

Research reveals how science changed methods of execution

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A University of Cincinnati sociologist combed through newspaper accounts of 19th and 20th century Ohio executions to understand how executions became more "professional and scientific" in character. Annulla Linders, an associate professor of sociology, presented the paper Aug. 9 at the 104th annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco.

Linders used two late 19th century executions to illustrate the transition from hanging to electrocution. Central to that transition, Linders says, was the audience of executions, especially journalists and physicians.

Newspapers - including The Cincinnati Enquirer and The Columbus Dispatch - and other commentators praised the swift hanging of Valentine Wagner at the Ohio State Penitentiary on Columbus on July 31, 1885 - the first execution under a new Ohio law that called for all executions to be conducted at the Ohio State Penitentiary in Columbus. The law also ordered witnesses to the execution to be comprised almost entirely of professionals.

A new execution chamber, with a state-of-the-art gallows equipped with padding to muffle noise, was created to meet the standards of the law. Wagner's execution was heralded as swift and efficient, with Wagner's death described as nearly instantaneous and painless.

Yet, 12 years later, the April 21, 1897 Cincinnati Enquirer declared hanging "a relic of barbarism in Ohio" as the newspaper covered the

state's first electrical execution of two convicted murderers, Willey Haas and William Wiley.

"Professionals influenced the execution in two distinct - if ultimately inseparably linked - ways," Linders states in the paper. "First, because they were middle-class, they infused the understanding of executions with a new emphasis on propriety, dignity and decorum. And, second, because they were professionals, they expected executioners to be competent, the equipment to work, and the proceedings to be efficient. In combination, these two elements, which we might call taste and efficiency, were key components in the production of the modern, rational execution event where speed and efficiency are of essence and mishaps, visible signs of pain, and emotional outbursts in the audience are signs of failure," writes Linders.

"...The arrangement of executions has remained under scrutiny as a contested and problematic area of state authority, and has continued to prompt procedural and technical innovations to reduce - and reduce the appearance of - pain and suffering, and thus make the execution more palatable for those who watch the execution" Linders concludes. "This means that the scientific gaze, in a sense, has been turned onto itself in that it provides a critical eye directed precisely at the very arrangements it compelled into being."

Source: University of Cincinnati ([news](#) : [web](#))

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