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Witchcraft in Europe: Where's the Anthropology?

This comparative study of witchcraft in Europe consists of ten chapters and is divided into three parts written by three authors; the two editors who are not themselves contributors wrote only a short six-page introduction. *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe* investigates reasons for the rise and decline of witchcraft in various European countries, a topic too vast for extensive treatment in a single volume. Nevertheless this book provides material sufficient for cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary investigation and deserves the attention of cultural historians. Although the regional stress is on England, the Low Countries, Germany, France and Switzerland, there are some glimpses into witchcraft practices and accusation in the Mediterranean, Scandinavia and East-Central Europe. The limited geographical scope of this work impresses one as ethnocentric if consideration is given to the extensive and global treatment of its chosen themes in anthropological literature. Furthermore, the absence of an explicit discussion and definition of the notion of 'magic' is noteworthy.

The initial question prompting scholars to investigate witchcraft in Europe is the interesting problem of its very

emergence, prominence and eventual decline. The generally accepted view regarding the latter is highlighted by Brian Levack in his introduction where he shows that witchcraft had ceased to be a crime and began to lose its grip on local communities by the late eighteenth century; for example, the last officially sanctioned witchcraft executions took place in Switzerland in 1782 and in Poland in 1793. Levack argues that when looking at cases in various European countries, we must distinguish between "the number of prosecutions and the number of executions." It is clear that by the eighteenth century marked reductions occurred in both, but not always at the same time. By using England, Scotland, Germany, France and Hungary as examples, Levack convincingly argues that the decline of witchcraft beliefs and accusations had many causes. He suggests, however, that "judicial skepticism" was a fundamental cause for changes in witch-beliefs and religious attitudes concerning 'black' magic, devil worship and witches. For Levack the growth of the modern state brought important judicial principles into being such as "the formal restriction on the use of torture, the reversal of convictions upon appeal, and legislation that restricted the right of local courts to try witches un-

der any circumstances” (p. 88). These, then, can be credited with influencing the outcome of the witch’s trade.

In Part Two, Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra considers further explanations for both the decline and continuation of European witchcraft. In her contribution “Witchcraft After the Witch Trials,” she focuses on questions of how ‘enlightened’ Europe lost its enchantment with witchcraft even though it persisted after judicial prosecution ended. Utilizing her own research material from the Netherlands she argues that witchcraft accusations continued well into the mid-nineteenth century although on a much lesser scale. In Belgium and France, lynching and maltreatment of suspected witches continued into the nineteenth century as well. But, as she observes, information concerning the continuation of witchcraft in Spain and Italy - countries noted for excessive and often brutal witch persecution - is almost lacking for the nineteenth century. In Great Britain, however, there is considerable evidence for the presence of both witchcraft and witchcraft accusations at this time. She also raises important questions relating gender imbalances to witchcraft trials and persecutions in Scandinavian countries. But the dearth of suitable material inhibits clear answers to these questions.

Gijswijt-Hofstra’s claims about Eastern and Central Europe are controversial and should be viewed with caution. Nevertheless she correctly observes that much of the east-central and southern European material is folkloristic (consisting primarily of oral accounts of magical practices and bewitching) and is seldom based on detailed court cases. While the more comprehensive Swiss, German and Austrian materials are excellent sources for comparative analysis, data on regions east and south are less accessible.

Thus, the question arises as to what sources researchers should use when attempting to reconstruct historical beliefs and magical practice in this region. Although she never really addresses the issue, Gijswijt-Hofstra’s use of data from this part of the world demonstrates that much remains to be done.[1] For example, her analysis is based on secondary literature. Using English translations of works by Kristof, Pocs, and Klaniczay she analyses witch trials from Hungary. And studies by Vorobec, Frank, Kivelson and Zguta are her sources for Russia and the Ukraine. Because of the lack of English-language material Poland, the Baltic region and the Balkans remain outside her (and, in fact, the book’s) scope of investigation.

