Wolfgang Behringer, *Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria : Popular Magic, Religious Zealotry and Reason of State in Early Modern Europe*

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be sought for a variety of reasons, perhaps most often because they are cheaper than going to law, because they allow participants in a dispute to maintain honour or reputation more easily, or because they are less disruptive on interpersonal, familial, or community relations than fighting a lawsuit through to the end. Infrajudicial practices may have been very varied, but they provided an important, familiar, and flexible means of conflict resolution, often as or perhaps more effective than the resources of official justice. Despite its lack of precision, and its inherent ambiguities to which we must always be alert, the concept of 'infrajudiciare' is an indispensable research tool for the historian of the law and the operation of legal systems.

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Wolfgang Behringer, *Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria: Popular Magic, Religious Zealotry and Reason of State in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xxiii + 476 p., ill., ISBN 0 521 48258 5

This is an important study of the history of witchcraft, even though the differences between this translation and the original German version published in 1987 are negligible. Since then the flood of studies on the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the early modern European beliefs in witchcraft and magic has only risen. But every expert on this field will see this monograph as a major contribution to this field of interest. Since 1987 Behringer's book has reached a sort of paradigmatic status in the German historiography and it might very well be that this English version will acquire a comparable position. The first methodological chapter for instance will be a useful introduction for any student preparing a study on the field of early modern cultural history. Focusing on two older regional 'paradigmatic' studies: Macfarlane's monograph on Essex (1970) and Midelfort's book on the German south-west (1972), Behringer points to the influence exerted by the nature of their sources on their conclusions. Macfarlane had argued that the rise of the number of the trial for witchcraft had been brought about by the introduction of a sort of proto-capitalism in the village communities of Essex. Midelfort on the other hand had put much weight on the importance of religious motives. Both these conclusions had benefits but they could not be applied to other regions than the surroundings where they had been developed. But it is clear that these persecutions were not prompted by local conditions alone. Almost everywhere in Europe the numbers and intensity of these prosecutions suddenly rose at the end of the sixteenth century to levels never seen before. Behringer endeavours to present an explanation for this phenomenon that is not restricted in applicability by purely local circumstances. That does not mean however that his study does not have a regional scope. He focuses on the region that is now the 'free state' of Bavaria, one of the major federal states of modern Germany. Under the ancien régime this region was a collection of one large political unity, the Duchy of Bavaria, several free, so-called imperial, cities and a number of more or less autonomous secular and church-domains.

A dazzling amount of sources was available for this research. One of these will catch the special attention of the reader: the card index of witchcraft trials in the

Third Reich that was set up in the 1930s and 40s on the orders of Himmler himself by the *H-Sonderkommando*, a special section of the SS.

After a brief survey of the quantity of the trials in Bavaria, and the introduction of the demonological interpretation of witchcraft there, a series of factors is examined that may have influenced the conjuncture of the trials. Of these the effect of agrarian crises and the role of counter-reformation ideologues such as the originally Dutch Jesuit Petrus Canisius are the most important.

Round 1590 all Western Europe was flooded by a springtide of trials and Bavaria was no exception in this, although it was not hit as hard as neighbouring Baden-Württemberg and Franconia. It was only after this explosive outburst that opinions concerning the desirability or acceptability of these persecutions came to follow confessional dividing lines. Protestants became more and more critical of the clear irregularities that beset these trials, whereas the conviction that the witches' sect had to be extirpated only grew among counter-reformatory Catholics. This last group bore most of the responsibility for the onslaught by which the Franconian Prince-Bishoprics were hit after 1600. In 1598, with the accession of Duke Maximilian I, the Counter-Reformation also gained momentum in the Duchy of Bavaria. But so did the opposition to the persecution as the legally trained Ducal Councillors came to realise that most witchcraft trials were anything but well-ordered judicial procedures. As a result their number was restrained and their character in the author's words 'domesticated'. From time to time the pyres flared up again, the last execution taking place in 1775 in the domain of the Prince-Abbot of Kempten, a high church-official with the ominous name of Schreckenstein who held full secular power. But despite this late date, it is clear that the trials in the German south-east never attained the massive and ruthless character they had in adjoining territories or in other Catholic parts of the Empire like for instance Westphalia.

