Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies

Vol. 4, n°1 | 2000
Varia

The Civilization of Crime. Violence in Town and Country since the Middle Ages, ed. Eric A. Johnson and Eric H. Monkkonen

(Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1996). 290 p. ISBN 0-252-02242-4

Herman Roodenburg

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/chs/870>
DOI: 10.4000/chs.870
ISSN: 1663-4837

Publisher

Librairie Droz

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 January 2000
Number of pages: 135-137
ISBN: 2-600-00433-5
ISSN: 1422-0857

Electronic reference

Herman Roodenburg, "*The Civilization of Crime. Violence in Town and Country since the Middle Ages*", ed. Eric A. Johnson and Eric H. Monkkonen, *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* [Online], Vol. 4, n°1 | 2000, Online since 02 April 2009, connection on 23 March 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/870> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/chs.870>

nouvelles, il rappelle aussi cette vérité d'évidence : que si les sources, et principalement les archives, sont indispensables à l'exercice de l'histoire, elles ne sont jamais que des matériaux, dont la valeur dépend des regards, des questions et les modes de construction que l'historien leur réserve.

Dominique Kalifa
 Université Denis-Diderot Paris VII
 Kalifa@ccr.jussieu.fr

The Civilization of Crime. Violence in Town and Country since the Middle Ages, ed. Eric A. Johnson and Eric H. Monkkonen (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1996). 290 p. ISBN 0-252-02242-4.

In their introduction to this stimulating volume, the editors pay tribute to the late Herman Diederiks, who was in many ways the leader of the «Dutch group», which was instrumental in the birth of the IAHCCJ. Diederiks played an important role in organizing the many meetings of the IAHCCJ, including the 1990 Stockholm conference on which most of the articles assembled in this volume are based. Indeed, with his no-nonsense though humorous approach to both organizational and scholarly issues, his impact on these meetings was considerable. His skeptical stance towards all theorizing would probably have made him love this volume, as theory is not its strongest point.

The editors' contribution is a case in point. Describing an older generation of crime historians, they conclude that these scholars «were far more optimistic about studying everything around crime than about studying crime itself». «Crime itself, we read, comes down to crime rates and crime trends»; alternatively, «everything surrounding crime», embraces «legal institutions from the penal system to modes of enforcement, popular and elite attitudes, court systems and crimes coming to courts». In the middle of the 1990s such «nominalism» is rather surprising.

Another puzzling aspect is the editors' reference to the «shadowy figure» of Norbert Elias. One might raise two objections: first, that, at least among European historians, Elias is far from a shadowy figure; and second, that, of the ten contributors to this volume, only five actually refer to Elias (the index lists four). Even more surprising, is the absence of any mention of Elias in Eric Johnson's own contribution to the book (the other editor, Eric Monkkonen, did not contribute). Taking a closer look, we find that only Eva Österberg and Pieter Spierenburg have really adopted Elias' ideas. The other three authors, James Sharpe, Esther Cohen and Jan Sundin, merely mention his work in passing.

This is not to say that *The Civilization of Crime* is an uninteresting or even unimportant book. On the contrary, this is a fine collection of essays, offering a subtle combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, and covering large areas of Europe from the early 14th to the first half of the 20th centuries. Essays by Sharpe, Österberg and Spierenburg make up the first part of the book. Writing on long-term trends, they focus respectively on the homicide rates in England, Scandinavia and the Netherlands. Though their findings are similar (Scandinavia lagging somewhat behind with an early 18th-century drop in the rates), each essay displays a thorough knowledge both of the many pitfalls involved in this sort of research and of the par-

ticular institutions (and other aspects «surrounding crime») that were characteristic of each country.

The seven essays that comprise the second part of the volume concentrate on shorter-term developments, offering interesting comparisons between town and country, and between the late Middle Ages and more recent times. Esther Cohen observes that, while the Hundred Years War may have dislocated entire sections of the civilian population, both in the towns and the countryside, the events hardly affected the picture of urban crime in contemporary Paris. In explanation, she points to official preoccupation with maintaining order, rather than justice. Michele Mancino, looking at cases of rape, murder and other types of violence in late 16th-century Naples, signals an intensifying control of the Neapolitan curia over crimes committed by both laypeople and the clergy. Florike Egmond argues convincingly that the accepted view of early modern organized crime as consisting of rural bands on the one side and an urban underworld on the other does not agree with her own findings for the strongly urbanized Dutch Republic. Also reporting on the Republic (the «Dutch group» is conspicuously present in this book), Diederiks compares six 18th-century jurisdictions: two small harbor towns, two rural jurisdictions close to urban centres and two jurisdictions on the periphery of the country. Interestingly, the strictly rural jurisdictions show more male and violent criminality than the others, most of the offenses being perpetrated by the villagers themselves.

