

Sammelrez: Lynching

Berg, Manfred: *Popular Justice. A History of Lynching in America*. Lanham, MD: Ivan R. Dee Publisher 2011. ISBN: 978-1-56663-802-9; 212 S.

Berg, Manfred; Wendt, Simon (Hrsg.): *Globalizing Lynching History. Vigilantism and Extralegal Punishment from an International Perspective*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2011. ISBN: 978-0-230-11588-0; 272 S.

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In „Popular Justice“, Manfred Berg provides a compelling history of lynching in America that explores three principal themes: „the frontier experience, the race conflict, and the anti-authoritarian spirit of grassroots democracy“ (p. xi). Some readers might find it „difficult to accept that the spirit of grassroots democracy [...] was a well-spring of lynching in American history,“ he notes. „Yet in claiming to execute the will of the people, the executioners of popular justice asserted their own ideas of democratic participation and local self-government“ (p. xi).

„Popular Justice“ devotes appropriate attention to the efforts of white southerners to subordinate blacks during Reconstruction and the so-called lynching era from 1880 to 1930. „In the last resort,“ it asserts, „white supremacy depended on the ability of whites to inflict violent repression on blacks with impunity“ (p. 93). The study also examines lynching along the frontier, as white elites employed violence to suppress what they characterized as „a criminal white underclass“ and establish a social order amenable to their interests (p. 38).

In addition to retelling familiar stories, Berg incorporates new ones. He illustrates that whites used mob violence as an instrument of racial terror over numerous minorities, including – in addition to blacks – Indians, Chinese, persons of Mexican descent, and not-quite-white Italians and Jews. He also shows that white stereotypes influenced when, how, and why they targeted victims.

„Anti-Chinese racism did not simply mirror anti-black racism,“ he notes. „Gender stereotypes of Chinese males differed from those ascribed to black men.“ Whites tended to view the Chinese as feminine. „The long braid that Chinese men had to wear due to an ordinance of the Manchu dynasty reinforced this impression. Mobs [...] took a fiendish pleasure in pulling and cutting the ‘pigtailed,’ ignoring that Chinese men who returned home without this distinctive hairstyle could be executed as rebels“ (p. 126). Berg also notes that Chinese settlement patterns – living in overwhelmingly male communities – protected them from the high levels of lynching endured by Mexican- and African- Americans. Because of their settlement patterns, however, they were much more vulnerable to race riots, such as the massacre of twenty Chinese victims in Los Angeles in 1871 and the expulsion of the remaining population.

Berg emphasizes the endemic violence in the South but also addresses incidents elsewhere in the country. He provides an insightful discussion of the disorder in Gold Rush California which „was an ideal breeding ground of frontier violence and lynch law“ (p. 50). He notes that a key factor contributing to the elevated levels of violence, which included at least 160 Mexicans between 1848 and 1860, was that young single men – „the most violence-prone group in all known societies“ (p. 49) – made up a substantial portion of the population in the so-called Wild West.

Finally, Berg examines the lynching frenzy of the 1880 to 1930 period but places it into a broader temporal framework. Initially, he examines the roots of lynching in the colonial era, and traces its rise in the antebellum era, emphasizing the well-known 1835 hanging of five gamblers in Vicksburg, Mississippi, as „a defining moment in the history of lynching in America [...]. Newspapers throughout the country reported the incident, describing it as a ‘lynching’ or ‘lynch law,’ thereby helping establish these terms in the parlance of ordinary Americans“ (p. 29). He also notes that „the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction (1861-1877) marks a distinct and crucial phase in the history of lynching in America“ (p. 69). Berg then provides a chapter on the growing challenge to lynching by civil rights activists,

such as Ida B. Wells and W. E. B. Du Bois, and another on the decline of the practice and its eventual transformation into so-called hate crimes.

As a work of synthesis, „Popular Justice“ breaks little new theoretical or methodological ground. Nevertheless, with its ambitious scope, it may be of interest to specialists eager to see the various new strands of historiography woven into a unified narrative. With its sensitivity to categories and issues, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class, and with its temporal and geographic range, the study would be excellent for undergraduate instruction.

In „Globalizing Lynching History“, Berg teams up with Simon Wendt in an edited volume exploring lynching from an international perspective, spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and covering fourteen countries on five continents. Having placed lynching in an international context, the editors establish a definition that satisfactorily encompasses this context. „What appears to be common to lynchings across the globe is the ideology of popular justice; that is, the argument that lynching represents a form of communal self-defense against crime that is unchecked by the state“ (p. 3–4).

The editors offer a number of perceptive insights. „It would be misleading to see lynching as the continuation of premodern traditions and mentalities that were somehow carried over into the modern world,“ they write. „To speak of lynching as extra-legal punishment takes for granted the principle that only government institutions have the authority to enforce the law and punish criminals. In short, the word lynching assumes the existence of the modern state“ (p. 6). The focus on the state monopoly on legitimate violence, they argue, constitutes the most logical basis for understanding lynching in a global context. The editors also argue that – in investigating violence in places such as Latin America and Africa – many „scholars have gone to great lengths to distinguish violence that mirrors legitimate grievances of the downtrodden from the actions of racist mobs“ (p. 8–9). Although there are genuine distinctions between lynch mobs which aim to enforce social oppression and those which reflect the

despair experienced by the oppressed themselves, the editors caution, „it is necessary to be aware of the temptation to condone violence simply because it is committed in the name of seemingly noble causes, such as social justice or democracy“ (p. 9).

Several of the contributors investigate the extraordinary upsurge in lynching in Latin America and Africa since the 1980s. In his contribution on lynching in Brazil, for instance, scholar Timothy Clark documents at least 1.402 lynchings in that country between 1980 and 2003. In an essay on mob violence in Africa, Tilo Grätz focuses on a vigilante organization formed in 1999 by Dévi Zinsou Ehoun to fight crime in Benin. He and his devotees lynched their victims – at least a hundred of them – through the ghastly practice of „necklacing,“ where mob members „throw a tire around the neck of the victim, pour fuel on the tire, and then set it alight“ (p. 209).

Despite their substantive contributions, Berg and Wendt have introduced one obvious weakness into their volume. In their effort to subordinate the American focus of the lynching scholarship and to elevate the international context, they have – perhaps inadvertently – re-inscribed America’s place at center stage. „Largely ignoring such incidents in other countries, Americans have rarely placed mob violence in an international context,“ they write in their introduction. „The time has come to challenge this prevailing view of lynching as a negative American exceptionalism and to situate the American experience in a broader historical and global context“ (p. 3). Over the ensuing fifteen pages, however, the editors repeatedly include some reference to (and often condemnation of) American historiography and, ironically, to the need to escape from this historiography. Some of the contributors follow a similar formula. Despite his own strongly stated rejection of the US-centered focus of the historiography, one author nevertheless found it necessary to compare the number of victims in four provinces in Indonesia to what he evidently views as the international standard – the American experience. „From 1995 through 2004, mobs killed 5.506 people – more than the total usually cited for American lynching in the years

1882-1965“ (Robert W. Thurston, p. 75). In their important and praiseworthy effort to internationalize the study of lynching, its proponents should be able to make their case on its own merits without unfairly denigrating American-based scholarship or reinforcing precisely that which they undertook to displace in the first place: the centrality of US history to the debate over lynching.

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