



Elder (Sace), Murder Scenes. Normality, Deviance, and Criminal Violence in Weimar Berlin

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- 1 In her book *Murder Scenes*, Sace Elder assigns herself the task of investigating how murder was experienced by Berliners during the Weimar period, and how it was understood in the city as an urban phenomenon. Elder is interested in how the inhabitants of Berlin made sense of homicidal violence. Certainly, the killing of a fellow citizen is the most serious breach of the rules of a community : not only are such rules broken, but they are also undermined, and threatening the community as a whole. Homicidal violence thus provides the perfect probe with which to investigate the social life of city dwellers, along with their experience of violence. What is more, the understanding of murder in the Weimar years was permeated by the political and economic disturbances experienced by contemporary German society. As a result, murder was also conceived of as a trope. Given the scope of this task, Sace Elder examines a wide range of very different materials : newspaper articles, minutes and reports from the police, scholarly contributions authored by criminalists and legal experts, and various literary and cinematic productions. From this vast and diverse material, Elder is able to present a very rich analysis, using a masterfully crafted narrative to examine the different voices and perspectives surfacing in, and contributing to, the moulding of the “narratives of crime” in the Weimar years.

- 2 In the first chapter, Elder painstakingly traces the notion of murder and the changing understanding of homicidal violence both in medical and legal discourses, and in public debates relating to highly-publicised crime cases. Suffice it to say, homicide figured prominently in public discourse during the Weimar Republic. For contemporaries, homicide (with all its reasons and circumstances) was closely associated with the disorder experienced during “the Great War”, and the social and political turmoil that followed. Indeed, compared with the pre-war period, the number of homicides went up during the post-war years. However, as Elder points out, the German public did not learn of this phenomenon from statistical surveys. Rather, it was “the overrepresentation of murder on the pages”(p. 22) of German dailies that was responsible for the prominence of homicide in public discourse. As the Weimar Republic stabilised, the homicide rate declined. Debates on murder did not abate however, and continued to serve as a trope for observations by contemporaries on the changing state of German society. Murder was increasingly linked to aspects of modernity, and perceived as an indicator of crisis. A pertinent example of this can be found in the depiction of the robber, who was hired on the cheap and ended up killing a fellow citizen. Siegfried Kracauer thus opined, « Life has recently become cheap ! » For contemporaries like Kracauer, it seemed fit that the erosion of the German economy resulted in the erosion of rules and values. A further disturbing factor for contemporary observers was that people who were thought to be « normal » suddenly turned into violent criminals, without any previous police record or apparent motive. Whereas criminologists at the turn of the 19th century sought to draw a clear distinction between the law-abiding citizen and the criminal on the basis of physical evidence, during the interwar period the imperceptibility of ‘deviance’ became a new professional doctrine, enshrined in scientific discourse and advocated by popularizers like Erich Wulffen and Curt Elwenspoek.
- 3 The focus of chapter two is the institution of the Berlin police, and its policy towards the urban public. To put it succinctly, the development of the police and its position in the urban public space could be described as a paradox : on one hand, ‘murder squad’ of the Berlin Criminal Investigation Department underwent thorough modernisation during the Weimar years, with the establishment of the internationally acknowledged and reformed ‘murder inspectorate’ employing new bureaucratic, scientific and technical methods ; on the other hand this apparatus still needed the support by the wider public, asking Berliners to help them searching for clues. The authorities’ dependence notwithstanding, the testimonies by ordinary Germans were generally met with scepticism, by police officers, state attorneys, and judges alike, who generally distrusted the accuracy and authenticity of eyewitness reports. Furthermore, in the eyes of criminalists like Hans Gross, the testimony of eyewitnesses was in principle compromised by class, age, and gender. Given their idleness, peddlers and artists were simply not trustworthy sources to rely upon ; prostitutes tended to give evasive answers ; and, generally, women were prone to exaggerate due to their penchant to emotional excitement. Instead, detectives and officers conducting murder investigations primarily focused their attention on collecting physical evidence at the crime scene. Similarly, police reforms sought to streamline the investigative procedures to be followed by detectives and officers. The establishment in 1926 of the murder inspectorate strengthened the supervisory control of the director, and the new police institute, founded one year later, provided detectives and officials with special training in murder investigation. In addition to this, existing techniques and records