Jan Sundin sketches a similar though more detailed picture for preindustrial Sweden, collecting his material from both north and south, and pointing, if only in passing, to aspects of honour and dispute settlement. Eric Johnson and the late Barbara Weinberger both write on the end of the 19th and the early 20th centuries, the latter focussing on the city of Birmingham and the county of Warwickshire, the former on a much larger range of towns from all over Germany. Weinberger's essay is one of the most careful in this volume. She sees no substantive differences between town and country, explaining the differences she did find in terms of differing forms of police management. Similarly, Johnson argues, against many 19th-century German conservative thinkers, that the modernization of German society produced hardly any rise in urban crime rates. Where the rates did go up, ethnicity and poverty were far more important factors than modernization.

Together the essays in this book argue forcefully that, for a very long time, European society, and the countryside in particular, has been far from peaceful and harmonious; that it was first of all in the towns that violence was successfully controlled; that violence, in particular the homicide rates, started to decrease dramatically from the 17th century on; and, finally, that the number of property crimes declined as well.

However, why the editors thought it necessary to call on Elias as a sort of pioneer, a «prescient thinker», in this context, escapes me. Elias may have been one of the first to question the views of Tönnies, Durkheim and others on a once harmonious past, arguing instead for a civilizing process over the ages, but his interpretation of the scarce data he put forward and his embarrassing lack of source-criticism have been criticized time and again. The attraction of Elias' work for Spierenburg and other crime historians seems to be the model he proposed, in which changes in crime rates, interpreted as changes in controlling the self, could be linked to processes of state formation. However this leaves us with the problem of an impulse-ridden medieval society and, more seriously, with Elias' neglect of agency and the symbolic dimensions of culture. His historical subjects are «caught»; the «objec-

tive processes » he describes take place behind their backs. Indeed, the most interesting essays in this book are informed not so much by Elias as by modern cultural history.

Herman Roodenburg
Meertens Institute
Amsterdam
The Netherlands
herman.roodenburg@meertens.knaw.nl

Leo Lucassen, *Zigeuner. Geschichte eines politischen Ordnungsbegriffes in Deutschland 1700-1945*, Köln/Weimar/Wien, Böhlau Verlag, 1996, 276 p., ISBN 3-412-05996-X

Today no one would challenge the statement that police history has become a well-established part of historiography proper, and not only its «crime and criminal» sub-department. The number of studies on the organization of the police, its personnel and its practices – primarily in Western European countries and Northern America – has grown considerably in recent years, indicating the new interest historians are taking in the subject. Although these studies have broadened our knowledge about the police, there are still a number of gaps which seem to have stimulated little inquiry. Among them are topics concerned with the influence and the determining effects that stereotypes and specific images have had on the police's perceptions of deviance, and the way the police have organized and structured their work.

In his book – a German translation of the author's doctoral dissertation in Dutch – Leo Lucassen does not use the term «stereotype», but instead the term *Ordnungsbegriff*, which could be translated as «master concept», leaving the borderline between «stereotype» and *Ordnungsbegriff* relatively vague. Lucassen tries to follow the use over time of the *Ordnungsbegriff Zigeuner* by the police, as well as the impact this usage has had on police practices. He sees *Zigeuner* as a label that has allowed the police to subsume different types of deviance under one heading.

The book has six chapters which divide more or less into three main parts: In the first part (Chapters one – the introduction – through three), the author describes the old regime and the early-nineteenth-century development of the *Ordnungsbegriff Zigeuner*; the second part focuses on the nineteenth century (Chapter four and parts of Chapter five); while the remaining chapters cover the early twentieth century up to the Nazi period. Although the book's subtitle implies a study of the Nazi years, in fact Leo Lucassen merely touches on them.

Lucassen sees a three-step development and use of the *Ordnungsbegriff Zigeuner*. Up to the 1830s, *Zigeuner* is – if one follows the author's arguments – a rather narrow concept that is reserved for ethnic gypsies. For the subsequent period, Leo Lucassen observes growing evidence for a widening of the concept and goes on to demonstrate what this widening meant: a growing incorporation of different categories of persons and groups beyond ethnic gypsies into the *Ordnungsbegriff Zigeuner*. This process occurred, according to the author, around the turn the nineteenth century and during the first three decades of that century. He relates it to state-building processes and changing poor laws and welfare policies in the