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Watson (Katherine D.) (ed.), *Assaulting the Past. Violence and Civilization in Historical Context.*

Houndmills (Palgrave Macmillan), 2007, 271 pp., ISBN 978 0 230 01945 / Newcastle (Cambridge Scholars Publishing), 2007, 315 pp., ISBN 1 84718 1058.

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- 1 Violence is a booming subject. Even few specialists manage to participate in all historical conferences organized around the theme. In 2005 there were two in England alone and this reviewer attended one of them (as a commentator, which leaves me free to review both volumes). The volumes resulting from these conferences appeared in 2007. It testifies once more to the popularity of the subject of violence that both editors were able to find a publisher, despite the growing hesitation about edited collections. Even appropriate book titles are scarce: the main title of one of the volumes under review here had also been planned for a collection, appearing in 2008, that I am co-

editing, so we had to change ours (although the project on which it is based has been running under that name since 2003). Geographic indications, on the other hand, might have been appropriate, but they are conspicuously absent from the titles of both collections. Mexico (one and one and a half contribution in the respective collections) and New Zealand (one half contribution) are the only non-European countries represented. Whereas the Carroll volume has France as a second country present several times, the Watson volume is geared overwhelmingly toward England. Both collections also contain a few philosophical essays that focus on no geographic unit in particular.

- 2 Then there is the question of theory. Understandably, the discussion in this field is dominated by the towering figure of Norbert Elias, whose theory of civilizing processes is generally considered the only viable explanation for the long-term decline of violence observed in Europe. As usual, Elias' opponents are content with criticizing him and offer few alternatives. The respective editors take opposite sides, as Stuart Carroll is largely hostile and Katherine Watson mostly sympathetic to Elias. Watson has consistently turned her volume into an engagement with the theory of civilizing processes, as the word «civilization» in the title indicates. Each contributor discusses Elias' work at some point, although the extent of the discussion varies a lot. The Carroll volume, on the other hand, is not consistently anti-Elias. In fact, if we may rely on the index, only two authors besides the editor refer to Elias or the civilizing process at all and one of them, John Carter Wood, is largely sympathetic. Thus, the burden of the attack rests on the shoulders of Carroll himself and Michel Nassiet. One of their major points concerns the persistence of feuding in France until the eve of Louis XIV's reign. That is, a number of aristocratic conflicts can be observed, sometimes involving revenge and at other times leading to a duel. Carroll and Nassiet have not attempted to quantify these conflicts, but they seem to have been numerous especially in the unsettled times of the wars of religion and in some unruly regions up to the years of the Fronde. Needless to say, nothing of this would have surprised Elias. France around 1600, moreover, was no longer like the feud-ridden middle ages and Claude Gauvard, hardly an admirer of Elias, posits a relative decline of feuding in France since the late fourteenth century already.
- 3 For the rest, Carroll's criticisms of the theory of civilization remain vague and unconvincing, based on the usual misunderstandings and dubious claims. Readers of his introduction can judge for themselves. Let me just add one quotation. According to Carroll the work of Elias and the scholars inspired by him is characterized by «simplistic approaches to the relationship between agency and structure» (p. 16). This may come as a surprise: My approach to this relationship is not even simplistic but non-existent! Although I use the word structure sometimes, I do not believe that there are opposites called structure and agency out there somehow. To be sure, the Watson volume also contains a few contributions by authors whose comments on the theory of civilization make little sense to at least this reviewer. Thus, David Nash identifies an «anti-civilizing process» and Steve Hall a «pseudo-pacification process». Nash bases his argument on the premise, shared by more scholars, that the definition of violence should include a lot more social activities than the infliction of physical hurt and in particular his subject, blasphemy. One of the reasons for considering blasphemy as violence is that eighteenth-century Englishmen allegedly thought that way, because they viewed blasphemy as an integral part of robbery. One highwayman tried in 1747

«swore in a blasphemous manner that he would shoot him dead» (p. 62: quote from the Old Bailey records). Presumably, the highwayman had said to his victim something like «I will blow your goddamn brains off» and the clerk rendered it in a bowdlerized way. Is this proof for a mental equation of blasphemy and violence? If a robber nowadays says «I will blow your fucking brains off», Nash's colleague in 2300 will conclude that twenty-first-century people equated sex and violence.

