

# H-Net Reviews

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Barry Godfrey, Clive Emsley, Graeme Dunstall, eds. *Comparative Histories of Crime*. Cul-lompton: Willan Publishing, 2003. xiv + 222 pp. \$39.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84392-036-6; \$84.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84392-037-3.

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## The Tension Between Theory and Detail in the Comparative History of Crime

This compilation furnishes a solid introduction to the primary questions, approaches and conundrums of concern to scholars in the burgeoning field of the comparative history of crime. The volume's articles, adapted from a 2002 conference at Keele University, New Zealand, explore the theoretical underpinnings of the discipline, probe tensions between the interests and approaches of criminologists and those of social-cultural historians who study crime and violence, and present recent case-studies to serve as examples of possible research topics and methodologies.

Much of the thoughtful discussion on the challenges of doing comparative history is relevant to historians interested in topics ranging far beyond the study of crime and justice systems. Furthermore, the exploration here of the sometime difficult marriage of historical and criminological approaches can prove enlightening to anyone concerned with the ways in which social sciences like sociology and psychology can inform, and in turn be informed, by historical study. On the other hand, since the contributions focus entirely on post-1500 Western European, British, and American examples with only a brief nod to the former British colonies of Australia and New Zealand, scholars keen for insights into non-Western or premodern crime will have to look elsewhere.

In their thorough introduction, the editors outline the specific concerns of comparative histories of crime, whose scholars work to chart transnational trends and test overarching theories about long-term, international

changes in the type and frequency of crimes. In particular, historians of comparative crime pose one large question: Why did there seem to be a general decline in the frequency of reported violence in Western Europe and the United States from roughly the seventeenth century to the nineteenth? Secondly, they explore the reasons behind the rapid growth and consolidation of Western centralized state-run judicial systems and the rise of prisons during the nineteenth century. In exploring these topics, many scholars take inspiration from Michel Foucault's 1975 *Discipline and Punish*, which linked the growing formal, highly codified systems of discipline in Europe firmly to the rise of the centralized, modern state.[1] Others, like contributor John Carter Wood in his article on violence, explore the theories of Norbert Elias, who proposed that modern European cultures underwent a "civilizing process" in which increased emphasis on individual self-control and responsibility in the public sphere corresponded with a marked decrease in acts of violence, and therefore, crime.[2]

Several conundrums face researchers interested in these topics and theories. First of all, the editors take seriously postmodern attacks on the right and the ability of anyone, especially scholars embedded in a modern Western value system, to study the "other." They explore with delicacy the possibility that cultural relativism makes all comparative histories, and perhaps all attempts at global theories of any sort, impossible. Their practical response is to urge scholars to "structure in familiarity" by comparing areas with a shared socio-cultural heritage or legal

framework, like the various European nations and their colonies (p. 8). Written in this way, the comparative history of crime would become the common story of specifically Western modern systems of violence, crime, discipline, and justice.

Secondly, as contributor Bronwyn Morrison explains with insight, an unresolved tension exists between those works, often by criminologists, which focus on interpreting cross-national crime statistics in macro-analyses based on generalized theories, and studies by social and cultural historians which compare regions in detail without much overarching theory. For Morrison, the first approach can lead to superficial comparisons that ignore crucial specific cultural and historical contexts, while the later can result in the conjecture that differences overwhelm similarities so completely that no larger, trans-national conclusions can be drawn.

Several of the case studies presented in this volume vividly illustrate the tension between theory and detail. Maria Kaspersson's statistical study of the sharp decline in Swedish homicide rates in the seventeenth century demonstrates that Elias's theory alone cannot account for the specific timing of this drop, especially since murder rates did not continue to dip in subsequent centuries. However, Kaspersson herself does not explore the specifically Swedish social, cultural, or political context, and does not offer alternative explanations for the statistical decline. Peter King argues that moral panics over perceived waves of violent street crime in the United States and Britain are primarily sparked by the media's need to create theme stories, and not by real spikes in crime, but never explores the ways in which the power of the press to affect public opinion changed over the period he studies, from 1765 to 1972, and across cultures. John Pratt's study of the particularly brutal race-based lynchings in the post-bellum U.S. South persuades in its argument that such incidents were a type of collective shaming that highlighted southern society's culture of honor and defiance against the hated central state authority. However, he links this finding less clearly to his warnings that a twenty-first century "renaissance of shaming," seen in restorative justice systems, might take an unforeseen but equally de-humanizing form (p. 191).

On the other hand, two articles in this collection, John K. Walton's study of the policing of British and Spanish seaside resort towns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Paul Lawrence's look at the memoirs written by French and English policemen during the same era, furnish details which add to the social and cultural history of the time, but will frustrate

scholars interested in larger frameworks of explanation.

The best essays in this collection walk the thin line between theory and culturally specific detail with care. Susanne Karstedt's work explores the drop in severe violent crime in nineteenth-century Germany and Elias's theory of increased self-control in light of the rapid expansion of the railways. For Karstedt, the expansion of the public sphere, class mixing and brief contacts between strangers sparked by train travel all strengthened "weak social ties" which demanded self-restraint from the individual passenger while increasing the traveling public's reliance on formal police systems to regulate the sorts of minor interpersonal conflicts that might have been solved informally in more insular communities (p. 104). Although Karstedt's thesis relies primarily on statistical data which does not link crimes or attitudes towards personal comportment specifically to the milieu of the train compartment, station, and traveler, her argument nevertheless demonstrates how a particular case study can complicate and inform more general theoretical frameworks.

Even more convincing is Heather Shore's article, "Inventing the Juvenile Delinquent in Nineteenth-Century Europe," which recognizes that while the nineteenth century saw major, Foucauldian-style increases in the formalized, state-controlled reform system for underage criminals and other minors who did not fit bourgeois society's romanticized definition of good children, these systems had important antecedents stretching back to the fifteenth century. Gary Oram's article on changes in British and American military law from the U.S. Civil War to the First World War similarly offers a detailed case study which furnishes insight through comparison. Oram concludes that the American and British emphasis on the autonomy of military discipline, along with the tendency to punish mutiny and desertion with execution, arose from the fact that those systems were set up in response to crises and that both states relied on volunteer armies, unlike most of their continental European counterparts. Shore and Oram thus use trans-national comparison and historical specifics to inform and shape the larger macro-theories that interest them. Their work should provide both encouragement and examples for future study.

#### Notes

[1]. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (London: Allen Lane, 1977).

[2]. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, translated by Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

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