

Media Review

***Criminocorpus*: Browsing through the French History of Crime and Medicine**

The open-access platform known as 'criminocorpus.org' has proved to be a very successful digitisation enterprise in the field of French history. Launched in 2005 by Professor Marc Renneville with the help and funding of the CNRS (the French National Centre for Scientific Research), this website was originally designed as a database where users could freely access the digitised version of the *Archives d'anthropologie criminelle* [Archives of Criminal Anthropology] (1886–1914). But *Criminocorpus* grew bigger each year; indeed, it was recently renamed the Musée d'Histoire de la Justice, des Crimes et des Peines [Museum of the History of Justice, Crime and Punishment]. In addition to the *Archives of Criminal Anthropology* database, the website now gives access to numerous other digitised historical sources (both iconographic and textual) that are compiled in fourteen thematic files. Issues include such topics as 'death penalty', 'incarcerated children', and 'jails'. It also comprises a blog and an online, open-access, peer-reviewed journal where researchers can submit publications in both French and English.¹ Since 2005, nearly 200 authors have contributed to the website. One should also not forget the Facebook page, which allows *Criminocorpus*'s users to interact directly with Renneville's team.² In sum, *Criminocorpus* may be described as a true interactive digital initiative, whereby the internet has not only facilitated but also reshaped the ways in which historians approach the realm of crime and medicine.

I made extensive use of *Criminocorpus*'s resources for my recent research on the history of French nineteenth-century medical views on female sexuality.³ I began with a systematic exploration of the digitised version of the *Archives d'anthropologie criminelle, de criminologie et de psychologie normale et pathologique* [Archives of Criminal Anthropology, Criminology, Normal and Pathological Psychology]. This journal was edited by Alexandre Lacassagne (1843–1927), who held the Chair of Legal Medicine in Lyons and also taught at the Medical Faculty. In its time, the *Archives of Criminal Anthropology* was a leading publication in the newly founded field of criminology. Physicians from several disciplines (psychiatry, forensic medicine, gynaecology, and so on), but also philosophers, law professionals, and sociologists used it as a forum to discuss various ideas about crime and its origins. As it was read throughout Europe, the *Archives of Criminal Anthropology* played a seminal role in shaping criminology and forensic medicine, especially as it often published heated arguments over the much-debated theory of 'born criminals' developed by the celebrated Italian physician Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909). Specifically designed to compete with Lombroso's own publication (the *Archivio di psichiatria e d'antropologia criminale* [Archives of Psychiatry and Criminal Anthropology], founded in 1880), Lacassagne's *Archives of Criminal Anthropology* was

¹ Website URLs: <https://criminocorpus.org/fr/>, <http://criminocorpus.revues.org/>, <http://criminocorpus.hypotheses.org/> (accessed 10 September 2017).

² <https://fr-fr.facebook.com/criminocorpus/>.

³ Izel Demirbas, 'Reading Female Sexuality: French Criminology and the Pathologisation of Women's Desires, 1886–1914', soon to be published on <http://criminocorpus.revues.org/>.