- 4 On the whole, in both volumes, there is no correlation between the intensity of an author's engagement with Elias' theory and the quality of his or her contribution. One of the most interesting contributions to the Watson volume, the closing one by the editor herself, does provide a creative elaboration of the theory of civilization. She discusses serial murder, asking whether its apparently growing prevalence since the 1960s is due to its being a feature of an increasingly interdependent society or, conversely, it is an example of a decivilizing spurt. She broadens the discussion by including serial poisoners, who were especially active in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although some have been identified as early as the seventeenth. This is a promising perspective, even though I would tend to draw a sharper line between the poisoners, as multiple murderers, and the «lust-killing» emerging after the mid-nineteenth century, for which I would reserve the term serial murder. In view of her concentration on the Anglo-Saxon world and her contention that few adolescents become serial killers, it would have been interesting if she had considered the work of Kerstin Brückweh (CHS 10,2; see also her 2006 book) on the young German Jürgen Bartsch (which presumably appeared too late to be considered).
- 5 One of the most interesting contributions to the Carroll volume, by Steven Hughes, does not refer to Elias at all. Nevertheless he presents a cogent story. Hughes is also the only author, in either volume, who makes extensive use of visual sources. He deals with the representation of daggers and swords in liberal and fascist Italy. Around 1900 swords constituted a very positive image for the Italian elites, who were prone to dueling, especially for perceived insults from parliamentary opponents or the press, but denied a sense of honor to lower-class men. Consequently, they viewed the knife as a negative symbol, marking Italy's bad reputation in the eyes of Northern Europeans. Although the young Mussolini had fought a few duels himself, the fascists inverted the values attached to these two symbols. They discouraged dueling and consciously promoted the image of the knife as symbolizing the aggressive vigor of the plebeian section of the Italian people. However, instead of standing for purely personal honor, the new image of the knife was integrated into the fascist ideology of national unity. Other interesting contributions to the Carroll volume include the essays by Richard Cust and Andrew Hopper on the Court of Chivalry in Stuart England and by Martin Blinkhorn on kidnap for ransom in Southern Europe in the half century preceding the Great War. The first argues that litigation came to serve as an acceptable alternative to a challenge to a duel and the second draws on personal documents from kidnap victims and cleverly analyzes the figuration that they, their captors, the local population and the authorities formed together. Rather than a few outstanding contributions, the Watson volume has a number of solid ones on subjects such as early industrial communities, comparative statistics of violence, homicidal women, Irish murder, violence and insanity, and domestic violence.
- 6 The two essays by Caroline Dodds on human sacrifice in the Aztec Empire deserve special mention as well. She and John Carter Wood are the only authors present in both

collections. Although there is some overlap between Dodds' contributions, the focus of each is different and they read as largely complementary. Whereas the one in the Carroll volume is devoted specifically to the sacrifice of women, the other deals with gender questions more broadly. In addition she discusses the apparent contradiction, for us as well as for the Spanish conquerors, between the bloody sacrifices and the orderly society around the metropolis that was Tenochtitlan. The Aztec Empire was at least as pacified, centralized and controlled as contemporary Spain or France. So did the ritual killing of women and men constitute an anomaly? It is always hazardous to juxtapose and compare elements from widely diverging societies, but my suggestion nevertheless would be to compare Aztec religious sacrifice with public executions in sixteenth-century Europe. As Peter Schuster and Mitchell Merback have shown, European executions had assumed a decidedly religious character by 1500. This politico-religious ceremony served to underpin the still unstable monopolies of violence in monarchies and republics. Human sacrifice had similar functions for the Aztecs.

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