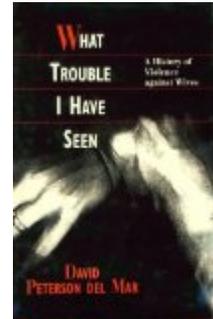


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Peterson del Mar. *What Trouble I Have Seen: A History of Violence against Wives*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996. xi + 244 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-95076-4.

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Spousal abuse and murder are topics that historians of all periods and places have only begun to explore. As a result, the number of works on these subjects remains small. David Peterson del Mar is one of the few American historians, among them Elizabeth Pleck, who has researched the topic of domestic violence and its ties to trends in the larger culture. Using primarily records from divorce cases in Oregon, including Portland, his book covers the years from 1840 to the present day.

Peterson del Mar centers his argument around the belief that the larger culture directly influences the course of domestic violence. As he points out, “The history of violence against wives in the United States over the past two centuries has been profoundly influenced by two broad cultural transformations” (p. 5). The first transformation was the shift from the rough, very masculine culture of the frontier to an ethos that emphasized disciplined self-control by the late nineteenth century. The shift made wife-beating less acceptable and even less common than it had been earlier. This first transformation culminated in Oregon’s Whipping Post Law, which was passed in 1905, but repealed in 1911. That law made Oregon one of three states that punished abusive husbands by public whippings. The other two states, Maryland and Delaware, passed similar laws a decade earlier. The timing of the Whipping Post Law emphasizes one of Peterson del Mar’s themes: namely, that in the nineteenth century general American culture was slowly transmitted to the Northwest. Therefore, Oregon passed its whipping post law after these other two states.

The second cultural transformation to affect domestic violence occurred after World War I and continues today. According to Peterson del Mar, the culture of consump-

tion has created circumstances that reduce the power of the ideal of self-restraint, replacing it with the desire for immediate gratification. It also changed expectations about marriage for both partners so that it is more necessary for husbands and wives to have greater intimacy. In addition, the author points out that wives since 1945 are more independent, which in turn affects their relationship with their husbands. As Peterson del Mar searches for reasons why men batter and kill wives, he concludes that since the 1960s, men have become more ambivalent toward women, and more anxious about their own roles. The result has been more violence against wives by some husbands.

David Peterson del Mar’s reliance on cultural explanations for spousal abuse and murder causes him to explore sources of popular culture such as novels, magazines, and sermons. By doing so, he seeks to tie these sources to men’s ambivalence toward women. In brief, popular culture sends “mixed signals” about marriage, men, and women. The result is frustration and confusion. For example, popular culture emphasized women’s place to be selfless, submissive, sex symbols. Or as Peterson del Mar puts it, “Oregon’s ministers and writers shared the same view of women as someone to serve man as adoring sidekick or as a selfless nurturer” (p. 113). He believes that one outcome of the second cultural transformation has been more extreme violence against wives.

The examination of both cultural transformations addresses the role of privacy and the belief that violence is solely a family affair. Peterson del Mar discusses how this attitude affected and affects intervention by neighbors in domestic violence cases. He finds that there was a great deal more active physical intervention by neigh-

bors in the nineteenth century, but after World War I intervention declined so that by the 1970s there were cases of people turning their backs on women who were publicly beaten by their husbands.

What Trouble I Have Seen examines not only white culture and its transformations, but also Native American marital relations. However, Peterson del Mar does not address many cases involving African Americans. His reasoning is that most of the book is dedicated to Oregon in the nineteenth century, and the influx of African Americans into Oregon was a post-1945 phenomenon. In terms of class, Peterson del Mar tells us that his study shows that violence against wives cut across social divisions. Yet, the bulk of his examples are drawn from divorce cases involving working-class people. The sections about the frontier do involve some prominent people, but the work does not sufficiently show others from the middle or upper classes. Such is the nature of domestic violence. Perhaps the absence of these groups in examples of domestic violence does not mean that they never abused women, but that they dominated their wives in other ways. Peterson del Mar surmises that the reason why there were, and are, a larger amount of domestic violence cases among the working classes is that working-class men felt and feel more threatened by wives' autonomy. The abusive husband, then and now, seeks to cut off sources of independent behavior—work, family, or friends—on the part of the wife.

In his book, Peterson del Mar rightly complains about the lack of work on family violence, an integral part of family history. In my opinion, this is an excellent criticism, as it is difficult to have a complete picture of family history without also including the role of violence in marriage as well as in child-rearing. The author also states that part of the reason for the lack of more work on family violence is because of the paucity of sources. Yet, he has found more than enough material through divorce cases to give a riveting history of spousal abuse in Oregon. I believe that the material is there (whether from divorce cases or court records) to provide, not an exhaustive treatment of abuse, but one that tells who was the abuser and the victim, and how neighbors, families, courts, and police reacted.

David Peterson del Mar's historical analysis ends

when he makes his case on possible ways to end wife-beating. He stresses that the attitude of family and friends who treat violence as a private affair must end. Community intervention is needed to stop wife-battery. Perhaps his boldest call comes with the plea to change masculine culture, a call that some may find too trendy. His argument is that not all men beat their wives, but all men do partake of the masculine culture that still desires to dominate women. For him, wife-beating is but one of a variety of ways to keep women under control. This last plea to change male culture because it supports spousal abuse is also one more part of his belief that abuse and culture are closely interrelated. The latter contention finds support if one begins to investigate the work done on the topic of spousal abuse in other countries. In those cultures where domestic violence is seen as a matter of course, there is little work done on it. In those areas, such as the United States and Britain, where ending domestic violence is an important issue, there are books, articles, and media attention. Perhaps this attention is what helps fuel historical research.

In conclusion, *What Trouble I Have Seen* is a compelling portrait of the battered wife as well as of her batterer. David Peterson del Mar's thorough research into divorce court records, his own work in battered women's shelters, and his discussions with counselors of abusive husbands makes *What Trouble I Have Seen* a work that examines all aspects of domestic violence. I would have liked to have seen more material from trial and police records. Divorce records can be suspect, since abuse was one of the few grounds women had for divorce, especially in the nineteenth century. Therefore, it is probable that some accusations of abuse were exaggerated in order to get the divorce, much as the accusations of sexual abuse fly between divorcing spouses today in child custody hearings. Despite this fault (and Peterson del Mar addresses the problem of using divorce records as sources), he makes an important connection between cultural trends and domestic violence. The implications of this connection should make us think about the future of gender relations in general and marriage in particular.

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