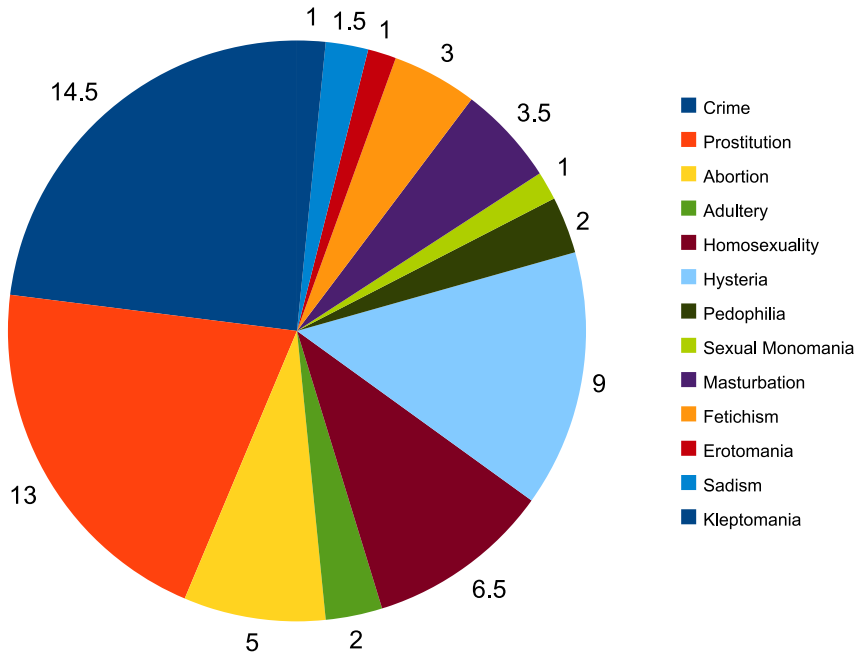


Figure 1: Thematic distribution of articles on femininity. Source: *Archives d'anthropologie criminelle*, 1886–1914.

first published twice a month, then once a month. It comprises 29 volumes of roughly 900 pages each. In other words, without the *Criminocorpus* search engine which allowed me to research keywords such as ‘female’, ‘sexuality’, or a combination of both, it would have taken me months (instead of weeks) to complete my research. In addition, by tracking down authors through a general search engine, I was able to unearth the medical networks and the webs of intellectual influences that shaped French-speaking discourses on female sexuality. Finally, this tool also made possible the following statistical analyses as shown in Figure 1.

As previously explained, the *Archives of Criminal Anthropology* was a *potpourri* that reflected opinions on crime that were generally shared by French intellectual elites beyond disciplinary and professional boundaries. Interesting then, that crime, prostitution and hysteria should be the three most common issues to be associated with notions of ‘femininity’ and ‘sexuality’ in this journal.

However, though *Criminocorpus* was incredibly useful in my analysis of the evolution of medical theories on women’s sex drive or lack thereof, browsing archival materials with a search engine does have its limitations. Using keyword search tools in particular has the insidious effect of leading historians to restrict their research to their own assumptions and interests. In other words, one mainly finds what one intends to find. The risk with digitised versions of sources is the loss of context and materiality of the archive. As far as scientific publications such as the *Archives of Criminal Anthropology* are concerned, one needs to see where articles are published. Do they appear at the end of a volume, drowned in miscellanea and insignificant materials, or are they top articles? What comes before and after a paper? And so on. If a text written by a female physician is

placed just after an advertisement for an antidiarrhoeal medication, for instance, that says something about the value that her colleagues place on her work. Like other digitised versions of historical journals, *Criminocorpus* gives a somewhat biased vision of an egalitarian, scientific, editorial world. All the fringe elements of the publication, such as advertisements, publicity for other journals, books, and the like, seem to have been lost in the digitisation process – at least in the case of the *Archives of Criminal Anthropology*.

Notwithstanding these methodological remarks, which could be applied to many other databases, *Criminocorpus* remains a remarkable research tool. Unique in its kind in the field of French studies, this multi-layered website is of interest to historians of crime and medicine, but is also attractive to legal professionals and lay people alike. More than a museum, in its current form the website could best be described as a historiographical laboratory as well as an online institution. In fact, in 2015 the CNRS and the French Ministry of Justice, in partnership with the French National Archives, decided to open CLAMOR. Described as a ‘mixed unit’ designed to be the ‘first centre for digital humanities and history of justice’, CLAMOR is the institutional name of *Criminocorpus*. To put it differently, what began in the ethereal world of the internet has now been incarnated into a real institution, with an office and a physical address. In the end, will the online museum give birth to a real, flesh and blood – so to speak – museum? That would be an interesting, though indeed ironic, development.

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