TWO

POPULAR DUELS
PART 2 shifts the focus from the official duel to its unofficial popular counterpart and to plebeian culture generally. Did men—and women—from the lower and lower middle classes have their own particular concepts of honor? This question has been on the historical agenda for some years, but historians' interest has hardly extended to the culture of (male) violence and its rituals and codes. The essays that follow, dealing with the Netherlands, Italy, and the United States, discuss precisely this issue. It is revealed that a popular form of dueling existed, which, though resembling the elite duel, had peculiar features of its own. Dying out in the northern city of Amsterdam in the course of the eighteenth century, the popular duel was still alive in the southern European city of Rome by 1900. In both towns its classic manifestation was a knife fight between individual men. The entire range of plebeian fighting rituals was broader, extending to the collective level. A good example of this is the group violence of volunteer firemen in antebellum America. Rather than upholding their individual honor, the firemen fought for the honor of their company. Since one company always stood opposed to another, the “riots” they started can be seen as popular duels, too.

The subjects of the three essays are truly novel. Until now, the popular knife-duel has hardly been noticed by historians. Possibly it originated in imitation of the elite duel. Although collective fistfights have been dealt with in the literature on popular culture in preindustrial Europe, they have been less frequently studied by American historians, and insofar as collective fights in America have been made a subject of study, the perspective was that of ethnic conflict rather than traditional notions of honor. The subject’s novelty is intriguing, because the types of sources used are hardly novel. Greenberg bases her story on newspaper reports. Boschi and Spierenburg are using court records as their principal source. In particular, they use homicide trials.

Homicide is present in all three essays. Even the firemen riots sometimes resulted in deaths. As a rule, however, the firemen fought without lethal weapons, so homicide was not a typical result. The clashes between fire companies had no significant influence on the homicide rate. This was different in Amsterdam and Rome. A substantial number, though probably still a minority,
of popular knife-duels ended in the death of a protagonist. In both towns, the homicide rates are known for the period studied. At first they were relatively high, and knife fights made a significant contribution to the figures. In both towns the rates declined during the period studied. Whereas in Amsterdam the decline of the homicide rate closely paralleled the disappearance of knife fighting, in Rome the popular duel continued to be practiced into the 1910s, when the homicide rate had already declined. Possibly, Roman popular duelists learned to fight without lethal consequences.

The homicide figures confirm that violent crime was preponderantly a male activity. This was especially striking in Rome: between 1870 and 1914 the share of men was over 90 percent, not only among the offenders but also among the victims. The close association of male popular violence with the world of the tavern also is a constant feature, equally characteristic of Amsterdam around 1700 and Rome around 1900. In the case of the American firemen, the intimate relationship between their riots and their duties precluded an association with tavern culture. However, the riots resembled knife fights in another important aspect: because women were not recruited into volunteer fire companies, the male character of violence was underlined in their case.

The three cases discussed differ in the extent to which the popular duel was echoed in contemporary literature. In the Netherlands a few picaresque novels and a number of crime pamphlets were published, but they hardly contained references to knife-fighting rituals. The latter had a greater resonance in late nineteenth-century Italy. The “fair” popular duel appeared in Italian literature as well as in Roman court records. This leads Boschi to entertain a residue of doubts regarding the authenticity of the stories his defendants told to the court. Spierenburg, on the other hand, is confident that the basic structure of the responses in the Amsterdam interrogation protocols represents reality. In contrast to the mere literary comment on knife fighting, the American volunteer firemen drew the attention of the press. The firemen were more visible as a group and, consequently, there was a greater public concern over their behavior. Still, the press was not the only medium paying attention to riots at fires.
With the figure of “Fighting Mose,” firemen violence also made it into literature. Some degree of fiction and mythmaking, then, was superimposed on all three groups of fighters—the least so in the Netherlands, due to the modest literary production of the period. The American firemen stood at the other side of the spectrum: they even acquired a national reputation, because of Mose and no less as a result of sensationalized press reports. In their case, the myth broke loose from reality, becoming relatively independent from actual firemen violence.

The evidence of the essays in part 2 can be confronted with that contained in part 1. This allows us to compare developments in elite and popular violence. A number of things are striking. First, honor was as important in the popular duel as it was in the elite duel. Although not every Amsterdam or Roman knife fight was fought with a code of fairness in mind, practically all fights touched on matters of personal honor. Collective honor was a conspicuous issue in the firemen’s riots. A significant difference between the popular duel and the elite duel lies in the former’s greater directness. Rituals there were, but they were attuned to an instantaneous settlement once a conflict had arisen. Certainly, popular duelists never issued written challenges. Although they may have viewed their own behavior as akin to that of elite duelists, the latter hardly acknowledged the popular duel as real. Indeed, the elites denied a sense of honor to persons from the lower and lower middle classes. The lack of intergroup recognition of honor may have been greatest in antebellum America. Many of the middle-class people who condemned the “riots” (their definition anyway) among volunteer firemen probably would have approved of a duel within their own milieu. An intriguing point of comparison, finally, lies in the student fencing bouts of imperial Germany: they became increasingly fierce, in accordance with the imperative to control one’s emotion and pain. This led German students to take pride in their scars, just as Dutch lower-class knife fighters had done earlier. The heyday of the German student fencing bout came after knife fighting had disappeared in the Netherlands. Here we have an example of a higher social group holding on longer to an “uncivilized” attitude than a lower social group.