
Greg Marquis

Christopher Wilson is a professor of English, not urban history, yet his interest in cultural representation has produced a study of “police stories” that will benefit urban studies. Previously he worked on American literature, news reporting, nonfiction, and popular culture. In a series of case studies ranging from the Dora Clark affair of 1896 to Boston’s Copney-Grant murders of 1991, Wilson illustrates the complex relationship between the police, the media, and mass culture. The focus is on big-city policing, journalism, and popular culture, specifically in centers such as Los Angeles, New York, Chicago and Boston. Police stories have functioned as “narratives of power” that, even in the case of liberal journalists, tend to allow the police to construct the “reality” of crime and criminality. At times this influence has been direct, such as the LAPD’s vetting of scripts for Dragnet. But in most cases the influences have been indirect, low profile and more powerful.

Readers are warned that the approach is experimental and the theoretical framework somewhat imprecise. But Wilson attempts to pursue three broad questions: the material forms of police power over the last century; the impact of “cop knowledge” on media depictions of police, crime, and urban society; and the challenges for “outsiders” working on and among the police.

The sources of *Cop Knowledge* include popular journalism, from the early twentieth-century muckrakers to the tabloids of the 1980s, political and academic writing including the works of Reiss, Fogelson, Skolnick, and Monkkonen, and fictional works such as the book and film *The Naked City* and the bestselling 1970s novels of Joseph Wambaugh. Supposedly empirical criminological studies such as James Q. Wilson’s *Thinking about Crime*, which signalled and abetted the neoconservative approach to law enforcement that is hostile towards not only “civilians,” but also misguided police commanders and their political masters. Wambaugh’s television series *Police Story* attempted to build sympathy for the ordinary mobile patrol officer.

Despite the upheavals of the 1960s and declining police prestige, the media and cultural industries retained their fascination with “cop knowledge,” especially when it involves murder. A series of “reality” best-sellers on urban crime, easily serialized for television, were produced by journalists who reiterated the police message that crime was influenced not by social-economic factors such as de-industrialization or racism, but individual pathology. Wilson also discusses the strategy of community policing, which may have served as a cover story for a more aggressive response to street, drug, and youth crime.

This book is both engaging and challenging. *Cop Knowledge* is accessible and thought provoking but also difficult in places for the non-specialist. The endnotes provide some assistance to readers unfamiliar with the theories and terminology of cultural criticism. This caveat aside, the study is valuable for reminding us that historical and contemporary accounts of urban crime and policing should never be taken at face value. And we should be careful not to overly enjoy those *Hill Street Blues* reruns.

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Over the last couple of decades, Geoffrey Crosick has co-edited a series of works, often with Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, that have largely defined the study of the urban lower middle class. Their *Shopkeepers and Master Artisans in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, in particular, is a seminal work in the social history of nineteenth-century small-business people. And now, with Serge Jaumain, Crosick turns his attention to the petite bourgeoisie’s indispensable enemy, the department stores.

As with Crosick’s other collections, this volume is timely, arriving at a point where interest in its subject is growing, but where the field remains fragmented. Unfortunately, unlike Crosick’s other books, this one merits a lukewarm welcome.

Reflecting the multiplicity of approaches to the study of the department store, the articles in this collection range from...