

***Passer à l'acte: Policing (in) the Office***  
**Notes on Industry Standards and the *Grosze Polizeiausstellung* of 1926**  
**The Universal Police, and After**

In his *Comparisons Between European, Asian and Other Apparently Barbaric Governments* (1762) (*Vergleichungen der Europaeischen mit den Asiatischen und anderen vermeintlich Barbarischen Regierungen*, Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi refers to public administration as *Polizeiwissenschaft*, the science of the police.<sup>1</sup> Justi wrote from the tail end of the so-called *Polizeizeit* (the era of the police), a time when the police—in the comprehensive sense of that word as essentially all of *res politicae*—and the (administration of) the state were one and the same.<sup>2</sup> During that time, the term *police* described nothing more and nothing less than the (administration of) the state, hence the *polis*, itself, and the police took care of a vast array of things, from the maintenance of an army to the administration of justice and the management of external affairs. As a police publication early last century put it, “What was not explicitly entrusted to other agencies [...] belonged to it [the police, S.S.]”<sup>3</sup>

After the end of the *Polizeizeit* the police changed from *being* the state to maintaining order *inside* it. Indeed, after the end of the era of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century *Polizeistaat*, the range of the police’s responsibilities shrank to such insignificance by comparison that when in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century public administrators urged the supplementation of largely ineffective local police forces with national ones whose operational range would be vastly greater, this call passed almost for a revolution. In 1919, Bill Drews, the official in charge of the overhaul of the public administration in Prussia, urged the creation of a “rigidly organized state police whose responsibilities are not limited to the local level, like those of the local police forces that work independently from each other and without any mutual connection.”<sup>4</sup> Of course, Drews is far from suggesting that the police return to run *res politicae* the way it had done in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. What he does suggest is that in order to be effective the modern police has to abandon or modify its local organisation by forming

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi, *Vergleichungen der Europaeischen mit den Asiatischen und anderen vermeintlich Barbarischen Regierungen*. (Berlin/Stettin/Leipzig, 1762), 41.

<sup>2</sup> Etymologically, the term police points to the “good [administration of the] state.”

<sup>3</sup> *Der Aktenplan der preußischen Polizei. Entwurf* (Berlin: Kameradschaft, 1933), 3.

<sup>4</sup> B. Drews, *Grundzüge der Verwaltungsreform* (Berlin: Carl Heymanns Verlag, 1919), 53.

interdependent structures modelled, presumably, on other large networks such as the electric power grid or the telegraph network; the police state meets the state police.

In this essay I will not be concerned with the 18<sup>th</sup>-century universal police per se but with a moment in the history of modern policing when the universalism of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century police returns in the claim to know *everything*. I will concentrate on the mid- to late 1920s, a time when the systematic management of an ever-increasing stream of data appeared to become more and more of a concern for the police, and a time when it appears as if only (office) machines were capable of dispensing the order that we all expect the police to produce. What I call the modern data police consists in a set of interconnected and interconnecting media technologies—from typed reports to portable card indexes—entrusted not only with gathering an ever-increasing quantity of data but also, crucially, with organizing and storing that data in such a way that it could easily be combined in any number of ways. The exponential growth in the amount of information stored by the modern police is not only, as is often said to be the case, an effect of the improvement in the techniques and technologies of observation, it is also, crucially, an effect of the fact that through the increased application of universal standards in the production and storage of records these could be linked and combined any any number of ways. A prerequisite of this type of networking was the effective organization of records. Modern police technology (*Polizeitechnik*), hence, is (also) office technique (*Bürotechnik*). The modern police is not only responsible for the maintenance of order in the public, it is also itself depended upon order—that of the ever-increasing quantities of data it gathers, stores, and exchanges. In Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Monsieur Dupin criticizes the Parisian police for "being cunning, but no more. There is no method in their proceedings, beyond the method of the moment."<sup>5</sup> Dupin continues: "Vidocq, for example, was a good guesser, and a persevering man. But [...] he impaired his vision by holding his object too close. He might see, perhaps, one or two points with unusual clearness, but in so doing he, necessarily, lost sight of the matter as a whole."<sup>6</sup> "The matter as whole" signifies nothing more and nothing less than all the records kept about the case at hand.

Some time ago, James Beniger referred to the period 1880-1930 as the "control revolution". By this Beniger meant the "loss of economic and political

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<sup>5</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Selected Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 204.

control [...] at [...] local levels of society during the Industrial Revolution. Before this time, control of government and market had depended on personal relationships and face-to-face interactions; now control came to be reestablished by means of bureaucratic organization, the new infrastructures of transportation and telecommunications, and system-wide communication via the new mass media.”<sup>7</sup> The control revolution corresponds to a “growing need for coordination of functions that accompanied differentiation and specialization”<sup>8</sup>, so that in the age of the steam engine information would be communicated at the same speed and with the same efficiency as mass-produced material goods.<sup>9</sup> For Beniger, the control revolution becomes a reality, between 1870-1920, by means, first, of the rationalizing modern bureaucracy and, second, by means of communications technologies developed at around the same time.

