder's more recent study on Berlin of the Weimar era.

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