

**[Review of the book *Politics of the Sword: Dueling, Honor, and Masculinity in Modern Italy*]**

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come was a national crackdown on Falungong and then restrictions on all *qigong* organizations and practices that ended support within the Party. “Most masters stopped their activities, took a low profile, went underground, or emigrated to the West.” Although limited personal practice was still legal, “the sector ceased to exist as a vibrant social space” (p. 280).

This was not, as Palmer makes clear, simply a blow of dictatorship against personal freedom, or a democratic rebellion against the Communist Party. The *qigong* movement was invented by officials, and their support fertilized its many metamorphoses. The rise of charismatic masters introduced a strong element of what Palmer calls religiosity that was incompatible with Party control. In most movements disciples experienced this dimension only in their intimate relations with their teachers, but Falungong moved it to the center. That inevitably precipitated a debacle.

I am not sure whether “religiosity” is the best word for this existential pivot. Palmer defines it as “certain universal subjective dispositions . . . rooted in mundane hopes for the avoidance of disease and misfortune, in aspirations for self-realisation, or in the search for transcendental salvation or wisdom. . . . As a subjective disposition, religiosity disregards artificial boundaries between the private and the social, *between the religious and the secular*, between personal pain and political judgements [sic]” (p. 25, my italics). But I cannot offer a better term.

This is a fine and worthwhile book. There is no space to do justice to its informed and sophisticated conceptual analysis. Its writing is a bit more academic than need be, but the prose does not, as in so many books, interfere with the argument. This is the best work in its field.

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## SECTION 4 SOCIAL ORDER

*Politics of the Sword: Dueling, Honor, and Masculinity in Modern Italy.*

By Steven C. Hughes (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2007. xiv plus 360 pp.).

Steven Hughes’ book on honor and politics in the founding of the Italian state is perhaps the most thorough analysis of the role played by the duel in any modern European society. Whereas the duel, especially when viewed from the perspective of Anglo-American culture, was once believed to be a pathetic vestige of moribund continental aristocracy, recent research has revealed that wherever it flourished the duel was popular with modernizing elites who regarded themselves as exemplars of the political culture of the future. Nothing about the modern duel resembled its ancestor. Duels were carefully regulated according to a quasi-legal code; in principle any man deemed a “gentleman” according to current

criteria could participate; and duels were remarkably safe when compared with the collective bloodlettings of old regime affairs of honor. Only the weapons and the ideological trappings of chivalry and personal glory resembled the duels of yesteryear, and even these were standardized or reinvented to meet the requirements of modern society.

*The Politics of the Sword* tracks the fortunes of the Italian honor culture from the eighteenth century through the period of unification to the final efflorescence of the duel under Mussolini. Hughes notes that though Renaissance Italians had more or less invented the relationship between an orderly duel and an affair of honor between noblemen, it was the French who kept dueling traditions alive through the eighteenth century and who then invented their modern forms when the armies of Napoleon threw together European men from varied nations, religions, and classes. The experience of serving in these multi-national armies re-ignited in Italian men an enthusiasm for settling differences with pistol or sword, and sharpened their collective identity as part of a political elite destined to unite their divided lands. By the time the nationalist passions of the Risorgimento were at full boil, Italian men were dueling at a rate of one a day, a figure that was maintained until after 1870 and which diminished only slowly thereafter. However, only “gentlemen” or those who aspired to this status were accorded the right to duel, though in practice this category was very elastic in unified Italy. It included Risorgimento military heroes of all classes, most professionals, politicians, and of course military officers and men of noble blood.

The modern Italian duel was more vigorous and long-lasting than that of any European country. Hughes demonstrates that the honor culture that nourished the duel served as a bridge between the political elites of Italy’s geographically and politically diverse regions. He artfully explains that the duel served to legitimate a man’s claim to participate in the civilian political order by making him the personal guarantor of the sincerity if not the precise truth of his words. Political parties were weak, there were no defamation laws nor was there any history of decorous parliamentary procedure, and the press was venal and traded in innuendo and scandal. In effect, there were no protections for a man navigating the public sphere, including family, wealth, or accomplishment. As Hughes writes, the personal was the political. A man who was publicly “given the lie”, whose reputation or person was insulted, or whose womenfolk or family name tarnished, was obliged to send his seconds to his offender to begin negotiations for a duel. The duel was socially exclusionary in the extreme; only a thin sliver of Italian men “qualified”. However, the duel was also rigorously egalitarian in requiring all “eligibles” to issue and answer legitimate challenges.

As Hughes demonstrates in countless, often tragic, sometimes amusing examples, men dueled as individuals but also as Italians seeking to redeem centuries of servility to absolutism or an “effeminate” acceptance of foreign rule. The purely nationalistic motive in these displays of civic courage was ironically fueled by the numerous military and imperial fiascos endured by Italian troops from the 1850s to the end of World War One. It is therefore not surprising that Italian military officers had the highest dueling rates of any category; despite an “official” disapproval of the duel, a man who refused a legitimate challenge from a brother officer, who did not leap to defend the honor of his corps, was summarily cashiered. Hughes explains that the last great spurt of dueling between 1918

and 1925 was produced by a combination of men humiliated by military defeat and the chaotic conditions of Italian political life, just before the Fascist state destroyed the press and political freedoms that had always been the most fertile sources of affairs of honor. Mussolini's "New Fascist Man" was a collective man who was expected to subsume his own honor into that of the nation.

Hughes gives considerable attention to the fine grain of Italy's honor culture. He studies the statistics of the duel, so far as we can know them, and concludes that the duel was largely an urban phenomenon without much regional variation. He follows in great detail the legal history of the duel in order to show that the liberal and later the fascist regimes could not bring themselves to outlaw the duel unless gross violations of the "law" of the duel had occurred. He carefully peruses the twenty-odd dueling codes published in Italy in the modern era to show the standards that in fact did govern encounters, which, if scrupulously observed by duelers, practically guaranteed legal immunity. And he devotes a chapter to the long public debate between proponents and abolitionists which was exhaustively rehearsed well into the twentieth century. Here he shows that even the most ardent Catholic or socialist opponent of the practice could find himself in a *vertenza* (affair of honor) in which relaxing his personal convictions was preferable to the loss of his personal reputation, his friends, and his masculine self-esteem.

The great merit of this book is the author's exquisite sensitivity to the real dilemmas faced by men whose every public action was scrutinized for a consistency between words and deeds. He reads dueling codes and anti-dueling tracts with the eye of an ethical casuist, that is, in the same way as the men who consulted them as guides to action. His numerous and colorful descriptions of duels suspend judgment on the ridiculousness or futility of their motives. Though he can sympathize with a man forced to defend his reputation in combat, he is fully aware that dueling and the political culture that sustained it also reinforced a patriarchal order in which women had no personal or moral autonomy except to defend their sexual honor at all cost. Until it finally died, the quasi-legal duel papered over the contradictions between the liberal "legal" country of laws and rights and the "real" country of hierarchy, class and gender bias, and the brutal conformism of honorable violence.

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*Certain Other Countries. Homicide, Gender and National Identity in Late Nineteenth-Century England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.* By Carolyn A. Conley (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007. ix plus 255 pp. \$49.95).

Most historic studies of 'Britain' are in fact about England, with only token nods to the considerable diversity within the Atlantic archipelago. In contrast, this ambitious study is *real* British history that devotes equal attention to all the component parts. Conley seeks to explore "responses to homicides and what those