The “rationalization” Beniger attributes to technologies such as rotary power printing (1840s), the typewriter (1860s), transatlantic cable (1866), telephone (1876), motion pictures (1894), wireless telegraphy (1895), magnetic tape recording (1899), radio (1906), and television (1923)”<sup>10</sup> relies on their ability to process a record amount of data in a record amount of time. Already in the 1920s, the sales catalogues of the office technology industry included not only typewriters but also mechanical and electrical calculators, encrypting machines, machines for the creation of statistical tables, machines for folding letters and addressing envelopes, machines for the sorting of large amounts of punchcards, machines for the copying and addition of such cards, and many others. Such machines, whether they were electrical or mechanical, revolutionized the way records were produced and processed in the modern office in a way that can only be compared to the effect Taylorism had on modern production techniques in the car industry. In advertisements, the superiority of office machines such as the mechanical stapler was shown mathematically by the demonstration that a machine could create x amount of records in an x amount of time, and that the ration between the two was inevitably lower if humans fulfilled the task. The following

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<sup>6</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Selected Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 204.

<sup>7</sup> James R. Beniger 1986, *The Control Revolution. Technological and Economic Orgions of the Information Society* (Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 37.

<sup>8</sup> James R. Beniger 1986, *The Control Revolution. Technological and Economic Orgions of the Information Society* (Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 37.

<sup>9</sup> James R. Beniger 1986, *The Control Revolution. Technological and Economic Orgions of the Information Society* (Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 37.

juxtapositions appeared in the German encyclopedia *Der Grosse Brockhaus* in 1929:  
[ILLUSTRATION 1. FROM: BROCKHAUS 1929, VOL. III]

The problem is, however, that the office machines that came into use, especially, in business offices between 1870 and 1920 did not only process existing records at record speed, they also produced record amounts of new data. In other words, the very technologies designed to stem the tide of record production were also in no small measure responsible for its intensification. For instance, if the introduction of telephones into the office removed, to some degree, the need to communicate in writing, the requirement, in many companies and parts of public administrations, of producing written memos of every phone conversation led, on the contrary, to an increase in the production of paperwork which then had to be filed and stored. With the introduction of carbon copies, the typewriter, too, was transformed into a remarkably efficient copy machine. In other words, the “control revolution” that took place between 1870-1920 also contributed towards the crisis of control that it was designed to conquer. If we can believe T. R. Schellenberg, the US federal government increased its production of records more than a hundred times between the civil war and the end of the second world war.<sup>11</sup>

### **The *Grosze Polizeiausstellung***

The rationalization Beniger quotes as the principal engine behind the machine-based control revolution hinged on the establishment of a set of universally enforced standards not only in the area of industrial production but also in the realm of the (office) media, standards that would allow not only for effective data recording but also for their combination and communication. One of the pioneer of the introduction of such standards into *Polizeitechnik* was the engineer Alphonse Bertillon (1853-1914), the head of the bureau of identification at the Paris *préfecture*. Bertillon's fame rests on his anthropometric treatment of criminals, and on his combination of photography with measurement. Bertillon's photographs of crime scenes allowed for the measuring of distances and sizes in retrospect, on the photograph itself. Bertillon's special apparatus for these purposes was later simplified by Franz Eichberg of the Viennese police. Famous for his expansion of the use of photography by the police,

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<sup>10</sup> James R. Beniger 1986, *The Control Revolution. Technological and Economic Orgions of the Information Society* (Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 37.

Bertillon also developed an innovative system for the classification of criminals' names, suggesting that the police classify the names of criminals according to the way they were pronounced, not how they were written in a given language ("On classe comme on prononce"). In this way the French name *Bailly* was classified alphabetically as *Bai*, *Bachimont* as *Bachimon*, etc. For, as the great pioneer of *Polizeitechnik* wrote, "in the mouth of a German, T could be confused with a D; B will often be taken for a P and vice versa. Un English person will inevitably confuse the vowels A and E, E and I [...]. An Italian will pronounce sh instead of s where in a French name the letter s precedes the vowels E or I [...]"<sup>12</sup> Bertillon's code allowed for the networking of data in a code that aspires to the same universal applicability as did the police in the era of the enlightenment. International standards in the coding and storage of information together with the (office) media that process it, then, bring back what the police appeared to have lost once and for all, to be and to know "everything."

In Germany, a crucial catalyst for the introduction of industry standards into modern policing was the *Great Police Exhibition* held in Berlin from 25 September to 10 October, 1926. Officially, the exhibition, organised by the Prussian Ministry of Interior Affairs as a kind of world fair of the modern police, aimed to demonstrate—less than ten years before the seizure of power by the Nazis—that the German police had successfully completed the transition from the imperial *Obrigkeitsstaat* to a democratic system.<sup>13</sup> Beyond that, the idea was to give a "systematic" overview of police history and technology on an (inter-) national level.<sup>14</sup> It is not by coincidence that in a booklet that explains the structure of the exhibition one of its organisers makes explicit reference to the 18<sup>th</sup>-century *Poizeistaat*: "The history of the police as a phenomenon of modern public life does not begin with the appearance of the word [...] in 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>-century [...] jurisdiction but only with the organisation of a technical [...] administration [...]"<sup>15</sup> The *Great Police Exhibition* treated the police as a network of knowledge-gathering agencies and practices, giving the visiting public

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<sup>11</sup> T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives. Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956), 36.

