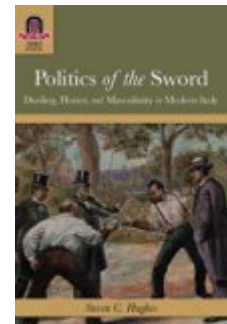


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Steven C. Hughes. *Politics of the Sword: Dueling, Honor, and Masculinity in Modern Italy*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007. xv + 360 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-1072-7.

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Published on H-Italy (June, 2008)



## How the Duel Made Italians

*Politics of the Sword* follows the trajectory of the modern practice of dueling from its recrudescence with Italy's Risorgimento to its demise with the Second World War. Steven C. Hughes seeks to explain the persistence of a tradition or practice that was inherently contradictory in its nature. As he describes it, the dueling ritual was a post-Napoleonic phenomenon that allowed for self-made gentlemen to emerge as the modern elite of a united Italy. The duel developed parallel to the liberal government, operating as a loose network of personal associations that were inextricably linked to the processes of public governance. Hughes ultimately makes the case that the practice of dueling was a component of liberal state formation, comparing its emergence in Italy to similar structural trends in Ireland, Belgium, and Portugal. The practice, however, was not exclusive to the system of liberalism. After all, in Italy, dueling endured the demise of liberalism, surviving through the rise of fascism. For Hughes, the duel existed because of its efficacy in "promoting status and buffering conflict as new elites, many from lower-middle-class backgrounds, scrambled for position and prestige within new bureaucracies," which also occurred under the Fascist regime (p. 267).

Modern dueling originated in the courts of Renaissance Italy and became a critical European practice in a period of modern nation-state building. Hughes introduces his discussion by acknowledging the existing scholarship on the place of the duel in European society, as found in the work of Francois Billacois (*Le Duel dans la societe francaise des XVI-XVII siecles: Essai de psychosoci-*

*ologie historique* [1986]) and Robert Nye (*Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* [1993]) on France, and Ute Frevert (*Men of Honour: A Social and Cultural History of the Duel* [1995]) and Kevin McAleer (*Dueling: The Cult of Honor in Fin-de-Siecle Germany* [1994]) on Germany. With this work, Hughes sets out to scientifically investigate the duel in modern Italy, which commentators described as a "plague" or a "duellomania." His creative use of sources includes periodicals, drama, and popular literature. He also employs the exhaustive quantitative analysis of the Tuscan journalist Iacopo Gelli, a study that was initiated by the head of Italy's official statistics bureau. Gelli collected data from 1879 through 1925. His modus operandi was exhaustive, and one must applaud Hughes for putting this source to such good use.

This work explores the integral role the duel played in the formation of a new class of men who, as they emerged from foreign occupation and the Risorgimento, strove to establish themselves as a class of liberal gentlemen capable of leading the new Italian nation. Not surprisingly, Hughes's narrative focuses on the practices of a "chivalric community" that imagined and ennobled the traditions of a new Italy, and that would embody this national consciousness (p. 8). According to Hughes, as this ruling elite came to form the core of the liberal government, they faced the difficult challenge of overcoming deep divisions of class and regional identities through the maintenance of gentlemanly codes of honor and shared cultural forms of association. Hughes contends that in this new environment of a burgeoning public sphere and free

press, the duel allowed for vehement disagreements to be settled with honor intact. This institution went beyond a satisfactory resolution of contentious debate, however, and permitted the emergence of the “gentleman” as a “psychological and social paradigm of distinction that allowed for the absorption and co-optation of successful newcomers while maintaining critical exclusionary standards against the vast majority of the population” (p. 7). Thus, the informal institution of dueling was, then, the creation of an elite group who founded their community on the honorable principles of chivalry, reinventing a practice taken from their aristocratic predecessors.

The same military apparatus that nationalized much of Italy also perpetuated the dueling practice. Hughes describes this as a component of the Piedmontization of Italy; in the struggle to liberate themselves from the Austrians, the duel became a signifier of liberation. The military, therefore, tacitly reinforced the legitimacy of the duel. According to the Piedmont Law of 1852, an officer who failed to “defend his honor appropriately would be deprived of his commission and cashiered from the corps” (p. 74). This prescription was adopted by the new Italian army until the close of the Fascist period. Hughes draws our attention to the fact that this existed in a subtext of inferiority. French attitudes in the Restoration toward their former brothers in arms reflected a prevalent European prejudice, with the exception of Piedmont, regarding Italian men. They were “a parasitic class of do-nothing pacifists who had been emasculated by their priests and the connivance of their mothers” (p. 22).

Dueling was an “antidote to the disappointment attached to the first decade of unification.... To defend it [Italy] was almost a patriotic act that stood in defiance of the individual and national cowardice of the past” (p. 100). Elites followed the code of chivalry to distinguish themselves from the cowardly masses. The Italian bourgeois, according to the economist Leone Carpi, failed to embody the ideals of an energetic and productive entrepreneurial middle class. The antidote to this *poltrooneria*, the behavior of spiritless cowards, was to instill virility in their youth to “redeem themselves with exercises, especially [with] weapons” (p. 101). Carpi also supported imperialistic endeavors to redeem Italy’s masculinity. Unhappily for the Italians, these efforts failed and they were unable to find redemption themselves through the shedding of honorable blood overseas in their imperialistic endeavors.

