H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Pieter Spierenburg. *A History of Murder: Personal Violence in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008. 274 S. $69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7456-4377-9; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7456-4378-6.

Reviewed by Trevor Dean (Roehampton University)
Published on H-Law (January, 2009)
Commissioned by Michael J. Pfeifer

M for Murder

Why has the murder rate in Western Europe declined so strongly since the fourteenth century? This is the key question addressed by Pieter Spierenburg in his stimulating new book. Spierenburg achieves a feat unusual in modern academia: he reaches out from his specialist period, the seventeenth century, both back into the later Middle Ages and forward to our own times. He ranges across northern Europe, drawing most of his material from Germany, the Netherlands, France, and Britain, and adds some examples and argumentation from Italy and Spain.

A clear introduction sets out the aims of the book (to examine "patterns in the character, incidence, social meaning, and cultural context of murder") and its main hypothesis ("we expect the murder rate to be highest, and traditional male honor to be most intense, when the monopolization of violence by state institutions and economic differentiation are at their lowest point") (p. 10). The introduction also spells out what Spierenburg sees as "the crucial role of honor" in explaining the long-term evolution of personal violence and homicide (pp. 7-10). In the medieval and early modern periods, the prevailing concept of male honor was associated with the body and with physical response to challenge; and during the early modern period a different concept of honor emerged, internal not external, and "spiritualized" (pp. 9-10). It has to be said that much of this is familiar to historians of violence. Lawrence Stone's discussion with Jim Sharpe in the pages of *Past & Present* in the 1980s evaluated the "civilizing process" in relation to the long-term history of violence, but Spierenburg develops and adds to their ideas.[1]

His seven chapters–five chronological, two thematic–explore his hypothesis across seven centuries of European history. Medieval feuding and the aggressiveness of elite males are the subject of chapter 1, where Spierenburg argues that it was "precisely the omnipresence of feuds" that was specific and characteristic of the late medieval period, and "was a major factor contributing to the elevated homicide rates" (pp. 14-15). The absence or nascency of state structures are seen as the reason for widespread tolerance of private revenge of injuries. The following chapter looks at the complementary practice of private settlement and pacification, and at the movement mainly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to require reconciliation and to criminalize feuding. A key development here is signaled in the emergence and application in trials of stricter criteria for the argument of self-defense. Chapter 3 traces the process of pacification of the elite in the early modern period, while the lower classes preserved the older form of aggressive male sensitivity to affronts; and the successive decline of violence in all classes, as elite attitudes "trickled down," and as ideas of male honor and of civility were transformed (p. 112). At this point in the story, Spierenburg pauses to consider the place of honor in acts of violence committed by and against women, and examines such violent acts as nose-slitting, house-scorning, "uncoiffing" (forcible hat removal), rape, poisoning, and spousal murder. He also, in the following chapter, deals with infanticide, suicide, and killings by the insane. Chapters 7 and 8 then bring the story up to date. The continued decline in the murder rate in the nineteenth century and for most of the twentieth is attributed to modern policing, modern sports, and moral campaigns, while the old style of male aggressivity, of knife fights and fistfights, was restricted to marginal geographic or social areas. But the rise in the murder rate since 1970 is traced to a variety of causes, including immigration, the market for illegal drugs, and global organized crime.

Spierenburg achieves success in this difficult task through a combination of elements: the hypothesis is clear and simple, individual cases are well chosen and well narrated, space is given to rival interpretations, and

differences between scholars are clearly articulated and evidence is fielded on one side or the other. One very likable feature of the book is the frequency with which the author asks whether the quantitative data are reliable. "Are they an artefact of prosecution policies?" he repeatedly asks (e.g., pp. 136, 138). "What about the dark figure of unreported crime?" he wonders (pp. 3-4). Another is the subtle way that stereotypes are put to effective use. Instead of just noting the divergence between stereotypes, such as the female poisoner, and "reality," he suggests the ways that stereotypes influenced literature and court practice.

However, I had some doubts at various points. First, is it justified to say that vendetta characterized medieval violence and explains the high murder rate? Most medieval prosecutions of homicide–on which modern calculations of the murder rate are based–do not describe the action as revenge; and while Spierenburg acknowledges that "not every medieval homicide can be traced back to a vendetta," he does not quite seem to take full account of that concession in drawing his conclusions (p. 14). Second, is it justified to equate late medieval Europe with stateless systems and undifferentiated economies? Third, the argument at times adduces, among causes of change, elements that are debated by historians: for example, the rise of domestic violence as a proportion of total homicide is related to the rise of the "nuclear family" (pp. 42, 132). Fourth, there are some slight chronological disjunctions. The late fourteenth century is identified as the starting point for the long "process from acquiescence to criminalization" of homicide (though in Italy this surely started earlier), yet the graph on page 4, showing "the long-term decline in homicide in Europe," 1300-2000, has a steep decline setting in from c. 1450 (p. 44). It is not altogether clear how either date relates specifically to state formation or pacification of elites through a new code of honor (though Spierenburg is hampered here, as he admits, by the fact that those processes have "as yet occasioned few systematic descriptions or analyses") (p. 44). These thoughts are suggested as debating points, in a constructive spirit and in recognition of the difficulty of the task that Spierenburg has tackled.

Note

[1]. Lawrence Stone, "Interpersonal Violence in English Society, 1300-1980," *Past & Present* 101 (1983): 22-33; and James Sharpe, "The History of Violence in England: Some Observations," *Past & Present* 108 (1985): 206-215. Neither article is included in Spierenburg's bibliography.

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Citation: Trevor Dean. Review of Spierenburg, Pieter, *A History of Murder: Personal Violence in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present.* H-Law, H-Net Reviews. January, 2009.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23852

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