<sup>12</sup> Alphonse Bertillon, *Notice sur la classification phonétique* (Melun: Imprimerie Administrative, 1951), 8.

<sup>13</sup> The Berlin conference was not the first of its kind. For example, in May 1925 there had been an International Police Conference in New York City.

<sup>14</sup> The exhibition included representatives from foreign police forces.

“a rounded and complete image of the multifarious tasks and the multi-faceted activity, the different uniforms and the technical equipment of the modern police”.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, at least two of the sections into which the Great Police Exhibition was divided, most notably the ones dealing with the suppression of “illegal literature and art” and “indecent images and writings” were accessible only to “specialists” with a special permit. This is interesting not only because it proves, predictably, that the willingness of the police to exhibit itself has certain limits, but also because secrecy, or rather the technological preconditions for its mechanical production and protection, was in fact one of the themes of the exhibition. An encryption machine produced by the *Kryha* office supply company won a prize for its technical innovation (the machine could be used as either an encryption or a decipherment device, and its electrical version could even write messages at the same time). Beyond that, the public display of the close relationship between the police and office supply manufacturers was an explicit goal of the organisers: “At the same time a close mixing [*eine enge Vermischung*; sic!] between police technology [*Polizeifachtechnik*] and industry [...] and commerce will occur by dint of the fact that the companies that participate in the exhibition are shown not separately but within the police agency with which they cooperate.”<sup>17</sup>

The *Kryha* encryption machine is a good example of the way in which by the late 1920s industrial standards had become an important marketing tool. The machine not only used an encryption code that was, in the company’s own words, “practically almost infinite”, the manufacturers also claimed that it could be used anywhere: “*Kryha* encryption machines are **international** [sic!] and can be used [...] in any city on earth without there being the slightest danger that the number of keys might not be sufficient [...]. If 10 million people by the machine any single one of them can change the system 90 million times without any two people ending up with the same system.” The same company advertisement goes on to say that “*Kryha* encryption machines are [...] indispensable for all government departments and agencies, diplomats, armies, the navies [sic!], air forces, the police, banks, industry

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<sup>15</sup> N. Abagg, *Aufbau und Gliederung der “Großen Polizeiausstellung Berlin 1926”* (Berlin: Verlagsgemeinschaft Kameradschaft, 1926), 5.

<sup>16</sup> N. Abagg, *Aufbau und Gliederung der “Großen Polizeiausstellung Berlin 1926”* (Berlin: Verlagsgemeinschaft Kameradschaft, 1926), 3.

<sup>17</sup> N. Abagg, *Aufbau und Gliederung der “Großen Polizeiausstellung Berlin 1926”* (Berlin: Verlagsgemeinschaft Kameradschaft, 1926), 4.

and commerce, economic and political associations, as well as the press and news agencies.”<sup>18</sup> Numerical encryption codes then were not only seen as somehow more “international”, they also ensured greater variability than the letters of the alphabet. Kryha, which sold many machines to the Prussian police, proudly quotes from an article that appeared in the professional journal *Die Polizei* in 1928: “In Germany the police agencies have already begun to use this new invention *on a grand scale and with complete success.*”

During the year the Great Police Exhibition took place, the *Commission on Industry Standards of German Industry* (*Normenausschusz der deutschen Industrie*, founded in 1917) renamed itself *Deutscher Normenausschusz* (*German Commission on Industry Standards*). The commission’s goal was to supervise standardization and rationalization of all aspects of commerce, industry, and administration. The assumption was that with the standardization of (office) hardware the hitherto unregulated human use of this hardware would become equally standardized in the process and that the standardization of one product would spawn an entire industry of related products. In his book on the 1925 International Design Exhibition in Paris, the architect Le Corbusier gives a good example of the effects of industry standardization: “When the typewriter was born, writing paper was standardized. This introduction of an industry standard had important consequences for furniture [...]. Typewriters, coal paper, filing trays, files, [...] filing cabinets, in one word, an entire furniture industry was influenced by the introduction of the standard.”<sup>19</sup>

To be sure, the standardization Le Corbusier addresses is not confined to industrial hardware. The introduction of standard digital codes used for the transmission of information was one of the most important concerns of the *Great Police Exhibition*. A meeting of the International Police Commission held at the time of the exhibition discussed the introduction of a universal code for telegraphic communication between the police forces of various countries. The idea was to “network” police forces not only on a national but also, increasingly, on an international level. The code debated at the conference was developed in 1923 by the police chief of the city of Vienna, Dr. Brandel, and met with the immediate approval of the delegates. It was based on a three-letter system and consisted of a coded sequence of three letters that replaced either one word or an entire sentence. The idea

