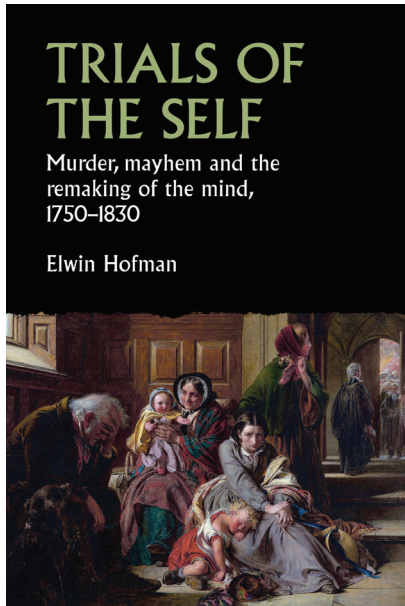


Review

Elwin Hofman, *Trials of the Self. Murder, Mayhem and the Remaking of the Mind, 1750-1830*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2021, 236 pp. ISBN 9781526153142.



'I am innocent and I know who I am.' This is how Gerard Deboysere, the former police sergeant from Bruges, defended himself under interrogation for murder and theft in 1802. But what did it mean for someone to know themselves in the Age of Revolutions? Elwin Hofman's superb book answers this question through extensive research into the criminal archives of Antwerp, Bruges, Brussels, and Kortrijk, focusing on cases of homicide, suicide, prostitution, and sodomy between 1750 and 1830. This broad chronology enables Hofman to identify and evaluate changes in the way people talked about their interior lives in the context of major developments in society and culture on the one hand, and the administration of criminal justice on the other.

Through lively examples selected with care from a mass of manuscript materials, Hofman discerns patterns of change and continuity in what he calls 'practices of the self', a broad concept that attends to common patterns in discourse and action, and builds on Michel Foucault's 'techniques of the self', Jan Goldstein's 'self-talk', and especially Monique Sheer's 'emotional practices' (14-16). Hofman does not identify this period as experiencing 'the making of the modern self', as Dror Wahrman titled his 2004 study of eighteenth-century England, but instead a more subtle and interesting process of 'the remaking of the mind'.

The result is a complex interpretation that fully acknowledges the importance of emotions, individuality, and self-control in the culture of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, but which also accounts for new developments around 1800. Above all, Hofman emphasises that criminal interrogations in this period reveal a shift towards an interest in the 'inner depth' of people's lives as they relate to the judicial outcome of a case (200-201). While some historians have sketched these shifts primarily in the intellectual culture of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, Hofman's work shows how these cultural changes

shaped the lives of non-elites, and sometimes how their impact varied according to class and gender. For example, elites and men were more able to explain their behaviour according to 'reason' than the poor and women.

Changes in the institutions and procedures of criminal justice around 1800 shaped, and were shaped by, these broader social and cultural developments. For example, magistrates needed to develop new techniques of interrogation after the decline of judicial torture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such that more complex engagements with suspects' motivations and feelings became integral to trial proceedings, especially in the most serious crimes of homicidal violence, when the magistrates sought to elicit a confession whereas previously they might have forced one. Changes in Enlightenment criminology made magistrates attuned to the importance of reason in guaranteeing a certain consistency of outcomes in pardoning, while shifts in medicine placed greater emphasis on scientific rather than vernacular definitions of madness.

A particularly significant passage in the book discusses the shift in the early nineteenth century to record interrogations in the first person rather than the customary third person, although manuals for magistrates continued to repeat examples of interrogations in the third person long after this shift took place (55-61). This is just the kind of subtle development in judicial practice that is impossible to trace without the kind of sustained, empirical research that Hofman has undertaken, and it raises important questions that can only be answered in a comparative context. Magistrates in the Southern Netherlands at least did not pioneer this shift, which Jeffrey Merrick has detected in the records of interrogations conducted by the Paris police as early as the 1720s, and Robert Shoemaker has analysed in the published *Proceedings* of the Old Bailey disseminated around the same time. Records of criminal interrogations conducted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries often included passages in the first person when reported speech mattered to the substance of the case or during moments of heightened attention to the accused, especially under torture. The long-run, comparative history of this shift remains to be written, and Hofman has made a major contribution to it in the context of the Low Countries.

Throughout the book, Hofman's portraits of accused criminals leap from the page in arresting terms. Pierre de Mahieu, accused of murdering his in-laws, composed a brief memoir and confessed that 'the movement of my mind and body, my pen cannot describe... I am sure that if I had been bled three days afterwards, there would not have been any blood, for all my blood was frozen from the horror of my crime and I have kept a tremble that will never disappear' (60). And Catharina van Erck, accused of infanticide, confessed that 'she was desperate because her lover didn't want to marry her, and her honour couldn't suffer giving light to a child that was disowned by its father' (91). Yet it might be suggested that emphasis on the most revealing cases ignores the mass of less interesting ones conserved alongside these documents in the same archival series. Perhaps the book's focus on the most serious categories of violent and sexual crimes skews the analysis towards psychological explanations in a way that might not equally apply to property crime. In this sense, most criminal trials were not (only) trials of the self, but Hofman is alert to this risk and qualifies his interpretation of sources accordingly.

Overall, Hofman's fascinating book makes a complex and compelling case for criminal trials as privileged sources for tracing changing practices of the self over time. In this way,

Trials of the Self opens the way for comparative studies in different periods and places, and different categories of crimes. This book is essential reading for anyone interested in the history of premodern and modern criminal justice, as well as those curious about the inner lives of Europeans who lived outside of the elite world of Enlightenment philosophy or Romantic literature, yet knew well what it meant to have a mind of their own.

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