Pieter Spierenburg, *Violence and Punishment. Civilizing the Body through Time*

Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, 223 p., ISBN 9 780745 653495

John Carter Wood

Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/1537>

DOI : 10.4000/chs.1537

ISSN : 1663-4837

Éditeur

Librairie Droz

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 octobre 2014

Pagination : 158-161

ISBN : 978-2-600-01854-8

ISSN : 1422-0857

Référence électronique

John Carter Wood, « Pieter Spierenburg, *Violence and Punishment. Civilizing the Body through Time* », *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* [En ligne], Vol. 18, n°2 | 2014, mis en ligne le 09 avril 2015, consulté le 22 septembre 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/1537> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chs.1537>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 22 septembre 2020.

© Droz

Pieter Spierenburg, *Violence and Punishment. Civilizing the Body through Time*

Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, 223 p., ISBN 9 780745 653495

John Carter Wood

RÉFÉRENCE

Pieter Spierenburg, *Violence and Punishment. Civilizing the Body through Time*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, 223 p., ISBN 9 780745 653495.

- 1 In *Violence and Punishment*, Pieter Spierenburg presents revised versions of previously published essays and articles, some appearing here in English for the first time. Given Spierenburg's status as a leading historian of interpersonal violence in Europe, these essays will doubtless (and deservedly) receive significant attention. It will come as no surprise to those familiar with Spierenburg's *œuvre* that they are unified by an approach based on a critical engagement with Norbert Elias's historical-sociological model of the "civilising process". Apart from a conceptually oriented introduction and an epilogue with the author's personal reflections on becoming a crime historian, the book is organised into three sections : "Violence", "Punishment and Social Control" and "Civilizing the Body in Human History".
- 2 The first section, "Violence", opens with a chapter on long-term homicide trends in Amsterdam from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries. Spierenburg argues that the homicide rate in Amsterdam declined from approximately 47 per 100,000 inhabitants in the mid fifteenth century to one that fluctuated between 1 and 1.5 per 100,000 at the beginning of the nineteenth century (p. 37). As in other European countries the rate rose significantly after the Second World War, but Spierenburg emphasises that many homicides in that city now take place within "unpacified islands" related to the criminal underworld and are disproportionately committed by those who "are

marginal from an ethnic or cultural point of view”: the effective marginalisation of homicide, he argues, still confirms the civilising process (p. 37). The second chapter takes a more qualitative perspective, focusing on shifts in legal definitions and popular attitudes. Questioning the Dutch self-image of a distinctively peaceful nation, Spierenburg’s analysis differentiates among Jewish-Christian conflicts (“whose frequency and intensity exceeded the level observed in most other parts of Europe”), “popular duels” (where the Dutch were in the “median” range among European nations) and “formal duels” (in which Dutch elites comparatively rarely participated) (p. 55). The third chapter compares European violence to that in East Asia and the United States, the latter ultimately standing out as a “thoroughly modern country” with “relatively high homicide rates” (p. 72), a pattern that Spierenburg attributes to a historically incomplete state “monopoly of violence” (p. 64).

- 3 The section on “Punishment and Social Control” opens with a theoretical discussion comparing the work of Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias. Revising his earlier and decidedly negative evaluation of Foucault, Spierenburg now finds some points of methodological overlap between the French thinker and Elias (notably their historical approaches and common emphases on the omnipresence of power). Spierenburg concludes, however, that Elias came closer to achieving the right balance between recognising the historical agency of “people of flesh and blood” and acknowledging that “people generate processes that are beyond their control as individuals” (p. 91). Building on themes broached earlier, Spierenburg’s fifth chapter returns to the historical shift that raised the threshold for acceptable violence between the early modern and contemporary periods. In earlier periods, “informal social control” – whether violent self-defence or the community punishment of thieves – was broadly accepted; however, margins of tolerated violent “self-help” have declined markedly, particularly since the Second World War. Discounting explanations based either on “the de-hierarchization of society or industrialization”, the author emphasises instead “the process of individualization which led to a heightened sense of privacy also in working-class neighborhoods” (p. 103). The last chapter in the section turns more exclusively to “formal” social controls as imposed by criminal justice systems through a comparative examination of European and American differences. While acknowledging a key trans-Atlantic difference (the continuing use of capital punishment in the United States), Spierenburg analyses how both Europe and America have witnessed a shift toward greater punitiveness in recent decades.
- 4 The final section, “Civilizing the Body” turns away from the previous sections’ focus on violence, attending instead to social behaviours such as table manners, public celebrations and rituals related to death. Conduct books, of course, were central to Elias’s original formulations of his theory of the “civilising process”; here, Spierenburg applies a similar method to Dutch evidence, discovering a process of “aristocratization” (p. 149) among the (largely bourgeois) Dutch elite between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. This process was driven by pressures both “from below” (elites’ desire to differentiate themselves from the middle classes) and “from above” (the struggle for commercially oriented Dutch elites to be taken seriously by other nations’ aristocratic elites) (p. 145). The chapter on festivals features a largely conceptual discussion of key ideas in the historiography and sociology of public celebrations – such as “liminality”, “rituals of status reversal” and “collective solidarity”. Spierenburg also finds the civilising process operating here: “The trinity of sex, food and violence, which was so characteristic of festivals in preindustrial villages and neighbourhoods,

