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Pieter Spierenburg

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Compte rendu Review

Schreiner (Klaus) & Schwerhoff (Gerd), (Eds.), *Verletzte Ehre. Ehrkonflikte in Gesellschaften des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit*, Köln, Böhlau Verlag, 1995 (ISBN: 3-412-09095-6).

Honor has recently become a hot topic among historians. Medievalists, of course, have been familiar with the subject for long, as a recurrent theme in the history of knightly behavior and chivalry. Increasingly, it is recognized that notions of honor were not restricted to the elites. Honor was equally important to persons from lower echelons of society. Court records were an important source in this respect and research in judicial archives has stimulated historians' interest in lower-class honor. In court cases, both offenders and plaintiffs may be motivated by honor: while some crimes were experienced by the victim as an encroachment upon his or her honor, other crimes were a way in which the defendant had sought to vindicate his or her honor. When we read carefully, often between the lines, in such cases, we can learn a lot about the mentality and world view of the actors involved. Among the pioneers of this approach are North American historians dealing with Europe (Natalie Davis, James Farr, Elizabeth and Thomas Cohen) and French historians like Robert Muchembled and Claude Gauvard. In Germany, representatives of the older tradition of *gerechliche Volkskunde* (judicial folklore studies) already paid attention to popular conceptions of honor. German historians are now catching up; scholars like Martin Dinges and Gerd Schwerhoff, both present in the volume reviewed here, already made important contributions. In the Netherlands, finally, the interest in matters of honor is also on the rise, reflected by Hans de Waardt's presence in this volume.

The editors of this collection of essays explicitly criticize those approaches and theories -which they consider especially characteristic for sociologists- which fail to recognize that ordinary people have conceptions of honor. This does not mean that the collection focuses on ordinary people alone: aristocrats, even princes, get their due share of attention. Not every essay is based on court records. Especially for the articles dealing with the middle ages, familiar sources like chronicles, charters and courtly literature are still the most appropriate ones. For the remaining essays, judicial records were important in one way or another. The collection results from a conference held in 1993. Frank Henderson Stewart's book on the theory of honor appeared a year later, probably too late for the editors to take account of it. On the other hand, they do seem to be focused a little bit too much on German literature. When the editors discuss masculinity, I miss a reference to Robert Nye's work on France; when they discuss the guilds and infamous occupations, I miss a reference to a work which, though published in 1971, still is an invaluable source of ideas: Mack Walker's *German Home Towns*. Both the editors and Dinges, finally, stress the novelty of ren-

dering Bourdieu's concept of the capital of honor as *Vermögen* rather than *Kapital*. However, it is the Dutch sociologist Cees Schmidt who first translated Bourdieu's categories as *vermogen* (*Om de Eer van de Familie*, 1986).

The usual method employed by historians dealing with honor is that of interpretation. The author takes a particular incident, an exchange of words between two people in the street for example, and relates the events as far as the sources disclose them. Then the author proceeds to explain to the reader what everything means. The interpretation focuses on the ritual significance of words and gestures and the symbolic layers they touch upon. Certainly, this method has increased our understanding of the way in which men and women from various social groups in different societies experienced their world. So does this volume. Although the method in question carries the danger of over-interpretation, most contributions do not indulge in it. I, for one, have learned a lot from the authors.

Sometimes the interpretation extends to a sequence of events, as in Jörg Rogge's contribution on honor as a factor in political conflict in late medieval cities. Thus, a citizen of Stralsund from artisanal background became burgomaster in the late fourteenth century because of his successful expedition against a group of pirates. His military success brought him honor, but this was resented by the old ruling families, whose honor was based on their patrician lineage. In Braunschweig, a century later, it was again a man from humble descent who penetrated the political elite, with a particular district of the town as his power base. His opponents drew on a rich repertoire of dishonorable symbols in an effort to damage his reputation and hence his position. Rogge's study of the cultural repertoire of honor is especially insightful, because it is firmly embedded in an analysis of social relations.

Other remarkable contributions include Robert Jütte's article on notions of honor in Jewish communities in the German-speaking world. This is a subject not much investigated yet. Jütte concludes, among other things, that among Jews honor was less tied to a person's status position and more to his reputation and his religious qualities. Valentin Groebner's contribution is valuable because it touches on female honor. He relates how, in Nürnberg around 1500, unchaste women stood the risk of having their nose injured, in a few cases even cut off. Usually, this was done by a woman to another woman who had an affair with her husband. As an explicitly physical act of defamation, this is a telling example of honor's – also female honor's – association with the body. Schwerhoff shows how a 'honorific' interpretation can put a traditional subject in a new light. Blasphemy, he argues, was considered by contemporaries primarily as an encroachment upon God's honor. Since God never showed up to demand satisfaction from the person insulting him, earthly judges acted as his stand-in. Punishment for blasphemy, then, was seen as the ultimate act of honorific violence: God's revenge upon his defamator. Not every contribution, to be sure, strikes me as novel. Burghartz's article on female honor, for example, is based on the marital court of Basel, already studied by Safley (*Let No Man Put Asunder*, 1984). Burghartz's data do not seem to add much to Safley's study.

My only other point of criticism concerns the relative lack of an analysis of long-term historical change. In their introduction, the editors reject a simple theory of modernization, in which the market takes the place of honor as the focus of orientation for modern people's behavior. I agree. But what about long-term changes in conceptions of honor? De Waardt's contribution, one of the few with a mostly theoretical character, highlights the difficulties stemming from an approach based on a static and closed anthropological universe. His problem is straightforward: why is it

that an insult to honor must be revenged by violence? To answer that question, in my opinion, the historical-anthropological analysis of Anton Blok (which De Waardt mentions just in passing, to criticize a point of detail) cannot be ignored. Instead, he tries his luck with Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, in particular their well-known concept of liminality. Turner's theory, De Waardt says, has had an ever-increasing success. Indeed, I would say, its success paradoxically implies its failure: every group, event, place, etc. can easily be described as liminal; everything can be liminal, so the concept is worthless. De Waardt's conclusion, that an injury to a person's honor and an injury to his bodily integrity are both liminal acts, does not have much explanatory value. The essentially static theory of 'liminality' cannot account for changes in notions of honor; it fails to acknowledge that the ties between violence and honor may become loosened in particular societies.

Despite these points of criticism, this is an important book. The editors have done a good job in putting together a set of coherent essays (the subdivision of themes may have been invented at the last moment, because it is only to be found in the table of contents, not in the text). Although a bibliography is lacking, this is compensated by the fact that abbreviated citations in footnotes always refer the reader to the note giving the full citation. I recommend the book to everyone interested in socio-cultural history.

Pieter C. Spierenburg
Erasmus University
(Rotterdam, Nederland)

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