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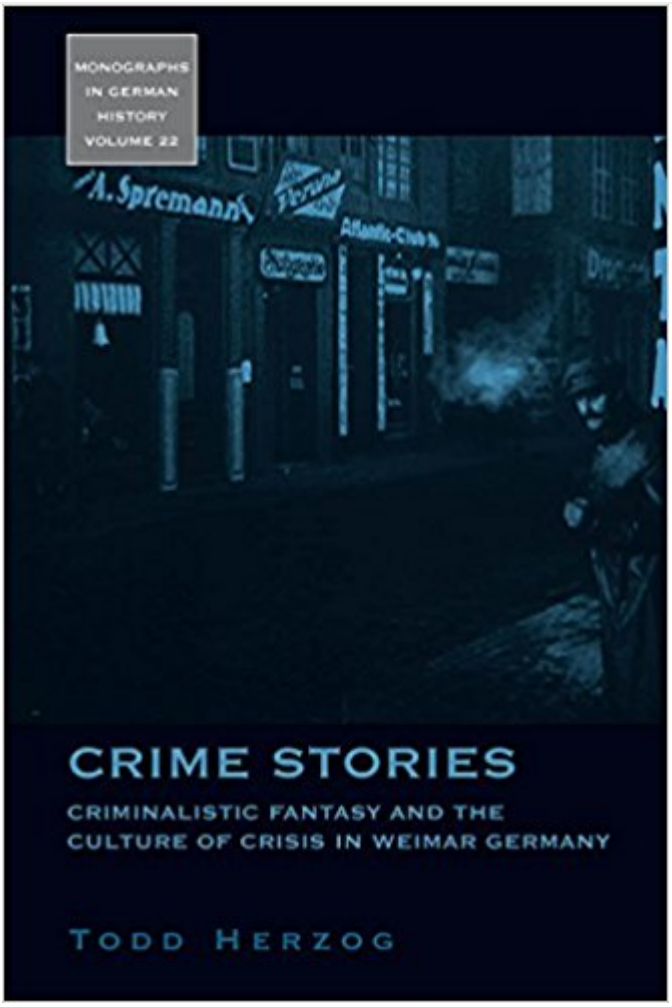
The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia

# Crime Stories: Criminalistic Fantasy and the Culture of Crisis in Weimar Germany



Volume 43 (2010)

## Reviewed Work(s)

Crime Stories: Criminalistic Fantasy and the Culture of Crisis in Weimar Germany. By Todd Herzog (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009). Pp. 182. Cloth, $75.00.

Michel Foucault's pioneering work on the rise of the modern penal system, *Discipline and Punish*, has contributed to growing scholarly interest in the development of criminology as an academic discipline and the social construction of criminals.[1] Todd Herzog's *Crime Stories*, a study of German obsession with crime and criminality during the Weimar Republic, is situated within this line of research. The author argues that "the Weimar Republic understood itself through its criminals" (6) and that Germans' fascination with crime, even when crime rates had dropped to prewar levels, contributed to the sense of permanent crisis that characterized the Weimar era. Many studies of criminals and criminology, following Foucault's insights, focus on the social construction of criminals as separate and easily identifiable types. Herzog, however, contends that the sense of crisis that pervaded the Weimar Republic was actually deepened by the breakdown of faith in the notion that there were "born criminals" who could easily be distinguished from noncriminals. No longer believing that criminals carried physical markers of their criminality, and having lost faith in traditional investigative approaches, Germans descended into a paranoid world where criminals were invisible and therefore imagined to be everywhere.

*Crime Stories* is a cultural studies monograph that addresses issues that will be of interest to historians of modern Germany. The analysis is based on the close reading of works by modernist intellectuals and filmmakers, criminologists, and police officials, as well as more popular sources such as criminal magazines and the press. The term "criminalistic fantasy" refers to the German obsession with crime during the Weimar Republic. According to Herzog, "it is through the lens of criminalistic fantasy that Weimar Germany saw itself, weaving together fantasy and reality, the sensational and the mundane, to narrate its stories about itself (3-4)."

After a brief introduction, the first three substantive chapters highlight the fascination that the criminalistic fantasy held for leading Weimar modernist intellectuals. Walter Benjamin, Bertold Brecht, and Siegfried Kracauer were all fans of crime novels, and they all wrote analytical pieces on detective stories. These authors argued that the detective stories that were common in the United States, England, and France, typified by Sherlock Holmes's work, envisioned the detective as the embodiment of rationality and logic, and these detective stories encouraged readers to see the world in terms of causality and rationality. Benjamin, Brecht, and Kracauer believed that the world of urban modernity was no longer characterized by causality, rationality, and logic, and so they encouraged a turn towards a focus on the illogical and mysterious world of the criminal in crime stories. This emphasis on the criminal and his or her connection to the noncriminal world is exemplified by Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, which focuses on the criminal Macheath.