Modern European nationalism constituted itself in exclusionary, gendered terms and, as such, was liter-

ally an exclusive gentlemen’s club. Following the work of George Mosse (especially, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* [1985]), Hughes maintains that at the heart of this increased concern for respectability and self-control lay a need for stability in a rapidly changing world, which also lent itself to the forces of nationalism. As Hughes notes, “the protection of women’s purity and sensibilities became a defining trope of the nationalist movement during the Risorgimento” (p. 149). Women and lower-class men were excluded from the *ceto civile*, which, as defined by Hughes, is “a relatively narrow, yet porous, segment of Italian society for whom the title, rights, and duties of being a ‘gentleman’ were a defining feature” (p. 9). Those outside the *ceto civile* were thus unfit to govern, because they were determined unable to control their emotions or their bodies. While middle- and upper-class women were considered capable of learning under the proper tutelage of male guardians, plebeian men were excluded, because they were thought incapable of the self-control necessary to make informed and important decisions. The “sword” of the “chivalric tradition” was often held in contradistinction to the knife or stiletto of the lower orders. Dueling and its ritual confirmed in the minds of the *ceto civile* their superior restraint, which was in contradistinction to the spontaneous knife fight of those without honor. Drawing on the work of Latin American scholar of the duel Pablo Piccato, Hughes terms this form of power consolidation and demarcation of membership a “technology of honor.” It established forms of comportment that “only literate elites could internalize and articulate” (p. 333).

Dueling had its detractors. Liberal opponents of the duel found it a backward custom at odds with the age of positivism. Catholic critics believed that the duel exposed the hypocrisy of the liberal government and a loss of morality that their manner of rule confirmed. Catholic commentators also felt that dueling was a roundabout form of suicide, which was, in turn, part of society’s rejection of the moral rule of the church. Italian socialists were opposed to the duel as a practice that was ideologically expressive of the essential individualism of bourgeois liberalism and was consequently hostile to their collectivist principles. Socialist opponents of the duel were continually hamstrung in their efforts to stamp out the duel, because their refusal to participate often left them vulnerable to the charge of cowardice, which ran counter to their efforts to project an image of virile and revolutionary dynamism.

Although it would seem to fit with Benito Mussolini’s espousal of virility and the futurists’ celebration of war,

the duel was ultimately reigned in by the fascists. The Rocco Law, named after the fascist minister of justice from 1925 to 1932, Alfredo Rocco, undermined the duel in a telling way. Rocco was relatively moderate toward the duel itself. He took an indirect approach: he punished the publication of any news or *verbali* concerning the duel with a fine up to five hundred lire. In December 1931, the head of the fascist press office simply forbade newspapers to report on any aspect of the duel. This was far more effective than the reactive fines of the code. Ultimately, the individual ethic of the duel was antithetical to the fascist collectivity; in addition, the press became a mouthpiece for the regime, which minimized the scope for debate and disagreement. In the end, the duel experienced its final decline in Italy after the Second World War. Drawing on the conclusions of Nye and Frevert, Hughes argues that the waning of the duel may be attributed to the perspective of mass warfare and the industrial nature of the war's violence, which required a "new standard of masculine courage" (p. 327).

This is a well-researched book that fills an under-researched niche in Italian history, and, as such, it is a valuable contribution to the history of Italian nationalism. Nevertheless, there are a few observations that I would like to make in closing. It would have been instructive to know more about the networks of correspondence and association outside the duel; that is, what networks of correspondence and sociability existed independently from the duel and encompassed other activities? Or, were these men exclusively linked by this revitalized cult of chivalry? Hughes identifies the difficulty of turning juridical power over to men of an undefined category of "gentlemen" lacking "academic and professional rigor" (p. 193), but he fails to describe the emergence of modern academia or professional technocrats. Did loose professional affiliations emerge into more tightly knit specialties at this time?

Despite the acknowledgement of anti-dueling

leagues and the contested emergence of the Italian nation, the premise of this monograph hinges on the unspoken agreement of elite gentlemen on the ideals of honor. Hughes has argued that the duel and the culture of honor were necessary to draw together men of disparate backgrounds who consistently evaded easy categorization. I concede that he has set himself a difficult task; however, he employs the ideology of chivalry to paper over the fissures of this heterogeneous class of men. In the end, this work would have been enriched by a closer examination of the very constitution and composition of the *ceto civile*. In the face of their various allegiances, and prerogatives, why and how they banded together as a class, or their inability to do so outside of the duel, is not thoroughly addressed.

Hughes is careful to avoid casting the south in an orientalist mode and, as such, is sensitive to the cultural intricacies that surround this complicated historical debate. In his statistical analysis of the regional divergences in dueling practice, he also refuses to read the lower numbers in the southern regions as representative of its backwardness and a lack of civic tradition. He, instead, adjusts the statistics for population and other variables, such as the presence of large cities and military bases. In spite of this sensitivity, we learn relatively little about southern elites and how they fit into the larger narrative of nation building and how foreign occupation may have had an impact on the culture of honor in the *mezzogiorno*, or why the culture of honor and the duel were unable to overcome the internal divisions among liberals in the south.

This work will be informative to a specialized audience, as it addresses a gap in the scholarship on dueling in Italian history and places it within a wider European historiographical context. For the college level reader, I suggest that it be accompanied by a general overview of the period, such as *Italy in the Nineteenth Century, 1796-1900* (2000), edited by John A. Davis.

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**Citation:** Sarah McLean-Plunkett. Review of Hughes, Steven C., *Politics of the Sword: Dueling, Honor, and Masculinity in Modern Italy*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. June, 2008.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14652>

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