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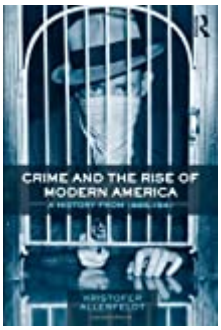

Kristofer Allerfeldt. *Crime and the Rise of Modern America: A History from 1865-1941.* London: Routledge, 2010. 264 pp. $125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-80044-0; $28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-80045-7.

Reviewed by Jeffrey S. Adler (University of Florida)

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Commissioned by Christopher R. Waldrep (San Francisco State University)

Crime and American Culture

Not only did crime reflect American culture in the age of industry, according to Kristofer Allerfeldt, but âit [also] is perhaps fair to say that crime and criminals could make as a [sic] good a definition of modern America and contemporary American-ness as any otherâ (p. 1). With this premise, Allerfeldt examines the high-profile crimes that revealed the nationâs mood and character as well as the celebrity criminals whose misdeeds informed the development of modern America. In an engaging, fast-paced narrative, Allerfeldt explores the marrow of American culture through the brashness, audacity, opportunism, and ruthlessness of American criminals from the end of the Civil War to the nationâs entry in World War II. While many scholars have noted that trends in crime and deviance are grounded in culture, Allerfeldt takes this view a step further, asserting that the motivations and actions of criminals, such as the swindler Charles Ponzi and the mobster Al Capone, reveal important, defining American values. Hence an analysis of their criminal exploits unearths the norms and cultural trends of the nation during a particularly formative era. He argues, for example, that Ponzi âwas the epitome of the American dream,â while Capone âresembled the robber barons in his business strategy,â which reflected the centralization, bureaucratization, and corporatization that fueled Americaâs rise to industrial power during the early twentieth century (pp. 15, 112).

Crime and the Rise of Modern America offers a wide-ranging portrait of American culture, examining crimes from banditry and labor violence to political corruption and terrorism. Allerfeldt develops his argument in a series of topical chapters, each filled with crisp, colorful vignettes of larger-than-life criminals, âcrimes of the century,â and high-profile scandals and swindles. He avers that greed, unbridled ambition, risk taking, and acquisitiveness shaped American culture during this period. Thus, robber barons command more attention than street criminals in his analysis, and the Wall Street financier J. P. Morgan and the New York City ward boss George Washington Plunkitt are portrayed as exemplars of the nationâs embrace of an avaricious, cut-throat, âcorporateâ mentality, one that blurred the boundary be-

tween business and crime. Many of Allerfeldtâs prominent âcriminals,â such as John D. Rockefeller, were not convicted of committing any crimes, bolstering his argument that their unethical behavior during this âera of supreme venalityâ represented an endemic and perhaps defining component of American values (p. 65). Amoral, unscrupulous titans of industry symbolized the criminal class that shaped industrial America. Similarly, the Triangle Shirtwaist fire of 1911 and the Black Sox scandal of 1919 epitomized the greed and corruption of the early twentieth century, just as Nathan Leopold and Richard Loebâs murder of Bobby Franks revealed the thrill-seeking ethos of the 1920s. While these were exceptional scandals, crimes, and criminals, the author argues that they personified the spirit and values of the era.

Allerfeldt writes from a traditional âAmerican Studiesâ perspective, focusing on the distinctive, defining elements of American culture. He frames his study, however, in a curiously iconoclastic manner, explaining that the book fills an important void linking crime and culture, for the existing scholarship on the history of crime, with few exceptions, is âlimited in scope,â lacks rigor, or consists of âpurely factual encyclopaedias [sic] with little or no analysis or contextâ (p. 2). By contrast, he intends his book to âuse criminal history in a more sophisticated fashionâ (p. 6). Because Allerfeldt focuses on cultural currents and then discusses illustrative âcelebrity crimesâ (p. 13), he does not identify or analyze patterns of crime or draw systematically from recent legal or criminal justice history to examine or explain overall trends in criminal behavior. Although Allerfeldt notes the diversity and heterogeneity of American society, his argument, with its emphasis on core âAmericanâ values, gives short shrift to perspectives based on gender, class, ethnicity, race, place, and region. Instead, he paints American culture, and the crimes that defined it, with broad brush strokes. Nor does his analysis of culture draw from literary or cultural theory.

Lightly documented and synthetic, *Crime and the Rise of Modern America* seems pitched to an undergraduate audience. Allerfeldt peppers his narrative with evocative quotations, usually culled from secondary sources. While his provocative argument will engage students, specialists will likely take issue with many of Allerfeldtâs characterizations, such as his assertions that âif alcohol seemed to be *an* American vice, gambling was perhaps *the* American viceâ; that âthere can be few other nations which take such a robust attitude toward political corruption as the United Statesâ; and that the conmanâs âvirtues were was *so* Americanâ and âdisplayed those *All-American* traits of ingenuity, audacity, ambition, self-reliance [and] originalityâ (pp. 118, 164, 80, italics in original). Similarly, African American historians will probably dissent from his characterization of plantation slaves as âpauper gamblers,â just as criminal justice historians will question his assertion that the egregiously unprofessional and corrupt Gilded Age police ârepresented the forces of bureaucratization and centralization which were transforming American societyâ (pp. 119, 63). Western historians will also be surprised to read Allerfeldtâs description of their treatment of frontier violence, which states that âto many interpreters, academic and popular, violence played out the struggles of the West, the fight between good and evil; right and wrong; just and unjust; strong and weak with violent and Manichean clarityâ (p. 29).

A number of errors mar the book, which is unfortunate for a volume with considerable classroom potential. Some are relatively minor, such as the anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells appearing as âIda Bell,â the late nineteenth-century New Orleans police chief David Hennessy appearing as âPeter Hennessy,â the early twentieth-century Kansas City political boss Thomas Pendergast appearing as âThomas Prendergast,â and the Chicago gangster Jim Colosimo appearing as âJoe Colisimoâ and as âJoe Collisimoâ (pp. 55, 213, 176-177, 2, 214). Other errors are more significant, including his assertion that âsome 7 million slavesâ were freed after the Civil War, though the accepted figure is four million (p. 46). To document a surge in violence, Allerfeldt states that the âU.S. homicide rate had quadrupled in the first two decades of the twentieth centuryâ (p. 137). Recent scholarship, however, establishes that the rate rose by a more modest 22 percent.[1] In addition, Allerfeldt offers many fascinating but undocumented statements, such as his observation that âthe outbreak of war in 1941 brought perhaps the greatest surge in homosexual activity in American historyâ and his assertion that ânot only were American criminals more powerful than those of other nations but they were also somehow more sinisterâ (pp. 163, 2-3).

But perhaps this book should be evaluated on other grounds. Allerfeldt is less concerned with quantitative precision or theoretical nuance than in offering broad, thought-provoking characterizations of American cultural development. Even if his treatment of patterns of criminal behavior will not persuade all specialists, and even if his analysis of cultural history is atheoretical, Allerfeldt provides an accessible and interesting portrait of industrial America and the crimes and scandals that

gripped the nation between Appomattox and Pearl Harbor.

Note

[1]. For example, see Douglas Lee Eckberg, âEstimates of Early Twentieth-Century U.S. Homicide Rates: An Econometric Forecasting Approach,â *Demography* 32 (February 1995): 13.