Middeleeuwen


**The interdeterminacy of medieval violence**

Modifying the term ‘violence’ with the adjective ‘medieval’ may strike some as redundant, others as a move from atavism to its most gruesome manifestations. ‘Getting medieval’, after all, is synonymous with extreme brutality, both before and certainly after the phrase was enshrined in Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*. Against this backdrop, which is hardly limited to popular audiences, Hannah Skoda’s monograph offers a major and eloquent corrective to the view of medieval society as jaded and indifferent to physical violence. Her broader observation, that violence is a polyvalent, nuanced, and continuously negotiated phenomenon in the Middle Ages as well, has been made for different regions and sub-periods by previous scholars. Yet even within this already revisionist historiography, Skoda not only fills an important lacuna but also articulates, in a highly nuanced manner, how violence functioned as a popular form of communication and
was integral to premodern communities' sense of self.

Interdisciplinarity was a prerequisite for this book, and Skoda's is an accomplished one. She has gone where earlier social and criminal historians were reluctant to venture, given the modest scale of evidence for the prosecution of violent offenders in northern France before the Hundred Years' War. To offset this particular scarcity, Skoda assembles and engages an impressive array of alternative sources, many of them fictional and dramatic, others legal-theoretical, narrative, and pastoral, and handles all of these sources concisely and mostly with due care. With independent methodologies developed for nearly every chapter, historical evidence is filtered critically through modern sociology, psychology, anthropology, literary criticism, political science, and law. The result is a thought-provoking cultural history of pre-modern and mainly urban violence that will be read with great profit, especially by social and urban historians, and by students of violence in general.

Following an introduction and a methodological chapter ('Grammars of Violence'), the book is organized in part spatially, in part typologically. Two chapters on street and tavern violence are followed by chapters on student and mob violence, with insights arising from each of these discussions shored up and further explored in a final chapter on domestic violence. Overlaps between each context are kept to a minimum, while routine comparisons between the cities of Artois and Paris (grounded in their political and economic circumstances) underscore the author's commitment to illuminating shades of meaning over making broad generalizations. Jointly these chapters amount to a clear demonstration of how violence, in its various manifestations, social contexts, and urban spaces, was a performative act, central to the negotiation of solidarities and identities, including class, gender, sexuality, religion, provenance, profession, age, and ethno-linguistic background. As such, it complements historians' tendency to focus on institutional violence, namely war and the Inquisition, on major episodes of mass violence, for instance those incurred by famine and plague, and on the sublimation (and thus pervasiveness) of violence in Christian mythology, liturgy, and lay piety.

The central role given to the analysis of drama and poetry is particularly welcome, although it does entail some risks. On the one hand, attributing a similar degree of agency and self-awareness to authors of violent acts as to authors of fiction is humanizing and productive. The literary analyses of tavern and mob violence, for instance, illuminate a shared grammar and semiotic tool-kit, which simultaneously allowed crowds to hone their political messages and tavern-goers to render them ambiguous to the point of meaninglessness. On the other hand, it is difficult to draw a stable link between the level of abstraction attained by literary texts and the agendas pursued by perpetrators of violent acts. That is emphatically not to argue that the link is absent, but rather to warn against confusing evidence of plausibility with proof of presence, a confusion that can lead to unwarranted optimism. Skoda notes, for example, that the indeterminacy of tavern violence is indicated by the frequent unresolved mystery surrounding such incidents (p. 100) in the legal sources. Yet the latter's production process rarely aimed at satisfying historians' curiosity about social realities. We are left with many frustrating silences indeed, but it is difficult to argue from them.

Court records' silence is as tricky as their explicit proclamations. In discussing street violence, Skoda sees such texts as reflecting how identity could be negotiated in a bottom-up process, since 'crimes were reported by local communities' (p. 67). Once again, the general point is valid and germane: local individuals certainly did report violent acts, and it is helpful to think about their descriptions as moments that shaped identities, defined networks of solidarity, and framed memories. But medieval court records, as Le Roy Ladurie famously forgot, were scarcely democratic compositions; indeed, as Skoda herself notes, 'testimonials of various wit-
nesses [...] were diligently recorded and transcribed" (p. 68). That these texts were compiled by and for court officials meant that what may have been original (and simultaneously strategic) voices have traveled too far and too wide to be considered straightforwardly representative of medieval city dwellers' experiences, let alone the degree of complexity which informed their understanding of violence.

The crown jewel of this book is its sixth chapter, on domestic violence. It is here that Skoeda expertly brings the range of mechanisms and possibilities unearthed in earlier discussions to bear on an ostensibly private and clearly gendered space, the scene for (in coeval eyes) a legitimate violent act. Yet here, too, perennial tensions between private and public jurisdictions, male and female identities, age groups, canon and secular law, family and urban hierarchies, human and nonhuman, all converge on the potential of a discrete disciplinary measure to become an act of savagery, savagery. The looming possibility of transgression clearly preoccupied many, and it is this shared anxiety over the loss of ordering violence that emerges from a full and balanced range of sources, all of which, in their different ways and under Skoeda's able guidance, underscore the indeterminacy of medieval violence.

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Middeleeuwen

Samuel K. Cohn, *Popular protest in late medieval English towns* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge 2013)
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Vergezicht op Engels volksprotest

Vóór het invloedrijke *Cultures of plague* (2010) publiceerde mediëvist Samuel Cohn over revoltes in met name Italië, Frankrijk en de Nederlanden. Met *Popular protest in late medieval English towns* keert hij terug naar dit onderwerp en richt zijn blik op Engeland. Met medewerking van Douglas Alton analyseert en inventariseert Cohn opvoer in Engelse steden tussen 1396 en 1450. Het onderzoek beperkt zich daarbij niet tot de roeringen van de laagste klassen: elke sociale groep beneden de aristocratie wordt geschaard onder de noemer 'populair'. ‘Protest’ definieert Cohn in onderscheid met groepsmoraliteit als collectieve actie voor het verkrijgen van economische en juridische rechten, het ongedaan maken van privileges van lokale machthebbers of het uiten van kritiek op de status quo. Cohn bevestigt de aanname dat er weinig protest was in Engelse stedelijke gebieden. Een aantal incidenten kregen reeds aandacht in de geschiedschrijving, zoals de goed gedocumenteerde *Peasants' Revolt van 1381*; Cohn stelt zich ten doel patronen in – kleine en grootschalige – protesten te reconstrueren en die protesten in een breed comparatief kader te plaatsen. Welke sociale en politieke groepen stonden tegenover elkaar? Wat weten we van hun samenstelling, hun leiderschap en hun motivatie? Hoe vaak, waar en wanneer kwamen bepaalde soorten protesten voor?

Cohns voornaamste bronnen zijn kronieken en de *Patent Rolls*, een collectie van brieven aan de koning en verslagen van commissies over lokale conflicten. Deze bronnen bevatten informatie uit 167 steden, variërend in grootte van enkele duizenden inwoners tot het circa zeventigduizend ziende tellende Londen. Omdat de twee soorten bronnen vaak verschillende incidenten vermelden, vormt hun onderlinge vergelijking de structuur van het boek. *Popular protest* is daarmee een onderzoek van indrukwekkende omvang geworden. Het geeft een groot aantal beschrijvingen van conflicten met levendige voorbeelden: van plunde-