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<sup>18</sup> *Der Aktenplan der preußischen Polizei. Entwurf* (Berlin: Kameradschaft, 1933), 36.

was that this code would not only make communication between different police forces more cost-effective as telegrams no longer had to be translated but also, crucially, that it would encrypt messages in such a way that they could not be understood by an outsider who was not in possession of the key. A further advantage of the introduction of the universal telegraphic code for the police was seen in the fact that it was not tied to any language in particular, even though it could be translated into any existing language. At the same meeting, delegates also discussed other ways of promoting international codes that would facilitate policing, such as the establishment of an international system of traffic signs; the introduction of specially embossed forms for passport applications; the introduction in all countries of a passport that would include the bearer's fingerprint and signature; and the development of an international dictionary of *Kriminaltechnik*.<sup>20</sup>

### **The *Aktenplan* for the Prussian Police (1928) and the Office Reform**

Apart from general exhibits relating to various aspects of the modern police both in Prussia and abroad ("The Historical Development of the Police"; "The Police and the Press;" "Illegal Literature and Art"; "Indecent Images and Writings", etc.), the *Große Polizeiausstellung* featured a startling exhibit that showed "the original clothes and the files [*Aktenstücke*] concerning the Nuremberg foundling Kaspar Hauser."<sup>21</sup> Aged about 16 at the time, Kaspar Hauser had been found in Nuremberg, Germany, on Whit Monday, 1828, and taken to a police station where allegedly he answered all questions with "*woisz nit*" (dunno). Unable to speak coherently, Hauser was able to write his name given to him by a policeman who then proceeded to take him into custody. It is not altogether clear why the Hauser exhibit was included in the *Polizeiausstellung*, except to demonstrate that in the age of the wireless telegraph, the *Fernschreiber*, and the telephone, traditional office files ("*Aktenstücke*") were rapidly being transformed into museum pieces. It is perhaps not by coincidence that police files increasingly became the staple diet of a new kind of literature that consisted almost entirely of quotes from the (purportedly) authentic files of various police agencies. Volumes such as Matthia's Blanks *The Battle With Crime. From the Files of a Police Inspector (Der Kampf mit dem Verbrechen. Aus den Akten eines Polizei*

<sup>19</sup> Le Corbusier, *L'Art Décoratif d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1996), 76.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Der Kriminalist. Mitteilungen über Polizeiwissenschaft* 17 (10.5.1926).

<sup>21</sup> *Der Kriminalist. Mitteilungen über Polizeiwissenschaft* 17 (10. 5. 1926).

*Inspektors*, 1909) or E. Thiemann's *From the Secret Files of the Political Police. Reminiscences of Its Former Activity (Aus den Geheim-Akten der politischen Polizei. Erinnerungen an ihre ehemalige Tätigkeit*, 1919) drew their revelatory appeal from the fact that they quoted freely from what the reader expected were closed files accessible only to the police.<sup>22</sup>

The standardization in the way the police gathered and stored data concerned not only its formatting but also, crucially, the way it was filed and archived. When in 1928 the police in Prussia (first in the city of Magdeburg) introduced an *Aktenplan* or filing plan that would abolish the traditional filing room, or *Registratur*, this measure was part of a general program of standardization that affected practically all areas of *Polizeitechnik*. This development took place before the general background of the office reform movement of the mid-1920s, a movement whose goal was to increase the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the public administration through the deployment of standardized office technologies.<sup>23</sup> The officials behind the reform, especially Dr. Brecht of the German Ministry of the Interior, were well aware of the fact that, in the administration and elsewhere, the (office) media were anything but passive receptacles. According to Brecht, "even such things as forms are not something purely external."<sup>24</sup>

The core of the office reform was a sweeping overhaul of the way official records (*Akten*) were handled by the public administration. The term *Akten*, of which the English term "file" is but an approximate translation, is derived from the neuter form of the passive past participle of the Latin verb *agere* < to act and could be translated as "that which has been acted upon". In imperial Rome, the term *acta* designated among other things the personal papers of the magistrates and other public officials, as well as the daybooks that were kept in Roman house archives (*tablina. populi diurna*). Another word for *Akten* is *Vorgang* (< related to *vorgehen* = something that occurs at the present moment). *Akten* are written transcripts not so

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<sup>22</sup> E. Thiemann, *Aus den Geheim-Akten der politischen Polizei. Erinnerungen an ihre ehemalige Tätigkeit* (Berlin: Verlag der Volkswacht, 1919), 4.

<sup>23</sup> For more information on the office reform movement in Germany, cf. Dr. Brecht, "Die Büroreform in der Verwaltung," in *Deutsche Juristen-Zeitung* 9 (1926): 628-633; Botho Brachmann, "Zur Geschichte der Büroreform," in *Archivmitteilungen. Zeitschrift für Theorie und Praxis des Archivwesens* 1 (1959): 6-14.