were adapted to increase the efficiency of detective work. As mentioned before however, the police could still not do without the eyes and ears of city dwellers. In asking the wider populace to provide the police with clues, the reformed apparatus remained reliant on sensory observations made by the unwelcomed and untrained, albeit indispensable, observer. Placards, cinema, and especially the press, the essential means of communication in the metropolis, disseminated the appeals and notices from the police headquarters at Alexanderplatz. As the years went by, the police also made increasing use of the most recent communication technology, the radio. City-dwellers proved rather « willing participant(s) in this culture of mutual surveillance » (p. 69). However, the police appeals and their efforts to educate the urban crowds ultimately did not result in generating the desired panoptical scenario, with the police maintaining the upper hand as ultimate arbiter. The broad support from Berliners and « the consumerist nature of the press » (p. 70) in particular often frustrated the concerted efforts to apprehend the wrong-doer (for reports leading to detection see Räckling Case p. 147 ; Grossmann case, p. 89). It is worth adding that this paradoxical situation kept the ‘wheel’ of the public fascination with homicide turning: it was instrumental in generating public debate on murder, and significantly contributed to public prominence of the theme in Weimar Berlin.

- 4 After having set the ground for further analysis, Elder uses each of the following four chapters to present a carefully chosen study of a murder case, paying particular attention to the specific circumstances attached to the case and its representation. The focus of the first examination is the legendary Grossman murder case of 1921, which occurred in the poverty stricken district around the railway station ‘Schlesischer Tor’ to the east of the city. Subsequently, Sace Elder shifts her attention to the boundaries of a middleclass neighbourhood in the Westend, revealing how the investigation into the Zäpernick child murder case of 1929 affected this respectable community. In her third case study, concerning the murder of Jakob Freudenheim in 1932, Elder looks specifically at the interactions between police and the local community. For the last case study, the author explores a case of domestic violence of 1931, probing the gendered roles of wife and husband in the Weimar years. The recurrent *leitmotifs* that permeate Sace Elder’s critical and meticulous inquiry into these four cases are the gendered moral portrayal of perpetrators and their victims ; the constructed and often shifting relationship between the allegedly alien criminal (“stranger”) and the “community” ; the palpable contrast between the depiction of perpetrators in scientific and in public discourse, along with the circumstances of social life and the experience of violence in the metropolis during the interwar period. To keep things short, I will take the liberty to highlight two examples.
- 5 The case-study of the Grossmann sexual murder case illustrates Elder’s attentive examination of the different voices involved in the making of the narrative. Whereas criminalists labelled Grossmann a most dangerous criminal, Elder sets out to reconstruct the milieu and the neighbourhood in which Grossmann lived, along with his position in it. Making a living as a street-peddler in economically deprived area of Friedrichshain, Karl Grossmann was well known among his neighbours and enjoyed some respect in an area that was characterised by high mobility due to the nearby railway station Schlesischer Tor. It was in this area that Karl Grossmann, benefitting from his relatively successful street business, exploited the disadvantaged economic situation of women like Marta B. and Gertrud B., by offering them shelter, food, or money, and then abused them sexually. Most interestingly, in the public opinion

Grossmann's victims were not covered by ordinary notions of citizenship. While the press considered Grossman to be genuinely deviant, in the media coverage his deviance also came to imply his victims. As women like Marta B. and Gertrud B. had acted beyond acceptable gender roles, they were portrayed as sunk to the bottom both morally and socially. Lacking any appropriate safety-net in the form of family or neighbours, they had made themselves vulnerable which exposed them to Grossmann's sexual violence. This murder narrative, predicated on the notion of female vulnerability, contained an inherent cautionary tale. Yet more important is Elder's observations that, although aware of their predicaments, neither of the abused women dared to report Grossmann's actions to the police prior to his apprehension. In view of the contemporary social-moral underpinning of gender roles and the attitude of the police towards prostitution, these women would have effectively accused themselves of illicit and illegal activities.

