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Colouring the invisible: The figure of the ‘black drug dealer’ as a projection of socially produced fears

In 1997/98, the figure of the ‘black drug dealer’ featured very prominently in Hamburg newspapers and magazines, which discussed the situation in the Schanzenviertel, a well-known quarter in the city. The media not only used ‘black’ stereotypes in their portrayal of the destructive powers of drug dealing but also discursive patterns that we commonly associate with modern antisemitism, such as abstractness, social disease, the fear of subversion and disintegration of communities. Ultimately, this analysis shows how the visual and the non-visual interact and, more importantly, depend on one another in perception and representation of ethnic difference.

A black African in designer jeans and jacket walks from the underground station Sternschanze over to the drug dealers’ meeting point in front of the kiosk. He takes a packet of Marlboro Lights out of his pocket and drops the foil carelessly on the asphalt. Two policemen are watching. ‘Did you see that? Why don’t you do anything?’ we ask.

This is the opening scene of an article in the Hamburger Abendblatt, one of the two major local newspapers, about drug problems in an inner city quarter, the Schanzenviertel. In this study, I will try to suggest how such an article could be written; that is, why journalists of a moderately conservative, respected newspaper call the police because somebody dropped a piece of foil and why these sentences do not seem to have provoked any bewilderment among editors or readers. As I will show, it is the skin colour of the ‘perpetrator’ that turns this obvious absurdity into an – at least for many – plausible reaction. But it does so only in a specific historical situation, as a result of the intersection of traditional racist stereotypes with a number of socially determined discourses that load colour with a specific meaning.

The quoted article appeared at the peak of a heated debate that evolved from the mid-nineties around the issue of ‘black drug dealers’ in the Schanzenviertel. After giving an outline of the situation that triggered that debate,

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1 This essay is based on a collage of interviews and other sound material related to the topic. The program was produced for a free, non-commercial radio station in Hamburg and subsequently broadcasted by other independent radio stations in Germany. Cf. Christine Achinger and Stefan Müller: “Wenn man jetzt sagt: gegen die Dealer, dann ist das doch im Grunde gegen dieses System”. Alltagswahn und Rassismus im Schanzenviertel. In: FSK Rundfunkprogramm. Hamburg 22 October 1997.
I will sketch how well-known racist images and manichaean narrations structured the media presentation of the events. I will furthermore present some related media issues of the same period and show how these discourses contributed to the creation of new facets of anti-black stereotypes: The presentation of ‘organised crime’ helped to cast the individual dealer as agent of a secret, evil and all-pervasive power purportedly responsible for a whole range of threatening social developments. This debate thus produced a focus on ‘dangerous’ groups of the population, such as migrants, a focus that also characterised the discussion on the new crime prevention strategies of the New York City police. Both debates manifested and reproduced a perception of a range of problems as interconnected symptoms of a social disease and thus facilitated processes that held the alien immigrant responsible for a figurai pollution of the body politic in ways not dissimilar to certain features of modern antisemitism. The event in question thus seems to be located in a broader context of political interests, economic crisis and collective fears.2

‘Our quarter’

The Schanzenviertel in Hamburg is an ethnically diverse quarter with a lively street life and offers an established left-wing, alternative infra-structure. The Schanze, also frequently referred to by residents as ”our quarter”, is one of the few inner city quarters of Hamburg where rents are still affordable for workers, students or people on benefit. Appreciated by some for its trendy character, including a traditionally high tolerance towards non-bourgeois ways of living, the quarter is detested by others for being dirty, and full of ‘foreigners’. Partly due to its ‘Latin quarter’ image, the fairly poor area has always also been attractive for parts of the upper middle class, and in recent years, tendencies of gentrification have been clearly visible. But since the early nineties, the situation has changed markedly, with homelessness and drug-trafficking booming in the Schanzenviertel. The area is not only affected by the dramatic increase of the number of homeless people in Hamburg; in the last decade the Schanzenviertel has also become one of the main street markets for soft drugs, for cocaine, heroine and synthetic drugs. Thus, today, the quarter confronts one at every turn with another reminder of an increasingly bleak German social reality.3


3 The perceived dramatic increase of homelessness, drug abuse and drug dealing