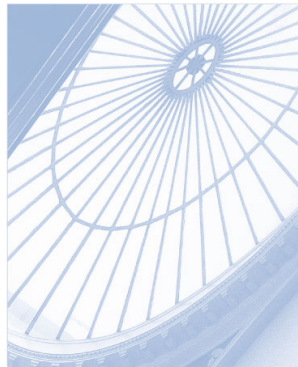


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BENJAMIN SEEBRÖKER, *Interpersonelle Gewalt und gesellschaftlicher Wandel: Lancashire 1728–1830* (Tübingen: UVK Verlag, 2023), 299 pp. ISBN 978 3 739 83225 8. €49.00

Within the master narrative of modernization as a civilizing process, a popular thesis has it that the emergence of modern society has been accompanied by a long-term decline in violence since the Middle Ages. This thesis was recently called into question by Gerd Schwerhoff, one of the German pioneers in the field, along with three collaborators in a major reconsideration of international research over the last fifty years on the history of crime. They showed, quite convincingly, that even the most sophisticated attempts to chart the course of violent crime in statistical terms (by means of homicide rates) suffer from severe flaws, because both the sources recording violent crime and the population data used for the analysis are a lot less reliable than hitherto thought. The authors were wise enough, however, not to throw the baby out with the bathwater and disregard the quantitative history of crime altogether. Rather, they concluded their reassessment with a thoughtful plea to combine quantitative and qualitative approaches and to pay more attention to the social and cultural context of violence in each particular historical field under study.¹

One of the co-authors of that article was Benjamin Seebröker, and the book under review, dealing with violence and social change in Lancashire between 1728 and 1830 (based on his Dresden PhD thesis supervised by Schwerhoff), reads as though he set out to answer that plea. The critical points raised in the joint article form the general frame of reference for the book, while the historical material is employed in a determined attempt to address the sore spots in the history of crime in a constructive fashion within the bounds of a carefully staged regional case study. The result is convincing in every respect.

The book consists of four parts. Part one, the introduction, clarifies the aim and the scope of the investigation. In order to determine the evolution of homicide rates in Lancashire during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (a period when they declined in London

¹ Gerd Schwerhoff et al., 'Hard Numbers? The Long-Term Decline in Violence Reassessed. Empirical Objections and Fresh Perspectives', *Continuity and Change*, 36/1 (2021), 1–32.

and the southern English counties, as previous research has shown; ch. I.1), the study draws on all cases of lethal violence recorded in legal records surviving for Lancashire for the years from 1728 to 1830 (ch. I.2). There is a detailed assessment of the sources (origin, substance, scope) and a succinct exposition of the methodology (quantitative analysis, qualitative interpretation; ch. I.3), followed by a brief justification of the choice of Lancashire (cotton manufacture as the heart of British industrialization, Manchester and Liverpool as centres of urbanization; ch. I.4).

Part two is concerned with the quantitative analysis. It begins, again, with a critical look at the sources, or more specifically at the devilish details encountered in the business of operationalization: how do we decide what to count as an instance of homicide? Excluding infanticides, accidents, and unclear cases, the resulting sample comprises 587 perpetrators and 510 victims for the entire period under observation (ch. II.1). Next comes the chronological distribution of these cases, which reveals a threefold increase in homicide rates between the early eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (from roughly 0.5 to 1.5 per 100,000). This is in clear contrast to the findings for other regions, but not readily explained, as the observed pattern bears no relationship to factors like war and demobilization or economic crisis (ch. II.2). About half of the perpetrators were acquitted, the other half found guilty, and of the latter, 60 per cent were imprisoned, 15 per cent branded, 11 per cent fined, 10 per cent executed, and 2 per cent transported (ch. II.3). Homicide occurred mainly within the working classes and was overwhelmingly a matter between men: 90 per cent of the perpetrators were male, as were 70 per cent of the victims, and young males in particular feature commonly in the records: two thirds of perpetrators were aged 17–30 (ch. II.4). Most cases were found in the industrialized parts of southern Lancashire, especially in Manchester and Liverpool (ch. II.5).