In combination with Midelfort's classic Behringer's monograph pretty much covers the history of the witchcraft trials in southern Germany. But its importance does not lie so much in this geographical aspect, but in the explanatory model Behringer presents. A large part of the historiography of witchcraft still has a rather parochial character. Prosecutions in tiny domains or territories are often described in great detail, but hardly or not analysed as a socio-cultural phenomenon and the benefits of a comparative approach are too seldom exploited to the fullest. The power of this book is the endeavour to explain why people, not only in south-western Germany, but also in other parts of Europe, were at intervals motivated to smoke out people assumed to be all too keen on ruining their fellow human beings. Behringer quite convincingly shows that every major wave of trials was preceded by a series of crop failures and food crises. Not every bad harvest was followed by a sudden rise in number of the trials, but each of these concentrations did indeed come to pass in the wake of a prolonged period of extremely high food prices¹.

This is a challenging interpretation. It is no wonder therefore that an examination of his thesis is by now a standard ingredient of every profound study of witchcraft by researchers with enough command of the German language to understand the original edition. This translation will make it possible to test it in a more interna-

¹ A few years before the original edition of this book appeared, the German scholar Decker found this same correlation in Westphalia: Rainer Decker, 'Die Hexenverfolgungen im Herzogtum Westfalen', *Westfälische Zeitschrift* 131/132 (1981/1982) 345, 359-360.

tional context. The first attempts to do so have already been made. It seems for instance that the ready supply of grains imported from the Baltic was one of the main reasons why in Holland witchcraft was never a major concern and why the prosecution of this crime practically stopped already before the year 1600.

Are there no critical remarks then that could be made about this book? There is of course the standard critique that can be brought in when a translation is published, namely that the author has not used this opportunity to update his analysis and integrated new literature and view-points. But in this case this would mean that the author would have been forced to write an altogether new book. On the other hand, there are adjustments that in my opinion should not have been avoided. It is for example a bit peculiar, to find in an English text a reference to the German translation of an article by Mary Douglas (p. 5 n. 22). It would not have been too much if the references had been adjusted accordingly to the language in use. However, what really strikes as odd is the fact that the card index of the SS *H-Sonderkommando* is still presented here as a thorough and trustworthy source. In a volume edited by a.o. Behringer that was published in 1999, but of which the contributions were composed several years earlier, it is argued that these SS-researchers were often rather sloppy². And it appears that their work became more slovenly when Himmler had forgotten about their activities. A note informing the reader about this new insight would have been useful.

A more methodological critique relates to the source-material in a more general sense. In his presentation Behringer pays much attention to the magical beliefs and practices described in his sources. This of course, is an absolute necessity. If we want to understand why things happened as they did, came about in a particular sequence and went into a specific direction, we will have to analyse the belief in witchcraft as an element of the culture in which it existed. But one can ask whether it suffices to look for that purpose almost only to criminal records. After all, a criminal procedure was an exceptional development even in periods when trials were staged by the dozens or for that matter by the hundreds. And it can be doubted if these records, however rich and informative they sometimes are, are broad enough to enable the researcher to distinguish the usual from the exceptional in the ideas and beliefs held by specific social groups at a given moment. Material from other sources as for instance slander trials should in my opinion also be drawn into the analysis to reach a more balanced impression. On the other hand however, Behringer's presentation of the magical beliefs of the inhabitants of Bavaria in the early-modern period makes a convincing impression. For this and other reasons, it can only be concluded that this is an important book and it can be assumed that it will be of use to many scholars, both to specialists of the history of witchcraft and to other people.

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² Sönke Lorenz a.o. eds., *Himmlers Hexenkartothek. Das Interesse des Nationalsozialismus an der Hexenverfolgung* (Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 1999).