<sup>24</sup> Dr. Brecht, "Die Büroreform in der Verwaltung," in *Deutsche Juristen-Zeitung* 9 (1926): 628.

much of the contents of a decision, its “final copy”, but rather of the process that led to its adoption.<sup>25</sup>

The first classification of *Akten*—at the police and elsewhere—occurred in the so-called registries (*Registraturen*) whose task it was to count (register) the paperwork that circulated in an agency, and to account for its whereabouts.<sup>26</sup> The registry acted as a relay station where incoming correspondence was received, attached to existing paperwork, and then assigned to the clerical worker in whose responsibility its contents belonged. When a letter was sent to an agency it first went to the registrar who looked it over, registered it in the so-called daily ledger [the *Tagebuch*, or diary] under a consecutive number, and attached to it any previous correspondence that could be relevant in making a decision in the given case. These ledgers were navigation manuals in the hands of the registry official, aimed at ensuring the safe passage of a letter to its destination, and the prevention of its loss:

On its left side incoming papers were entered with notes of their contents and other characteristics, some columns in the middle made it possible to show the course of each paper within agency, and on the right side the necessary entries were made with regard to the outgoing letter and the call mark of the transaction.<sup>27</sup>

Whenever *Akten* were passed on from one office to another they had to go by way of the registry where its trajectory inside the agency was meticulously recorded. In this way, the ledger functioned, ideally, as a screen on which the whereabouts of the many documents that were circulating in an agency at any moment in time could be tracked at any point.

In order to expedite the search for specific items in the registry, the daily ledger was traditionally supplemented by an index that consisted of an alphabetic list of keywords that were derived from the entries in the daily ledger. Using the numbers

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<sup>25</sup> Menne-Haritz, Angelika. *Der Vorgang und was steckt dahinter? Paradoxien im Entscheidungsprozess der Verwaltung* (Speyer: Deutsche Hochschule für Verwaltungswissenschaften Speyer [Speyerer Vorträge. Heft 49], 1999), 21.

<sup>26</sup> Already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, clerical offices almost everywhere featured their own registries where all files were taken before they were transferred to the actual archive, their final resting place. This is not to say that registries were limited to the public administration. They also existed, into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in larger companies, especially in industrial and insurance companies.

under which individual items were listed in the ledger, it was possible to shift back and forth between the ledger and the index in the search for individual files. Another index that accompanied the ledger listed the persons (or, at times, the places) named in the papers that appeared on the ledger. These indices were kept in the form of books that usually ran over several years.

As a bureaucratic institution the registry stands between the office, where papers are produced, and the archive, where they are stored in perpetuity at a time when they are no longer relevant for current business. If an archive preserves those papers that are no longer needed for the dispatch of current business, the registry looked after them while they still circulated within the agency, and while it was thought that they might become relevant or necessary again for ongoing business.

The idea behind the abandonment of the registry and the diary at the Magdeburg police headquarters was that individual officials would be given more freedom to keep and maintain their own paperwork. The real objective, however, was to standardize the rules under which the (police) bureaucracy operated. As the chief of the Magdeburg police district pointed out in 1928:

In management science [...] the problem of an administration without registry [...] occupies much room. It has now been scientifically analyzed and practically proven, and it is therefore ready to be implemented. The elimination of central and departmental registries [...], the distribution of files among the officials who can now administrate their own files with the help of steadily improving office technology represents undoubtedly a big step in the direction of any genuine office reform, a.k.a., the improvement [...] of administration through simplification, acceleration and standardization of office procedures.<sup>28</sup>

Traditionally, the Prussian bureaucracy had arranged its paperwork according to so-called provenances, a principle of archivization that preserved *Akten* in chronological

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<sup>27</sup> Ernst Posner, *The Role of Records in German Administration. Archives and the Public Interest. Selected Essays by Ernst Posner* (Washington/D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1967), 95.

<sup>28</sup> N. Menzel, *Einführung, Der Aktenplan der preußischen Polizei. Entwurf* (Berlin: Kameradschaft, 1933), 3.

order according to the agency in which they originated.<sup>29</sup> The narrative-based *principle of provenance*, which was developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century, made it difficult to network data from different agencies because it was assumed that every single file could only be understood in conjunction with the other files in the same series (provenance).

The abolishment of the registry in Magdeburg and elsewhere was designed to remedy this problem by classifying all files according to their subject matter with the help of numbers. The use of the numeric system for the classification of police *Akten* represented a radical departure from the traditional method based on alphabetic writing. The number code used for this reorganisation was derived from the system invented by the American librarian N. N. Dewey for use in libraries. The Dewey system conceived of the (hypothetical) totality of all files to be organized as a whole number (1, 10), and of all the sub-categories it comprises as fractions of that totality, indexing all categories with an individual number code. By indexing the total knowledge of the police with the help of decimal fractions it became possible to conjoin concepts vertically as well as horizontally, a.k.a., between agencies on the same level in the hierarchy. Below is a sample page from the *Aktenplan* of the Prussian Police (*Politische Polizei*) as it was designed in 1928. It functions in essence like a phonebook: [ILLUSTRATION 2]