Moreover, Gijswijt-Hofstra uncritically adopts the

central tenet of G. Klaniczay’s much publicized article “The decline of witches and rise of vampires”, that the eighteenth century rise of vampires resulted in the decline of witchcraft practices and accusations in the Habsburg Monarchy.[2] Nothing could be further from the truth. Since in popular literature there is no evidence indicating that the demise of witchcraft is a result of vampirism’s ascendance in public discourse and popular treatises, she should convince the reader as to the viability of this argument. Although classic vampirism appears in western European literature first in the mid-eighteenth century, aspects of vampirism already existed in seventeenth-century sources. It should be remembered that the last witch executions took place in the late eighteenth century well after (mostly Slavic) vampirism became known all over Europe. Even though, as Gijswijt-Hofstra correctly observes, the trials and legal prosecutions of witches had ceased in Hungary witchcraft beliefs continued well into the nineteenth century. Finally, I remind readers that two aspects of vampirism are inadequately discussed in the literature presented here, namely, the undead husband returning to his wife or lovers (the demon lover) and the werewolf belief -both are well known themes in Western European folklore and popular beliefs.

Roy Porter is the author of Part III “Witchcraft and magic in the enlightenment, romantic and liberal thought.” His approach is clearly in line with the book’s overall aim but with a remarkably simple yet acceptable twist. He argues: “Doubtless witch persecutions shuddered to a halt partly because courtroom proceeding became too troublesome, contentious or embarrassing. But the repeal of witchcraft legislation was an expression of deeper shifts in elite outlooks, often represented as a joyous emancipation from dated dogmas repugnant to modernizers anxious to bury the past and to build a better future” (p. 193). As Porter puts it, religion, philosophy and science (especially medicine) all contributed to relegating witch practices to low culture with occasional outbursts into public limelight.

All in all, it is rather disappointing that the book does not have an index, pictures, tables, or graphs. We don’t even know who the authors really are. Moreover, it is simply inconceivable that a book which aims at covering almost the whole of Europe from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries can get away without putting some of the data, figures and numbers into some easily understandable graphs or charts. It would have been a nice addition, too, to be able to see some pictorial material relevant to the topics covered. I expect that some-

one will acknowledge these deficiencies in the near future and publish a book that will have a wider scholarly as well as popular appeal. Also, in light of the recent emergence of modern magic, witchcraft and psychic phenomena, one wonders about the basic premise of the book (that modernization and the enlightenment caused the decline of witchcraft). Today there are perhaps more (self-proclaimed) witches than in any previous known age. Further studies will have to deal with this renaissance and its connection to historic magic and witch practices.

Finally, it is well known that the study of witches and witch beliefs in Europe has been largely the reserve of historians whereas anthropologists have studied religion in tribal societies. That practitioners of the two disciplines should learn from each other is amply demonstrated by this book. Anthropologists study magic, sorcery and witchcraft in its cultural setting as part of a religious world-view. In this book, however, historical settings dominate, settings that are not analyzed in great detail. For historians, Eva Labouvie's study remains still a pioneering work.[3] We find almost no evidence that societies and local communities have produced their own witches and accusers. Historians draw upon court testimonies, written descriptions, trials and evidence coerced by eager persecutors or torturers. I know of no anthropologist today who would rely solely on this type of data. Rather a broader range of material is required such as one finds in Jeanne Favret-Saada's excellent book.[4]

Certainly "there is much that is needed" (as the editors put it) when it comes to understanding historical data like those presented here. *Witchcraft and magic in Europe* tells us a lot about how historians perceive and analyze witchcraft in Europe. Yet "the topic of their dis-

cipline," in the words of the editors, exists not only in Europe but all over the world. Despite the fact that I liked the book for its Western European coverage, my feeling is that it will be useful mostly for scholars of western Europe schooled in comparative historical methodology.

Notes

[1]. T. M. Luhrmann deals with this in her book, *Persuasions of the witch's craft. Ritual magic in contemporary England*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991, especially in Part I.

[2]. See, G. Klaniczay, *The uses of supernatural power*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 168-188. The first version of this article appeared in Hungarian in 1985 with the title "Witches, vampires and enlighteners"; then, in 1987, it appeared as an article in *Ethnologia Europaea*, XVII, 1987, 165-180, with the title: "Decline of witches and rise of vampires in the 18th century Habsburg Monarchy;" only to appear in the volume under discussion in another version. The three versions are slightly different. However, Klaniczay's argument has remained the same connecting the rise of vampirism to the decline of witchcraft.

[3]. *Zauberei und Hexenwerk. Landlicher Hexenglaube in der fruehen Neuzeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991.

[4]. See, Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words. Witchcraft in the Bocage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

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