

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Sixteenth Century Studies Conference 2003. Session. 98: Individual and Community in Reformation Europe: Papers in Honor of James D. Tracy. Sixteenth Century Studies Society.

Reviewed by Nathan Rein

Published on H-German (December, 2003)

At least as often as they tell the stories of individual people, historians also deal in collective identities—cultures, societies, classes, communities, or states. At the same time, historians are often acutely aware of the constructed nature of those collectivities. Invisible cleavages and unspoken tensions often lie just below the surface, emerging only in situations of pressure or change. Typically, situations characterized by the disintegration of collective identities, previously believed to be solid, are designated as crises. The three papers presented on this panel explored, from widely varying geographical and methodological perspectives, the problematic enterprise of knowing collective identities historically—a problem that also runs through the work of James D. Tracy. <p> Tom Brady opened the proceedings with reflections on the German Peasants' Revolt of 1525. He began by calling to mind an earlier war, Emperor Maximilian's unsuccessful attempt to thwart the Swiss bid for independence (1499)—widely understood as a revolt of the so-called “common man” against his masters. While the jurist Christoph Scheurl defined “common” (<cite>gemein</cite>) as “without power,” Brady reminded us of the other meaning of <cite>gemein</cite>, namely, “held in common.” Brady then moved from this tension in definitions to a larger tension about historical interpretation. The paper proceeded to a discussion of two influential paradigms for understanding the Peasant's Revolt, best exemplified in the works of Peter Blickle, on the one hand, and Tom Scott, on the other. Blickle's work, focusing on “town-village isomorphism,” has developed the “communalist” model, which can trace its intellectual lineage back to the legal historians Georg Ludwig von Maurer and Otto von Gierke. According to this model, after the manorial

system's disintegration around 1520, peasants began to “claim the liberty to dispose of their own labor” (a liberty already possessed by the burghers); Brady labels this development “the union of liberty and labor.” Townsfolk and peasants thus had political interests in common. In Blickle's view, the two groups also shared common theological assumptions, primarily the notion he identifies as the “godly law” trope. Blickle thus favors the notion of a “people's reform” (M.M. Smirin) as an organizing concept. Accordingly, early modern history requires a single, coherent narrative of the “communal reformation” and thus an innovative periodization based on the trajectory of communalism as a “pan-European fundament.” Blickle's most influential critic is Tom Scott, who proposes an alternative model concentrating not on peasant-seigneurial relations but rather town-land interactions. In his view, events surrounding the Peasants' Revolt suggest not the town-land partnership of Blickle's <cite>Gemeindereformation</cite> but rather a growing subjugation of rural to urban interests in a world where market relationships were increasingly dominated by property rights, manufactures, and the putting-out system. Scott debunks three of Blickle's central assumptions: the notion of an agrarian crisis, preferring to concentrate on “structural formation”; the communalist idea, pointing to the exclusionary components of corporate identities; and the role of religion. Well-off peasant proprietors held all the power in village life, he finds, and thus solidarity among the common folk, so central for Blickle, is for Scott a romantic myth. In his conclusion, Brady remarked that these two competing models reflect an underlying conflict over “how history can be known.” For Blickle, history is dialectical; the people are first liberated (ca. 1300), then oppressed under abso-

lutism, and finally liberated again in the modern period—history is thus infused with moral meaning. Scott, on the other hand, takes a utilitarian and realist stance, focusing on the interplay of economic and political forces; this avoids framing historical narratives in terms of morality or progress. Brady quoted Troeltsch on the “need for explanation” in history—“the present continually hovers before the backward-looking glance”—and offered the work of James Tracy as a corrective, in which the historian takes the past on its own terms rather than as a possible source for explanations of present conditions. Susan Karant-Nunn turned then to an examination of the role of pastors in the developing German Protestant community in the beginning of the confessionalization period, focusing on the part ministers played in regulating the behavior of ordinary men and women. She opened by offering an alternative title for the paper: “They have highly offended the community of God’: Rituals of Ecclesiastical Discipline.” Given that the pre-Reformation clergy was typically understood as outside and above the lay community, Karant-Nunn asked, to what extent did this understanding shift with the coming of religious reforms? In other words, how did pastors “fit” into the newly-reformed Christian communities they served? She argued for the development of what Robert W. Scribner once labeled a “new clericalism.” Pastors not only consoled but also enforced community discipline, and they did so primarily by admonishing (usually via sermons), excluding (controlling access to the sacraments), and reconciling lay individuals. Karant-Nunn cited princely proclamations and ordinances from Maurice of Saxony and contemporaries instructing church officials to police their parishioners’ conduct. She noted in these documents a growing emphasis on both regulating the role of consistories and liberally employing the ban as a mode of coercion. Church visitors were to take note of crimes such as youthful disobedience or premarital sex, and harsh pastoral condemnations of such behavior could be scripted into the official wording of the ordinance. In Karant-Nunn’s words, pastors had effectively been made into “members of a civil bureaucracy” responsible for the morals of ordinary layfolk. Many were required to swear oaths of loyalty to the person of the prince. They were regularly exhorted to act with total detachment and impartiality towards their flocks and not to involve themselves in secular government. Visitation records in both Lutheran and Reformed territories, however, attest to official dissatisfaction with their performance of such functions. Pastors were too lax, or too partial, in their enforcement of moral standards, and rulers and their represen-