The point to the abolishment of the traditional registry and the introduction of the Dewey system for the organisation of police files was, once again, that it constituted a standard system that could, like the telephone, be used more or less uniformly all over the world. During the massive controversy that surrounded the (partial) introduction of the Dewey system in libraries in the late 1920s, it was indeed referred to both by friend and foe as a *Weltsystem*, a world system.<sup>30</sup> With the introduction of this system, the police, too, may have hoped to become once again the universal police it once was. Beyond that, the number based Dewey system demonstrates once more a weakening of alphabetic writing as the sole organizing

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Ernst Posner, "Max Lehmann and the Genesis of the Principle of Provenance." Ken Munden [ed.], *Archives & the Public Interest. Selected Essays by Ernst Posner* (Washington/D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1967), 36-44; "Il principio di provenienza" in *Archivi. Archivi d'Italia e rassegna internazionale degli archivi* (Roma: Biblioteca d'arte editrice 17, 1939), 184-199; Georg Winter, "Das Provenienzprinzip in den preußischen Staatsarchiven," in *Revista de la biblioteca, archivo y museo* 38 (1933): pp. 180-190.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Wilhelm Weinreich, "Zur Frage der Dezimal-Klassifikation," in *Minerva-Zeitschrift. Zentralblatt für die gelehrte Welt*, 5 (1929): 43.

medium used by the police in the management of its data. With the introduction of the numerical Dewey system the historical-analytical era of the police (Sherlock Holmes) gives way to a new era, that of numbers and, eventually, computers. It is hardly a coincidence that the computer put together in the apartment of his parents by the amateur painter Konrad Zuse came into being a mere 15 years after the introduction of the Dewey principle at the Berlin police and that a few years after that the first computers were used for the computation of data by the police.

The Prussian police's transfer to the *Aktenplan* at the *Polizeipräsidium* in Magdeburg went hand in hand with an effort to standardize the office hardware used by the police. This involved, among other things, the introduction of a uniform, standardized color code designed to distinguish the files of various agencies:

For the files solid folders are used. The back of the file folders has a white paper strip glued on to it that is identical for all [police, S.S.] agencies. In order to distinguish the files of the three main divisions more easily from each other they additionally receive a paper strip of three centimeters width: a green one for the administrative police, a blue one for the urban police [*Schutzpolizei*], and a yellow one for the crime squad [*Kriminalpolizei*].<sup>31</sup>

Where traditional filing methods had emphasized the historicity of the files, the new method was happy merely "marking" them. In 1928, the police headquarters in Magdeburg became an exemplary "*Musterbetrieb*" also in that it was provided with the latest developments in office technologies, the kind of machines that were often lacking or scarce in other police departments. For example the Magdeburg headquarters was supplied with more than two dozen mechanical as well as electrical typewriters and accounting machines of the well-known *Mercedes* brand whose slogan was: "*Ordnung durch Mercedes!*" ("Order Through Mercedes!"). We may be surprised to find that what appears to be the traditional domain of the police, a.k.a., the creation of order, here becomes the mission of the office media acting as it were in the police's place. In any event, the introduction of the *Aktenplan* in Magdeburg was accompanied by intense advertisement and lobbying on the part of office supply companies. Among the products these companies peddled to the police were standard

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<sup>31</sup> *Der Aktenplan der preußischen Polizei. Entwurf* (Berlin: Kameradschaft, 1933), 7.

electric typewriters, *Fernschreiber*, calculating machines, wireless telegraphs, address machines, separate telephone systems, and mechanical card indexes. Interestingly, in the many advertisements of office and organisation technologies in police publications, the efficiency and power of these machines was generally measured not in words but in numbers. One advertisement by the Berlin Adrex company for an automatic address machine announced that the machine was “capable of printing 1200 addresses every hour.”<sup>32</sup>

### **Incident Report vs. Card Index**

It is instructive to compare the way data is stored by the new, standardized and registry-less police administration with the more traditional, narrative forms of data-storage that were still used by the police at the time when the Dewey system was introduced. I have in mind in particular the so-called incident report, a piece of narrative prose that the police bureaucracy was at pains to bring up to the rigorous standards of machine-style objectivity. As narratives, incident reports struggled to adhere to a set of rules that prescribed everything from the use of the personal pronoun “I” to the descriptive measurement of varying degrees of drunkenness:

Every policeman is obliged to report everything he perceives [alle Wahrnehmungen, die er macht] [...], especially any infringements of the law to his superiors. All [...] reports have to conform strictly to the truth [...]. The incident should be related exhaustively, clearly, and precisely, without any unnecessary details. The report should consist of short sentences without any subordinate clauses so that it may be read fluently and comprehension is facilitated. Evaluative statements such as ‘in my opinion’ or ‘to my mind’ ought to be omitted.<sup>33</sup>

To the extent that it lists “everything” perceived by the observer, the police record encourages us to think of it as something akin to a camera. At the same time, the (conflicting) demand that the report should not include “any unnecessary details” reintroduces what the machine-ideal appeared to have banished, the human observer’s

