

Pieter Spierenburg, *A History of Murder: Personal Violence in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2008.

ISBN: 978-0-7456-4377-9

**Reviewed by Bridget Harris
(Monash University)**

While *A History of Murder* may conjure images of malevolent and sinister humanity, Spierenburg's text is not a brutal or sensationalised account of violence, but insightful and engaging. It is an accessible work, thematically and chronologically structured and rich in case studies which both inform and entertain the reader. Spierenburg uses qualitative and quantitative research to present an account of interpersonal violence in Europe from the Middle Ages to current times, exploring the gradual decline of murder in early modernity and the rise of murder in recent decades. In a synthesis of scholarly work, statistics, cultural theories and archival materials, Spierenburg analyses trends, patterns and social meanings of violence. Yet his study moves beyond this to offer deep insights into cultural experiences, identities and hierarchies in Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands.

This is an extensive study, presenting a comparative analysis which encompasses a wide geographic and chronological range. Due to its broad coverage it is somewhat restricted in sociological and anthropological analysis. The greatest strength of Spierenburg's work lies in the historical framework of the text, which allows for more than a simple reading of violence. Spierenburg documents cultural and social evolution, exploring not only earlier models of violence, but also how these past models might inform our contemporary understandings of it. As Spierenburg himself notes, there has been much work investigating modern violence, yet this work is typically divorced from historical contexts and dislocated from past patterns of violence. This analysis is indicative of the trend towards interdisciplinary work and suggests the benefits for criminologists in exploring historical frameworks.

Through a social scientific perspective, Spierenburg applies the work of sociologist Norbert Elias and the theory of the 'civilising process'. He suggests that the strengthening and consolidation of states, processes of industrialisation and centralisation affected cultural and social patterns, resulting in a transformation of emotional and behavioural patterns. Behaviours that were at one time acceptable became seen as unacceptable. In terms of violent behaviours, Spierenburg proposes there was a gradual shift from aggressive urges and attitudes to greater passivity.

Spierenburg's analysis suggests murder rates were highest in the Middle Ages, when states were weak and the importance of preserving male honour was widely recognised. Interpersonal violence was a private matter, primarily manifested in feuds, which functioned as an accepted means to protect honour. On state development, Spierenburg writes of the next phase, in early modern times, of reconciliatory practices and increased state intervention into formerly private practices. The criminalisation of murder firmly established the role of the state in incidents of murder and the status of murder as a public, criminal matter. This coincided with the increasing spiritualisation of male honour, with honour less connected to and defended through violence. Subsequent models of interpersonal violence which emerged, such as official and popular duels, involved levels of premeditation and organisation not seen in feudal fighting. Further declines in interpersonal violence and increasing passivity (arguably more noticeable in elite circles) are said to be both a result of political developments, including developments of criminal justice systems, the advancement of police force and criminal detection methods and transformations of the concept of honour, from a bodily to moral focus. Alternative sources of honour surfaced, such as honour in financial dealings and capacities. While the role of the state in this process is clear, further analysis of the development and effects of the criminal justice system and punishment pathways, such as shifts from punishing the body to punishing the mind, could be explored. With the increase of state power came increased possibilities both for the repression of activities deemed to be illegitimate and for resistance to this repression.

Being focused on interpersonal violence, Spierenburg's text does not explore state violence, or violence directed at the state (particularly by marginalised groups) which he characterises as revolutionary, rather than interpersonal violence. Although Spierenburg's omission of revolutionary violence is hardly a shortcoming of his work, it would certainly be interesting to examine the meaning of violence in such settings. While Spierenburg does document the different interpersonal violence practised by various socio-economic groups, the emphasis here is on dominant and state pressures in transforming meanings of honour and violence, with less exploration of multi-directional power flows and, more specifically, the impact of the working class or 'outsiders' in this process.

In considering violence committed by and against females and intimates, Spierenburg highlights the differences in male and female honour. With femininity aligned with passivity, females were much less likely to defend their honour through violence. In cases where males did not defend their honour, there was a greater likelihood that symbolic violence would be committed against other women, not men. Any female divergence from ideals of femininity, such as from nurturing, in incidents of infanticide were increasingly viewed as the result of instability or insanity. Although, Spierenburg argues infanticide should also be understood in regards to community pressures and socio-economic deprivation. This he claims is evidenced by the decline of infanticide in response to shifting cultural attitudes and increased state support.

In the nineteenth century Spierenburg suggests murder was marginalised and became more intimate, until in the 1970s when an increase in interpersonal violence is detected. He proposes this increase is the result of globalisation, and specifically of increased immigration and the inability of the state to combat criminal dealings, particularly organised, transnational crime. Whereas in the introduction Spierenburg posits that race has historically had a limited impact on European murder, certainly a more limited impact than it had in America, in the conclusion he implies that cultural and racial factors have a more extensive role in recent violence.

In addition to recent surges in interpersonal violence, Spierenburg suggests there has been intensified awareness of violence and its impacts. He also notes a heightened fear of crime, although he argues this does not correlate with actual crime levels, noting specifically that fears of violence increased precisely as acts of murder decreased in the nineteenth century. Spierenburg writes of increases in interpersonal violence in 'relatively depacified neighbourhoods' (p. 226), such as areas inhabited by immigrant and marginalised groups. However, the fear of this violence could have been further explored, as could the ways the state or dominant social groups might politicise and utilise such fears to acquire increased power over citizens and communities deemed to be criminal. He suggests that the working class return to traditional forms of bodily honour, to violence, is indicative of a reliance on force for protection, but fails to consider other possible meanings of violence, such as its functionality as a means to achieve power or contest the state. It is possible that for underprivileged groups violence holds a currency, a power that, while not necessarily positive, is yet beneficial. Furthermore, while there may be greater uses of violence by these communities, there is also definitely greater visibility of marginalised groups. Their greater likelihood of using public space compared with other social groups means their lives and use of violence receive more attention; they are disproportionately policed and subjected to excessive interventions.

Overall, the breadth and depth of Spierenburg's study results in a powerful work which is of value to criminologists, sociologists and historians. This is a text which should help us to better understand past and present patterns of violence, culture and power.