Part three is devoted to the qualitative interpretation of the material. This is basically a collection of close narratives of individual cases, drawing on a smaller sample of 144 offences with particularly detailed depositions (often including longer witness testimonies). Again, it starts with methodological clarifications as to which forms of violence can be distinguished: of all cases, just a single one relates

to sexual violence, and only 8 per cent to predatory violence (robbery, theft), while the majority (nearly two thirds) involve disputes, though again, the boundaries are not always clear-cut (ch. III.1). Next come the accounts of the cases themselves. In the single example of sexualized violence, three men raped a woman and beat her up so severely that she died from her injuries (ch. III.2).² Homicides associated with property crime were rare and include cases related to the notorious highway robberies (ch. III.3). The vast majority of lethal violence was dispute-related. It occurred within everyday quarrels, or more precisely in cases where the 'normal' use of physical force in more serious personal conflicts had gone out of control. A closer look at such cases reveals that these conflicts were mainly about masculinity and male honour, and that the pub was a prominent location. Not surprisingly, alcohol was an accelerant, not least in domestic conflicts, which were in turn often linked to poor housing and deplorable living conditions (ch. III.4).³ The fights themselves show that violence was regarded as an almost natural aspect of social relationships and that it formed an integral part of everyday life. The typical form of quarrel was the open fist fight, often in a ritualized fashion, in which the surrounding spectators insisted on the common rules of fair play. Occasionally sticks, stones, and tools were used, but weapons only rarely, in just one in eight cases (ch. III.5). The social regulation of violence is also evident in cases where people tried to mediate between the conflicting parties (ch. III.6).

Part four provides a brief summary of the major findings. While the observed increase in homicide rates might suggest that the pressure of social change and hence the propensity to violence increased with industrialization and urbanization, both the social context and the social meaning of violence remained more or less the same. In the case of Lancashire, there was no general change in attitudes towards violence and no behavioural shift towards more 'polite' forms of conflict. If such changes are discernible in London and the surrounding

² Two of the men were found guilty of manslaughter. They pleaded benefit of clergy to escape the death penalty, and were instead branded and sentenced to twelve years' imprisonment.

³ The sample includes one case of an industrial dispute in which a strike-breaker was wounded with his own knife and died a few days later.

regions (as suggested in previous work), the question is to what extent they were restricted to the social elite and the middling classes. And if, by contrast, the labouring classes in Lancashire adhered to traditional notions of violence, might we not regard that as the rule rather than an exception?

Seebröker tends to an answer in the affirmative. I would agree with that, but also endorse his conclusion that we need more historical case studies of crime and violence in industrial regions before we can form a closer understanding of the relationship between violence and industrialization. And I would strongly recommend that they follow the example Seebröker has set. In my view, his book is a model case study. It is not just the combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis which deserves praise, but also each of the two exercises in their own right. The quantitative part is a neat example of how to work with numbers when the evidence is not in itself of that order, so that meaningful numerical units have to be gained from it in the first place (which is so often the case in premodern times). All decisions as to what and how to count are absolutely transparent and the ensuing calculations also made in a clear, conscientious, and careful manner. The qualitative analysis is no less meticulous. The chosen case histories are inspiring, full of interesting detail, and instructively narrated. At the same time, they are not left to speak for themselves, but thematically embedded and perceptively contextualized. Moreover, in considering the wider context, Seebröker is often led to question widely accepted views and wisdoms. For example, in his discussion of the spatial dimension of crime, he is able to show that the distinction between indoors and outdoors, or private and public, is often inappropriate. Thus, quarrels in pubs were never 'private', not only because the pub was per se a public space, but also because quarrels which began in the pub would end up in the streets. Another example would be a drunken husband who swore at his wife, beat her up, and made such a noise that the neighbours stepped in to help her.

Although I recommend the book and wish Seebröker a wide readership, I regret that the latter is probably going to be rather limited. While it deals with an English case and is deeply embedded within British and American research, it is nevertheless a German book, and one most decidedly addressed to German students of crime and violence.

In fact, one of its particular merits is that it provides an excellent guide to two areas largely unknown to the common German reader – that is, English criminal law on the one hand, and English-speaking research on the history of crime on the other. Thus the critical assessment of the sources is at once also an introduction to the institutional setting of the criminal law, highlighting the role of the assizes, the duties of coroners, and other features (there is also a very helpful glossary). Likewise, the major authorities in the English field of the history of crime crop up time and again in the references, including scholars like John Beattie, James Cockburn, Peter King, James Sharpe, and Robert Shoemaker. If these names might not be familiar to most German readers, Seebröcker's book will certainly help to make them better known. Still, all this will hardly touch British and American colleagues, most of whom no longer read German. But then, they are lucky enough to be able to turn to an English-language article by Seebröcker in which major findings from the quantitative analysis of his Lancashire data are summarized.⁴ And I very much hope that he will publish more articles in English featuring case narratives from the qualitative part of his book. They deserve to become widely known in the country in which they originated.

⁴ Benjamin Seebröcker, 'Lethal Violence in Decline? A Critical Review of Historical Homicide Rates in England', *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés*, 25/2 (2021), 33–57.

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