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<sup>32</sup> *Der Aktenplan der preußischen Polizei. Entwurf* (Berlin: Kameradschaft, 1933), 24.

judgement. Such judgement, of course, is precisely what the camera omits as it records literally *everything* that comes before its mechanical eye. The tension between (camera)-like objectivity, on the one hand, and subjective judgement, on the other, structures the incident report even in its outward appearance. The tension between the conflicting demands two is almost tangibly present in the way such reports were formatted as the page on which incident report was written was split vertically, with the left column used for reference matter (incident, name of suspects, articles seized, etc.), and the right for the report itself. [ILLUSTRATION 3]

The tension between machine-like objectivity and subjective judgement is also apparent in the following stipulation:

In a report the facts that are the object of the illegal act [...] have to be stated with the greatest precision possible. For example, it is not sufficient to say: "The accused resisted my attempt to apprehend him." Instead the report should indicate how or by what means resistance was offered. To give an example: "N.N. violently resisted his being taken into custody by stemming his feet against the ground, shaking his fists wildly and kicking me with his feet."<sup>34</sup>

Of course, the "precision" of the phrase "N.N. violently resisted his being taken into custody by stemming his feet against the ground, shaking his fists wildly and kicking me with his feet" is questionable, hinging as it does on subjective experience. Perhaps the reason for the ambiguity implicit in incident reports, and for their notorious unreliability, is the fact that the information they dispense, no matter how objective, is contained in a narrative, and thus complies with the laws that govern narratives. As narratives, incident reports encourage a way of thinking that is implicitly or explicitly inductive and syntagmatic, and that conceives of contiguous facts as causal links in a historical chain of events. The following is an excerpt from a report included as exemplary in a police manual:

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<sup>33</sup> Max Weiß, *Die Polizeischule. Ein Lehrbuch und Leitfaden zum Unterrichte an Polizeischulen und in kriminalistischen Unterrichtskursen, ferner ein Buch zum Selbstunterrichte für Polizeianwärter und ein Nachschlagebuch für Beamte der Sicherheits-, Kriminal- und Wohlfahrtspolizei* (Dresden), 150.

<sup>34</sup> Max Weiß, *Die Polizeischule. Ein Lehrbuch und Leitfaden zum Unterrichte an Polizeischulen und in kriminalistischen Unterrichtskursen, ferner ein Buch zum Selbstunterrichte für Polizeianwärter und ein Nachschlagebuch für Beamte der Sicherheits-, Kriminal- und Wohlfahrtspolizei* (Dresden), 152.

On 7 January 1909, at half past one in the afternoon the merchant Max Kunze, Bismarckstrasse 17., II pointed out to me a man and said that he had come to his house to beg for money and that when the maid had refused him entry into the house he began to curse in the most coarse fashion. Despite the fact that the maid asked him repeatedly to leave he did not budge and instead broke the windowpane in the vestibule, which was worth 8 marks, with his cane. Only when [...] Mr Fritz Schubert, who lives in the same house, entered the scene did he leave the house, cursing all the way. There he continued to disturb the public order and deliberately jostled several ladies who were passing by. [...] I stopped the man [...] but he denied having begged for money, made noise or jostled the ladies. [...] At this point I asked the man to follow me to the police station. He said to me: “You poor miserable fellow, I will not come with you.” [“*Du trauriger, elender Kerl, mit Dir gehe ich nicht.*”] [...] Shortly before we reached the police station all of a sudden a woman approached us, shoved the suspect aside and said to me: “Let this man go, he has done nothing, he is my husband.” Then she took him and dragged him away from me so that he wanted to run away. I however reacted quickly, grabbed him and led him into the police station. The woman then also entered the station. Here the man was identified on the basis of his papers as [...].<sup>35</sup>

As a narrative, the report represents the “incident” as if it were a scene in a film script. The scene is orchestrated deftly and with great deliberation, moving from an atmospheric introduction that sets the tone to a central climax and peripetie, and then to the final *dénouement*. The report *stages* the incident reported as an urban drama punctuated by crisp syntax, direct speech and economic use of adjectives.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Prussian police increasingly introduced forms of data storage that bracketed the (narrative) representation that held the incident report hostage, without however abolishing the latter. The media I have in mind are indexes of standard-sized cards contained in boxes, the *Karhoteken*. By the late 1870s, the

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<sup>35</sup> Max Weiß, *Die Polizeischule. Ein Lehrbuch und Leitfaden zum Unterrichte an Polizeischulen und in kriminalistischen Unterrichtskursen, ferner ein Buch zum Selbstunterrichte für Polizeianwärter und ein Nachschlagebuch für Beamte der Sicherheits-, Kriminal- und Wohlfahrtspolizei* (Dresden), 155.

use of such card indexes by the police had become widespread<sup>36</sup> The *Karthotek* that came into use in Berlin in 1876 was a derivative of the *Verbrecheralbum*, the vast, multi-tome album of photographs of criminals (inspired by Bertillon's prototype) that were designed to facilitate recognition by crime witnesses and victims. The album consisted of a large number of photographs of suspects that were glued into the album according to specific criteria. The images contained information about the suspect's height and the color of his/her eyes and hair. The portraits in the Berlin album did not contain the names of the persons depicted. Instead a number referred the user to a special index where the numbers were matched by names, so that the people in the photographs could be identified without prejudice. In the *Verbrecheralbum*, lists of different types of criminals replaced the syntagmatic narrative characteristic of the incident report. The *Verbrecheralbum* used in Berlin was divided into more than 30 categories, from 1 (murderers and robbers) to 29a (international bank robbers).

