
DAVIS, ROBERT C. *The War of the Fists: Popular Culture and Public Violence in Late Renaissance Venice*. New York Oxford University Press, 1994. Pp. vi, 232. Notes, illustrations, index. \$55 cb., \$22 pb.

Robert C. Davis's recent book may not have caught the attention of readers of the *Journal of Sport History*, but this work should interest sport historians on a number of levels. The subject of the book is a popular spectacle that took place regularly in Venice during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in which artisans and laborers representing the two factions of the city would gather at bridges to battle bare-handed. The spectacle represents what one might call a distinctive "early modern" form of sport that combines aspects of public entertainment, working-class culture, urban factionalism, and youth violence. The book is also interesting for its microhistorical approach, which has grown increasingly popular among historians of many geographic areas and periods and has created rich and persuasive accounts of obscure lives and events and a broad array of subjects in social-cultural history.

In the introduction, Davis discusses his main sources: two lengthy narrative chronicles written by an anonymous author. One chronicle, completed in 1574, describes a mock battle with sticks held on the main city bridge in honor of a visit of King Henry III to Venice. The other, from the mid-seventeenth century,

describes “little battles on the bridge” (*battaglie sui ponti*) held by Venetian laborers and artisans several times a year on Sunday or holiday afternoons in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The little battles ranged from individual boxing duels (*mostra*) to large prearranged wars (*frotta*), which went on for hours and were observed by hundreds of people from windows and balconies.

According to Davis, the war of the fists originated as one of a larger number of “quasi-ritual brawls for neighborhood supremacy” (p. 14) that were common in many Italian cities of the period when rival bands of youths battled in public spaces with fists, stones, or sticks. The first surviving official notice of the little battles in Venice date from 1369, but reports of pretend battles waged by citizens with sharpened sticks date as far back as the ninth century. Earlier battles took place in the public squares of the neighborhoods. The first mention of a bridge battle was in 1421, but throughout the fifteenth century, bridges vied with public squares as the preferred battle site. Around 1500, the battles began to take place exclusively on the bridge; a century later, fists replaced sticks as the preferred method of fighting. In chapter one, Davis explains that the shift in location from public squares to bridges and in the form of fighting from sticks to fists, which distinguished battles in Venice from those in other cities, took place at the height of stone bridge building in the maritime city and when factional antagonism between the two major clans in the city, the Castellani and Nicolotti, had reached a peak. According to Davis, bridges became the preferred site not just because they were an important feature of the Venetian landscape, but because they offered a suitable site for factional confrontation. Bridges provided a clear and well-defined battlefield, and they were accessible from two ends and also channeled factional armies in an orderly fashion. Arched and open bridges presented themselves as a public stage that could be observed from balconies above. They also served an important psychological role, dramatically signaling the defeat of a fighter or group of fighters by their tumbling into the water.

In chapters two and three, the strongest parts of the book, Davis uses the narratives beyond their descriptive worth, presenting a highly differentiated analysis of what the battles meant to the participants and spectators. In doing so, he shows the possibilities offered by a textual, ethnographic analysis common to microhistorians. Davis explains that the chroniclers, visitors to the city, and the nobility, who were all spectators, viewed the battles with a miscomprehension similar to ours. To these people, “the battles were neither exactly sport nor all-out war; they were too much for a game, too little for a real war” (p. 47). This ambiguity seemed to appeal to the participants, their families, neighbors, and friends, who had “no desire to define these encounters within the same sort of formal rules” (p. 47) that defined other civic amusements and spectacles. To the participants and their allies, the battles served a number of functions. First of all, they were a celebration of faction, a feature of Venetian society that was as ubiquitous as parish and occupational affiliation. Second, they were about gaining honor. Davis notes that “such single-minded pursuit of status and reputation by ordinary workers is striking in an absolutist age, where the assertion and display of honor was typically the preserve of social elites” (p. 91). Third, the battles were about male

identity They granted the individual fighter public recognition of his manhood, representing, in effect, a working-class man's right of passage. Finally, they were about community-based bonding, as men, women, and children followed the aspiration, and success of their local leaders not only during the battles themselves but in festivities scheduled days before the event.

Davis ends his study by noting the contrasts between the civic processions that took place in the city center on feast days—which stressed order, wealth, decorum, and power—and the battles on the bridges, which expressed disorder and the exaltation of violence over civic peace. The only major critique of Davis's work is that there is somewhat of an inherent inconsistency in his interpretation of these contrasts as “a world of the patrician ceremonial turned upside down” (pp. 44-45). While Davis's overall argument that the battles were “largely, if not primarily, the cult of the socially disenfranchised” (p. 84) is convincing, he also shows that this phenomenon “penetrated every corner of daily life, as people of all classes talked and indeed thought of little else for weeks at a time” (p. 89). Thus, even if many of the upper-middle-class spectators and visitors did not understand the battles in the same way as the participants did, it would make more sense to view them as an interaction between laypersons and elites—a typical manifestation of early modern popular culture (as described by Peter Burke in *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* [New York, 1978])—than as a patrician ceremonial turned upside down. On a minor note, Davis has accumulated a large number of fascinating visual sources; unfortunately, they serve mainly an illustrative function in the book. The author could have drawn on them in the same critical fashion as he did the written sources to support his overall views and further draw interest to his already compelling, highly interesting work.

Those familiar with the history of early modern cities will recognize that *The War of the Fists* presents a view of early modern Venetian society quite unlike that of the serene republic that has come down to us. The historian of modern sport, far from early modern Venice, might find that the violence and factionalism of the battles shed some light on violence and participation in modern sport (i.e., boxing, ice hockey, and American football). For social-cultural historians of all persuasions, this fine book shows us the value of unknown sources and obscure events as a prism for understanding larger developments.

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