- 6 In her study on the Freudenheim murder case, Sace Elder provides examples of a "culture of denunciation" (p. 131), revealing a culture of mutual surveillance and incrimination in Weimar Berlin. In her explicit reference to the denunciation research on German National-Socialism, she argues that during the Weimar era, citizens "were already accustomed to the message that they should be operating as they eyes and ears of the police." (p. 155f.). In January 1931, Jakob Freudenheim was found dead in his apartment in Heinrich Roller Strasse 6. In the course of the police investigation, the police began to focus on Walter Klein as a suspect, while the press preferred to portray Jakob Freudenheim in exotic terms, thus implicating the « greedy Jew » in his own murder. Meanwhile, the neighbours of the victim entertained rather different suspicions and willingly produced testimony to the police. One would be mistaken to assume a « neighbourhood of strangers » in the densely populated area of Prenzlauer Berg: as Elder convincingly demonstrates, the mix of industrial, white collar and skilled workers represented a community held together both by social and economic ties. Subsequent to the revealing of Freudenheim's murder, residents of the Heinrich Roller Strasse made accusations with reference to the published results of the police investigation. On the one hand these accusations targeted marginal figures, less well embedded into the local social network; they were either unpopular or had not lived in the vicinity for very long. On the other hand, residents increasingly incriminated each other, revealing tensions and exacerbating the conflicts between them. As a result, the police were confronted with a series of interlinked mutual incriminations. Given the complete dearth of information on the murder, the police willingly investigated these denunciations, but to no avail. Remarkably, residents of Heinrich Roller Strasse continued to inform the police about on-going rumours and hearsay of neighbours over the following years, indicating « a collective memory of the event » (p. 154) and its continuing importance for the neighbourhood, its social ties and community lore. With reference to other crime cases, Elder reflects on why city-dwellers cooperated with the police. For one, the reward provided an attractive incentive; for another, worries, fears or a sense of duty were reasons for locals to act. Furthermore, Sace Elder points out that, for personal motives, wives as well as husbands made false allegations against each other. Similar to observations made by Vandana Joshi in her book *Gender and Power in the Third Reich* (2003), estranged couples avenged themselves by calling upon the authority of the police.
- 7 Despite such otherwise thorough work, it comes as something of a surprise that such a well-researched book ignores Kerstin Brückweh's examination of sexualised violence in

20th century Germany, entitled *Emotion macht Geschichte* (2006). Furthermore, Sace Elder puts valid emphasis on the role of the press and its importance in the dramatisation of police reports, shaping the complexities of the interactions between police and citizens. In this context, it would have been of great interest to learn more about the specific material features of media coverage (e.g. layout, pictures), how it changed during the interwar period and how it specifically contributed to the normalization of violence. This would not only have widened the obvious limitations of a merely textual understanding of “narrative”, but would also furthered our insight into the specific historicity of the communication process between authorities and citizens, which was essential to each individual murder case, as well as the wider history of the media during the Weimar period.

- 8 On some more specific points, the question of change deserved more attention than it receives in this study. The starting point of Elder’s book is the particularity of homicidal violence in the Weimar era, in the light of the political and social circumstances as well as the meaning ascribed to it by contemporary observers. Looking at the accusatory practices in the *longue durée*, and the relationship between the Berlin police and the urban public as established through the traditional media coverage on crime during the Imperial period, it would have been worth reflecting on questions of change and continuity. For example, Elder repeatedly makes the highly interesting observation that, although the police obtained circumstantial evidence, they were not able to prosecute the suspected perpetrator (e.g. Freudenheim Case, p. 143 ; Zäpernick Case, p. 128). This opens questions about the extent to which the institutional reform of the police in the late 1920’s, as well as the police’s preference for physical evidence over eyewitness accounts, was interlinked with institutional and procedural reforms of the German justice system and changes in the practices of judicial court proceedings against criminal offenders during the Weimar era. One also wonders about the extent to which the interplay between the various agents who engaged in the « murder chase » during the Weimar era significantly differed from the judicial and police practices in Berlin during the Imperial period (with the Heinze Case being the most prominent example of a trial based on circumstantial evidence).
- 9 Given the attentive and careful analysis, Sace Elder points to examples where the experience of violence went counter to the legal and medical discourse. For example, when the murderer Bruno Gerd was acquitted on the basis of medical expert opinion, the decision of the court prompted a public outcry (p. 39). Despite the distrust of police in sensory observations, members of the public were rather adamant of having seen and identified the perpetrator, and often their descriptions adhered to rather old fashioned but apparently popular marks of the criminal (e.g. « piercing eyes », p. 121). Unfortunately, these very valuable and interesting observations, indicative of the limited reach of the more powerful voices of criminalists, jurists, detectives and journalists, are not considered further or considered in a broader context.
- 10 This is nevertheless a remarkable and innovative study. In looking into different murder cases, Elder explores not only experiences of homicidal violence by city dwellers, but also the relationships between the sexes and the role of violence between them. Indeed, this important and significant study makes a genuine contribution to the understanding of denunciatory practices in the Weimar Republic. Although Gellately’s pioneering study has led to an abundance of books on denunciations during the Third Reich, studies concerning this form of cooperation between public authorities and

citizenry in other periods of modern German history have received significantly less scholarly attention. Elder's study thus accomplishes and furthers our insight with regard to the Weimar Republic. Finally, Sace Elder does not couch her observations on the ready assumption of « Weimar's failure ». Rather, her study gives a rich and differentiated perspective concerning metropolitan life in a period of time, in which sensationalist murder cases served as medium as well as catalyst for debate in the public arena.

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