



Claudia Töngi. *Um Leib und Leben: Gewalt, Konflikt, Geschlecht im Uri des 19. Jahrhunderts.* Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 2004. 434 S. EUR 44.80, cloth, ISBN 978-3-0340-0663-7.



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Claudia Töngi has written a compelling study on violence and gender in Switzerland's Canton of Uri. In the last ten years, a number of studies on local communities have tried to capture the mechanisms of social transformation and shifting patterns of domination using the tools of microhistory and historical anthropology. Hans Medick's extensive study on Laichingen and David Sabean's massive work on Neckarhausen are two outstanding examples of this approach in the German-speaking world. Töngi follows this microhistorical path but also comes close to studies that have taken inspiration from the history of emotions, most importantly, Robert Nye's work on the history of gender, sexuality and masculinity, and William Reddy's investigations of the microhistory of emotions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Töngi's work rests solidly on these discussions and is systematically informed by gender and family history.

The book is divided into three parts. The first section explores violence in village communities in Uri; the second probes the family; the final section takes a closer look at sexuality and violence.

The book rests on an extensive study of court records, including 180 cases recorded between 1803 and 1885. The focus rests upon the Canton of Uri and individual villages are not systematically discussed. One of the most fruitful sections of the book, which alone would have been an impressive study, is Töngi's detailed analysis of the courts and their status as the site of intersections of power and truth. In addition to an exhaustive description of the contextual origins of her sources, she manages to provide a deep description of how courts were situated and controlled in the rural communities of Uri. The judges, she argues, were influential as censors and commentators on the structure and content of testimonies and witness accounts. At the same time, they helped to retain a substantial component of the authentic voices of the villagers. It is the tension between social controls and the voices from below that Töngi masterfully captures in the best sections of her book.

In the first part of the book, Töngi starts her analysis with a compelling description of the courtyard (*Eigen*) and its social and emotional

meaning for the villagers of Uri. This spatial analysis of violence is followed by a social and emotional one with the notion of honor (*Ehre*). Informed by Pierre Bourdieu's and Martin Dinges's conceptions of honor, Töngi produces a rich description of men's and women's mutual relations, which were mediated by their recognized and intended sense of honor. She shows how the face-to-face society of Uri constantly produced acts of violence because of the violation of people's sense of honor. Honor and the negotiation of one's honor (*Ehrhändel*) were not mechanisms of excluding villagers but reintegrating them into the community. Honor was the social and emotional cement of the village community. With the notion of honor she is able to explain the importance of corporeality (*Leiblichkeit*) to the villagers, the physical contests of wrestling between men and the possibilities of asymmetric physical violence between men who could carry honor and women for whom that was not possible. The use of violence to defend one's honor was more or less tolerated and this toleration extended to what Töngi calls the secrets of the night, which included the use of violence in taverns, streets and roads during nighttime. She also describes in detail the conflicts between locals and the Italian guest workers, which started to escalate after the 1870s.

After this first and perhaps most rewarding part of her analysis, Töngi shifts her attention to violence in the familial environment and discusses the various forms of kinship and family arrangements. The author pays special attention to the status of women under the guardianship of other adults (*Geschlechtvormundschaft*) and therefore categorically incapable of being in charge of their property. This status and legal arrangement regulated women's possibilities to find legal and physical protection against violent husbands; divorce was an option but more often arrangements amounted to partial physical separation, the "separation of table and bed." Since relationships between men and women within the family were not mediated through honor, men's

relationship to their wives was defined either as legitimate physical disciplining or physical abuse. In this sense, women's status was not very different from that of children, who were also directly exposed to parental--and, predominately, paternal--violence.

The last part is based on an extensive examination of 115 cases. Töngi discovers that the court records did not explicitly recognize sexual violence and official numbers remain very low. But a detailed analysis of non-legal records reveals that this type of violence was far more common than its appearance in legal records suggests. A large number of obvious cases, including violence against female servants and wives, were defined as inappropriate behavior or harassment because rape was defined in radical, demonic terms as uncivilized, an act that should and could not take place.

Töngi's detailed study on violence in Uri reveals a rich picture of a rural community. Although social and cultural historians may wonder whether the richness of this image provides the details of a distant mirror that is frozen in time and has only hints at the possible dynamics of change, the study is highly stimulating and calls for similar investigations in other local communities, both rural and urban.

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