However, only the use of portable, standard-sized index cards (instead of bound books like the *Verbrecheralbum*) enabled the police to network data between different albums. Such cards could easily be copied and filed into multiple boxes. If, given the nature of the crime, a criminal belonged into more categories than one, he or she could thus be classified in a variety of different ways. At the Berlin police, the images included in the *Verbrecheralbum* were glued onto index cards that were then placed in a special collection of so-called *Fahndungskarten* (investigation cards) containing all the basic information about a criminal. A color code organized the cards into male (yellow) and female (light blue, later green), and the card also contained basic information about the suspect (name, crime category, number in *Verbrecheralbum*, etc.). Whenever a card was removed from the box by an agent, a piece of paper was inserted in the box—often of a different color—that listed the inventory number, data, and signature of the card that had been taken out. The *Fahndungskartei* was designed, among other things, to function as a mobile data bank that a detective could carry with him during his hunt for a suspect. The identification of the criminal by the detective happened, at least ideally, by comparing the suspect with the photo on the card. The police detective functioned like an office clerk whose expertise consisted in his ability to master a variety of (office) media.

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<sup>36</sup> Card indexes (*Zettelkästen*) had been used by scholars and writers ever since the 18<sup>th</sup> century but it was not until 1900 that standardized versions began to appear. For a cultural history of the *Zettelkasten*,

At least seven different types of card indexes were in use by the police at the time of the *Grosze Polizeiausstellung*, from the Signal Card Index (*Merkmale Karthotek*) that was designed to facilitate the recognition of suspects according to special bodily traits to the *Steckbriefregister*, the list of persons wanted by the police. In 1920 the Berlin *Steckbriefregister* comprised of 106 boxes for male suspects and 13 boxes for female suspects, with many thousand single cards. The *Leichen- and Vermißtenkarthotek* in its turn contained information about dead bodies found by the police and about people who had been declared missing, with detailed data about their appearances.

In his writings Norbert Wiener frequently makes allusions to the dream (the nightmare) of transmitting a human being as if he or she were a message sent through a telegraph. In a way, *Karthoteken* as they were used by the police aimed to do just that. Card indexes divided the human body into a sequence of signals that could not only each be combined in any conceivable way but that could also be communicated like any other digital code. In the 1920s, the crime squad in the city of Dresden established its own *Verbrecheralbum* in the form of a card index, consisting like its counterpart in Berlin of cards made from cardboard that carried a photograph of the criminal. Inside the box these cards were arranged in horizontal lines according to the type of criminal, and in vertical rows according to the criminal's height. In this way, the tallest criminals appeared in the upper rows, and the shortest in the lower rows. Within each box there were sub-categories according to age, the shape of the nose, and the shape of the lower ear lap (*antitragus*). The six sub-categories were: 1. Nose straight with protruding *antitragus*; 2. Nose bent with protruding *antitragus*; 3. Nose bent inward; 4. Nose straight without protruding *antitragus*; 5. Nose bent without protruding *antitragus*; 6. Nose bent inward without protruding *antitragus*. The criminal as it is put together (or taken apart) by this card index mutates into a collection of discrete physical signals that can be either present (on) or absent (off). The identification of the criminal with the help of these categories was no longer a question of narrative since no syntagmatic links between them were required.

Similar card-based techniques had been in use in censuses for some time. Here, a card was subdivided into even fields corresponding to a set of categories [ILLUSTRATION 4] that were then filled with a standard set of data. It was cards

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see Markus Krajewski, *Zettelwirtschaft. Die Geburt der Kartei aus dem Geiste der Bibliothek* (Berlin:

like these that in the 1890s inspired Hermann Hollerith, of the US Census Bureau, to invent his automatic tabulating machines, machines that by the time of the *Grosze Polizeiausstellung* had been in use at the Berlin police for more than a decade. Allegedly, Hollerith had the idea punching holes into the census cards as he was watching a conductor on the train.<sup>37</sup> Hollerith's punched cards made any human classification of the cards in a *Karthotek* unnecessary. They not only represented a virtually infinite archive of records stored according to prescribed standards, they also indicated that statistics was fast becoming one of the most central areas of data processing—at the police and elsewhere.

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Kadmos Kulturverlag, 2002).

<sup>37</sup> More immediate predecessors, of course, are Jacquards famous looms and Charles Babbage's designs for his *Difference Engine*.