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Review of *Violent Sensations: Sex, Crime, and Utopia in Vienna and Berlin, 1860-1914* by Scott Spector

Abstract

The question “who is the murderer?” remains at the heart of countless media scandals today, just as over a century ago; many rely on graphic images of violence, brutality, and criminal activity. Scott Spector’s long-awaited book eloquently demonstrates that the fascination with such spectacles dates back to the 1860s, with the rise of media scandals about sexual practices (especially between men) and their potential connections to violent criminal acts. Ritual murder accusations that gained momentum in the 1880s made for Central European versions of the Dreyfus Affair, which strained Christian-Jewish relations and put allegedly treacherous Jews on trial. The fin-de-siècle, when killers similar to London’s Jack the Ripper and other marginal or degenerate figures came to signify urban modernity, marks a further turning point in this history. It was also around 1900 when new sensationalist texts about the criminality of the metropolis proliferated. [excerpt]

Keywords

book review, media scandals, Scott Spector, ritual murder, World War I

Disciplines

German Language and Literature

Comments

Review of *Violent Sensations: Sex, Crime, and Utopia in Vienna and Berlin, 1860–1914* by Scott Spector. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Violent Sensations: Sex, Crime, and Utopia in Vienna and Berlin, 1860–1914. By Scott Spector. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. Pp. 296. Paper \$25.00. ISBN 978-0-226-19678-7.

The question “who is the murderer?” remains at the heart of countless media scandals today, just as over a century ago; many rely on graphic images of violence, brutality, and criminal activity. Scott Spector’s long-awaited book eloquently demonstrates that the fascination with such spectacles dates back to the 1860s, with the rise of media scandals about sexual practices (especially between men) and their potential connections to violent criminal acts. Ritual murder accusations that gained momentum in the 1880s made for Central European versions of the Dreyfus Affair, which strained Christian-Jewish relations and put allegedly treacherous Jews on trial. The fin-de-siècle, when killers similar to London’s Jack the Ripper and other marginal or degenerate figures came to signify urban modernity, marks a further turning point in this history. It was also around 1900 when new sensationalist texts about the criminality of the metropolis proliferated.

Violent figures associated with the city became the subjects of modern scientific studies, legal investigations, and medical diagnoses. Yet in some cases they also emerged as subjects on their own terms. In rejecting the sufficiency of the “marginalization thesis” embraced by Richard Evans and others (namely that marginal figures merely validated more centered identities), Spector shifts the conversation toward a dialectical analytic that brings together “enlightened” and “decadent” discourses (2–3). Scientific, legal, and medical texts constitute the enlightened sources; newspaper articles and popular books make up the decadent. Although Vienna and Berlin are the primary focus of this study, which innovatively explores cultural phenomena across national borders, noteworthy events elsewhere in Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire also receive attention.

One of the book’s major claims makes it required reading for historians and German studies scholars alike: it was not after the First World War, but rather in the decades prior to the war, when violent fantasies emerged on a mass scale. By positioning the Great War “not as a cause but as a symptom” (14), Spector suggests that Weimar scholarship—on *Lustmord*, criminality, and sexuality, among other topics—must look to earlier decades for the origins of interwar-era incarnations (170, 196). The fin-de-siècle represents an especially key moment: Otto Weininger, Robert Musil, and, to a lesser degree, Sigmund Freud factor into Spector’s portrait of this time.

In addition to its in-depth look at individual texts and criminal cases, the book also offers an early history of the fields of criminology, criminal psychology, and forensics. For Spector, Austrian Hanns Gross serves as a real-life Sherlock Holmes (56). German responses to the early criminal anthropological work of Cesare Lombroso, which privileged physical signs of degeneration ranging from forehead shape to tattoos, lead to a fascinating discussion of criminal accountability (*Zurechnungsfähigkeit*). Here we see the growing authority of expert witnesses and their knowledge, a trope that runs throughout the book. Spector makes the powerful argument that the fixation on “twilight conditions” or border states (*Dämmerzustände*) including epilepsy, somnambulism, alcoholism, and religious fanaticism, points to a rejection of will and a privileging of innate characteristics as explanations for crime or violence (252).

Sexuality is at the core of several chapters on homosexuality and *Lustmord*, and scholars of gender and sexuality will find this history indispensable to understanding

work on later developments in sexology. In weaving together various theories of homosexuality, Spector emphasizes the early conflation of same-sex and violent sexual practices, as well as the crime scandals that brought many alleged homosexuals into the limelight. The coinage of such terms as *urning* (same-sex attraction) by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and *homosexual* by Karóly Kertbeny (Karl-Maria Benkert) predates and informs the important work of Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Magnus Hirschfeld. One scandalous court case from 1889 led Krafft-Ebing to write the first article on lesbianism (*Gynandrie*); the story of Sándor (Sarolta) Vay here leads us to consider the extent to which gender-bending was criminalized as an act of fraud.

The final chapter of *Violent Sensations* adds a new dimension to Spector's work in German-Jewish Studies. By reading ritual murder accusations beginning in the 1840s as anticipatory of and part of a larger obsession with violent acts, Spector suggests that the process of criminalizing Jews, too, was subject to the rhetorical authority of "expert antisemites" (228). Accusations of Jewish background were enough to discredit this authority. In this chapter in particular, Spector goes far beyond Vienna and Berlin into rural areas that are today part of Hungary and the Czech Republic, though he does not provide a clear analysis of differences between rural and urban settings. Close examinations of the Damascus affair, Tiszaeszlár (Hungarian Dreyfus affair, 215), the Hilsner affair (Austrian Dreyfus affair, 232), and the Ernst Winter case in Konitz, the last of which linked Jews, prostitutes, and homosexuals, reveal significant connections between the different figures charged with violence during this period.

Indeed, Spector interprets all of these fantasies as part of a tendency to map violence and decadence onto civilization in order to fuel a self-critical cultural project (15). If taken too literally, this argument could be understood to write out other histories of persecution, though Spector's sensitivity to the nature of his claims is apparent throughout. He convincingly shows that the "ritualized discourse of violence" (243) around the fin-de-siècle in a sense reproduced the same violence it denounced. Notions of violence are bound up with fantasies about supposedly deviant figures; such figures represent both the advent and decline of modern civilization, as well as the utopian hope of improving it. *Violent Sensations* thus conveys the urgent reminder that it is equally important to consider the way violent acts were (and still are) received and represented, as it is to condemn them.

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