Herzog continues with an analysis of a short-lived series called "Outsiders of Society," which enlisted prominent German authors to write books on recent sensationalist crimes and criminals. Since early in the eighteenth century writers had used case studies to portray criminals as a clearly separate type of person and to prove their guilt; the "Outsiders" series did just the opposite. The authors were deeply influenced by the modernist loss of faith in the ability of traditional narratives to convey truth, and so they used montage techniques to suggest that traditional investigative practices and trials could only render inconclusive verdicts. The well-known modernist author Alfred Döblin wrote the first book in the "Outsiders" series, and the experimental form of that work deeply influenced his 1929 masterpiece, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Herzog argues that in both texts Döblin broke down the border between criminals and noncriminals, expressed a complete loss of faith in the justice system, and found "a sort of de-individualized, illogical violence to lie at the base of everything (80)."

After considering the criminalistic fantasy from an elite perspective in the first three chapters, the next two chapters are devoted to a discussion of the criminalistic fantasy at a more popular level. In one of the most interesting chapters, Herzog sketches out the development of the field of

criminal anthropology in the late nineteenth century, which, influenced by Cesare Lombroso's seminal work, *The Criminal Man*, held that criminals bore the mark of their criminality on their body. In this school of thought, criminals and noncriminals were perfectly distinct from one another, and criminals could easily be identified by their physical markers. During Weimar, however, a series of criminological and literary works, together with the tabloid press, challenged the notion that character could be read on the body, and instead suggested that criminals could easily blend in to society.

That criminals could have "normal" appearances and comport themselves most unsuspiciously was driven home to Germans when it was discovered that the serial killer Peter Kürten, known as the "Vampire of Düsseldorf," was a normal looking married man with a good job. Kürten was only caught by chance, and this contributed to the growing loss of faith in traditional investigative approaches used by the police and the legal system. In a novel interpretation of a classic film, Herzog contends that Fritz Lang's *M*, which was inspired by the Kürten case, grapples with many elements of the criminalistic fantasy near the end of the Weimar Republic. Franz Beckert, the serial killer in the film, is a perfectly "normal" looking man. The police, despite all of their sophisticated techniques, are completely unable to identify Beckert as the murderer, but a street gang, eschewing traditional investigative approaches, mobilizes the public for self-defense, establishes a dense surveillance network, and finally succeeds in catching Beckert.

In a brief concluding chapter Herzog argues that Nazi criminal policies did not derive from the gradual separation between criminals and noncriminals that criminal anthropologists established over the course of decades. Rather, they derived from the breakdown of the distinction between criminals and noncriminals, which led to the paranoid belief that criminals, now invisible, were lurking everywhere, and that the population had to be mobilized against these criminals in order for society to be safe.

By describing the operation and impact of the criminalistic fantasy during the Weimar Republic, *Crime Stories* provides another lens through which to view the tumultuous fourteen-year lifespan of the Weimar Republic. Herzog's readings of films, and literary, popular, and criminological works are creative, illuminating, and generally

convincing. He is particularly adept at describing the collapse of faith in the idea that criminals could be physically distinguished from noncriminals. His attempt to draw a line of continuity connecting the Weimar criminalistic fantasy and Nazi criminal policies, however, is not entirely convincing, in part because of the work of Richard Wetzell. In his history of German criminology, Wetzell showed that the criminologists who were most beholden to the idea that criminals were a physically different type were the most ardent supporters of harsh and murderous policies towards criminals during the Third Reich.[2] Although Herzog approaches his topic from the field of German Studies, rather than history, he would have been able to better highlight the novelty of his arguments if he had framed his study within the historical literature on criminology and criminality in modern Europe. These minor concerns notwithstanding, *Crime Stories* is an engaging and innovative study that will be of interest to historians of criminality, twentieth-century Germany, and German cultural modernism.

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[1] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison*, 1st American ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977). Other important works on criminality in modern Europe include Robert A. Nye, *Crime, Madness, & Politics in Modern France : The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Richard F. Wetzell, *Inventing the Criminal : A History of German Criminology, 1880-1945*, Studies in Legal History (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Peter Becker and Richard F. Wetzell, *Criminals and Their Scientists : The History of Criminology in International Perspective*, Publications of the German Historical Institute (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and David G. Horn, *The Criminal Body : Lombroso and the Anatomy of Deviance* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

[2] Wetzell, *Inventing the Criminal*.

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