tatives tried several solutions. Sometimes they shifted these responsibilities to boards of presbyters; sometimes they took measures to distance pastors from their parishioners. Such measures might include a prohibition on clerical-lay fraternizing; mandating the wearing of distinctive clerical dress; the institution of extensive, sophisticated training; or recruiting new clergy from among urban populations. Karant-Nunn remarked on the difficulty and delicacy of the pastor’s role as disciplinarian: some “sins” would have been so rooted in local custom—drinking comes to mind as an example—that it would likely have been impossible for clergy to participate safely in efforts to eradicate them. Karant-Nunn concluded that clergy gradually became part of the apparatus of social control, but pointed out that pastors had to strike a delicate balance between their responsibilities to the state and their need to maintain minimally civil relations with their congregations. Henk van Nierop’s presentation examined the rival loyalties that split the Low Countries’ urban communities as they were swept up in civil war in the wake of the “Wonder Year” (1566). In February 1567, eight to nine thousand of Amsterdam’s citizens—many Catholics among them—staged an insurrection in response to rumors that the magistrates were preparing to open the town to Philip II’s troops. The coming of the Reformation movement had divided communities and even families; van Nierop recounted one story in which two brothers found themselves fighting on opposing sides of the confessional divide. Traditional communal and familial loyalties weakened in the face of the new, totalizing demands of confessional solidarity. Van Nierop’s central question here was: to what extent did urban identity affect the townspeople’s attitudes towards the revolt? He argued that one of the consequences of the new confessional divide was that each religious party sought to portray itself as the authentic defender of “true” civic identity and to cast its enemies as betrayers of the community. A genuine culture of corporate solidarity existed in these cities, expressed in the key concepts of freedom, brotherly love, and concord. However, this collective identity was strongly idealized, not to say mythical. The towns were largely under the control of powerful elites, and underlying social cleavages were real. Van Nierop found that as the revolt spread, civic responses were governed especially by three characteristic burgher attitudes. First, townsmen were reluctant to allow the quartering of government soldiers inside the community. Second, they tended to suspect magistrates of failing to mount an effective defense of urban interests. Finally, burghers generally saw their civic militias as a concrete representation of civic unity; accordingly,

they sought to avoid opening the city to any outside troops at all, whether they fought for the government or the rebels. The revolt catalyzed a crisis in civic identity, as Catholic refugees clandestinely sought sanctuary in Protestant towns in the face of massacres of clergy by advancing rebel armies. Van Nierop concluded that the revolt "fatally undermined" Dutch urban identity by providing new and compelling models of corporate loyalty incompatible with the traditional urban paradigm. Civic *concordia* could not coexist with confessional identity. Once the fighting stopped, urban leaders attempted to undo this damaging outcome by commanding townsmen, in effect, to forget their animosities. This strategy proved more successful in the Low Countries than in France. The reasons behind this difference might lie with the economic upswing of the 1590s, or, possibly, with leaders' conscious downplaying of confessional

differences in the interests of civic unity and freedom of conscience. In this sense, van Nierop concluded, the long-range outcome of the revolt in the towns was a more open society, characterized by a renewed culture of corporate solidarity bolstered by a broad tolerance for dissent and discussion. Raymond Mentzer's brief comment placed these papers in a broader geographical context by raising comparative questions. To Karant-Nunn, he remarked that the French pastorate was steadily losing power simultaneously with the period addressed in her paper. To van Nierop, he reflected that further investigation into the great differences between the French and Dutch outcomes could yield fruitful results. In the minutes that remained, an energetic discussion ensued, including responses from James Tracy and members of the audience.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Nathan Rein. Review of , *Sixteenth Century Studies Conference 2003. Session. 98: Individual and Community in Reformation Europe: Papers in Honor of James D. Tracy*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. December, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15274>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.