gave way to orderly merriment, often carefully programmed” (p. 161). The final main chapter examines Johan Goudsblom’s theses regarding the interrelationship of death, magic and the origins of religion.

- 5 There is a great deal to welcome about this book, not least since Spierenburg is well placed to embed his arguments in a useful and readable synthesis of criminal justice history across national and linguistic boundaries. Despite his recurrent focus on Dutch evidence, what emerges is of European (and even global) relevance. It is much to the author’s credit (and not at all a matter of course in the wake of the cultural turn) that he is willing to make clear and often convincing claims about broad historical trends in actual human behaviour between the early modern and contemporary periods, whether the long-term decline in serious interpersonal violence, growing sensitivities toward physical suffering, shifts from informal community control to formalised state regulation or the impact of “state formation” on everyday behaviour in Europe, Asia and North America (from the intricacies of table manners to the treatment of prisoners). Even if occasionally marred by jarring shifts in register and a few brusque opinions about the work of fellow scholars, the book makes many intriguing and insightful observations, arguing, for example, that increasing punitiveness towards prisoners may be driven not by an overall decline in sympathies but rather their relocation from perpetrators to victims (p. 122) or the situation that “Americans are inclined to a lesser recognition of the existence of a monopoly of force” and therefore “have a lesser inclination to make demands for restraint on it” (p. 124).
- 6 However strong the book’s methodology when it comes to analysing statistics or cultural “meaning”, I could not help noting what might be described as a psychological void at its centre, one that it shares with much contemporary historical work on violence and crime. This is not to say that psychology is absent : indeed, references to aggression or self-control and desires for dominance, lust and respect abound. However, the human psychology that generates them remains at best implicit : there is little effort to understand how these diverse motivations cohere (and compete) in what might be called a universal human nature (which the book’s globally comparative aspirations would seem to demand) or to make even glancing reference to cognitive or evolutionary psychology or to the neurosciences.¹ There are findings and arguments in those fields relevant to many topics addressed here : status hierarchies, identity formation, kinship, group allegiances and sexuality. For example, what Spierenburg characterises as the “riddle” of the “tenacious link” between homicidal violence and male honour would become less mysterious (though no less worthy of analysis) in the light of three decades of work on this topic by Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, scholars who additionally provide compelling arguments for the need to separate out blood relatives from other forms of “intimate” relationships when examining violence, a distinction that Spierenburg ardently resists (13).²
- 7 Although the book’s subtitle is “civilizing the body through time”, Spierenburg’s approach means he’s dealing ultimately less with *bodies* than with *discourses about them*. Although the largely philosophical or medical discourses on the body considered here are certainly justifiable as a research focus, it is not always made clear how they are connected to the causes of actual violence (such as knife fights) or to popular attitudes toward violence, the organisation of punishment regimes, the omnipresence of “power” or the content of etiquette books. In addition to its many powerful insights into criminal justice history, *Violence and Punishment*, therefore, perhaps despite itself,

makes an eloquent argument for historians to improve our knowledge of actual human bodies, in particular the brains (and therefore minds) they possess.³

NOTES

1. That connecting the civilising process to such psychological perspectives might be useful is suggested by Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature : Why Violence Has Declined*, London, Penguin, 2011.
2. Martin Daly, Margo Wilson, *Homicide*, Hawthorne, New York, Aldine De Gruyter, 1988) : on the topics noted, see p. 17-35 and 123-86.
3. An argument I have made at greater length in “A Change of Perspective : Integrating Evolutionary Psychology into the Historiography of Violence”, *British Journal of Criminology*, 2011, 51, p. 479-98.