

Daggers of the Mind: Towards a Historiography of Fencing

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If historians from Karl Marx to Michel Foucault have dealt with conflict between dominant and subordinate groups as a primary theme in their work, it is arguably because of their European background. The notion of social class, it has oft been noted, is more in the fore of the French or British mind than it is in the American. After all, one often-admired quality of American society is its supposed “egalitarianism.” The United States has had a civil war, but never a revolt of the plebes.^[1] Therefore, to the American-born historian, conflict and competition between social equals would seem to be a more authentically pressing issue than conflict between social classes.

Classical fencing—that is, a systematized method of civilian combat with the sword, for sport and for self-defense—is a virtual repository of attitudes, norms, and codes for dealings between social equals. It is, after all, rooted in the reality of the duel, the antagonistic and ritualistic combat between two adversaries, intended to settle a question of honor; that is to say, of social status amongst one’s peers.^[2] Through the bourgeois appropriation of aristocratic, chivalric ideals, such as the bearing of arms, the code duello participates in what the medievalist Johann Huizinga called the “identification of an aesthetic concept with an ethical ideal.”^[3]

However, though the oldest existing martial tradition in the Western world, the Italian school of fence, reckons itself to be almost five hundred years old,^[4] academic consideration of the subject may almost be said to still be in the Dark Ages. Some of the most well-known and frequently cited works on the history of fencing are more than a century old, and are inundated with attitudes and assumptions that, while typical of their age, are badly in need of reappraisal. Yet, these selfsame attitudes are, in turn, very revealing of the mindset and mentalities prevalent amongst the educated elites in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, and which to an extent, are still current in our own society.

A study of these works would, arguably, be even more revealing of the “spirit of the age” than reading the works of writers such as Nietzsche, since it would tell us what was going on not in the mind of the philosopher, but in the mind of the (admittedly well-dressed) man on the street. Since fencing is, perforce, a pastime of the elite, the segment of society most likely to have been schooled in depth in the various mental habits and viewpoints of their culture, it will reflect a “pop culture” version of this culture’s biases. This group’s perceptions of, and thoughts about, their leisure activity will, logically, reflect their ways of thinking, not only about practical matters, but about their aesthetic tastes, their hopes, dreams, and ideals. An analysis of works on fencing and dueling will, likewise, provide us with the views of this upper crust towards conflict, fair play, and the place of the aggressive instinct in society. In these aspects, it may be broader and even more valuable than a detailed, in-depth analysis of one influential historical writer, such as Ranke or Gibbon.

Finally, the study is also of interest to historians of science, since classical fencing was, and is, reckoned to be not just a physical activity, contingent upon reflexes and brawn, but a science—an aesthetic science, subject to eternal and universal rules, as if the same Platonic truths embrace geometry, fencing, and art. The better we understand the clockwork of the universe, the better we can make it work for us. The attitudes towards fencing will, therefore, also reflect attitudes towards science and scientific progress.

The three primary English-language historians of fencing in the nineteenth century were Edgerton Castle, Captain Alfred Hutton, and the famous adventurer and explorer Sir Richard Burton, whose major



contributions, respectively, are *Schools and Masters of Fence*, *Old Sword Play*, and *The Book of the Sword* (all published in 1892). Castle deals with the history of the art itself, Hutton with the practical points of Renaissance swordsmanship, reconstructing technique from an antiquarian point of view, and Burton with the archaeology and development of the sword itself.

The most significant of these writers is Castle, who is still widely quoted as a historical authority in works on fencing. Burton, though a colorful character, is not as useful, since *The Book of the Sword* mainly deals with the evolution of the weapon itself, and thus is not of as much interest to the historian who wishes to deal with social conceptions of its use. Finally, though the bulk of Hutton's work deals with the actual technical aspects of the use of "old" weapons, the introductory portions are very revealing.

The primary assumption underlying the writings of these men is that human history since the Renaissance has, under the aegis of reason, been a continuing march towards greater and greater "perfection." Like the Swiss historian Jacob Bruckhardt's view of the Renaissance, Hutton, Castle, and Burton display a strong moral and historical positivism. To them, the invention of fencing, begun in the glorious days of the Italian Renaissance, paralleled the progress of the scientific revolution and the evolution of the "modern" age towards greater moral, intellectual, and physical enlightenment and refinement, to a point, in fact, where dueling had vanished, and the study of the sword was wholly an academic, leisure-time activity. (At the time of writing, no Englishman had engaged in a sword duel for years.)^[5] As Castle says in his introduction to *Schools and Masters*:

"The author does not profess... to analyze closely the contents of *all* the books written on the **imperfect play of our ancestors**, nor to trace every link in the chain of [fencing's] development, from the "pancratium" of the fifteenth century, in which leaping and wrestling were of more avail than aught else, to **the courteous and academic 'assault' of modern days, where elegance and precision of movement are more highly considered-or ought to be-than mere superiority in the number of hits.**"^[6]

As part and parcel of this bias, we see a strong tendency that, the later and further north one looks, the more "perfect" the development of the art is accounted to have been. Hutton, trying to say in a few paragraphs what Castle said in a book, is even more revealing. For instance, in his introduction to *Old Sword-Play*, he makes blanket statements such as:

"...in Western Europe the long, handsome rapier had by degrees given place to the short walking sword, which, however, did not assume a settled form until the century following [the eighteenth]; but the Italians, who were the original teachers of our art, adhered to the earlier form. This change of pattern in the sword necessitated a change in the method of using it, and **hence arose the two great and only "schools" of fence**, the Italian and the French.

"From this point on we deal with the French system alone, and we find that **as the short, light swords improved in their form, the art of wielding them advanced in precision and grace**, which latter quality may be said to have **attained its perfection** about the middle of the eighteenth century."^[7]

Hutton summarily drops his discussion of the Italian school as soon as it cedes to the French—the students have surpassed the masters. Likewise, he apparently does not feel the Italian school to have been "perfect" in and of itself, but rather only an antecedent to the French school, in which the art reached its ultimate culmination. In this, we might detect an obvious nationalistic and even racist bias—fencing



could never be “perfected” by those swarthy Italians. Similarly, Hutton ignores, and Castle dismisses, the Spanish school. While their southern cousins might have been inspired artists with brush, pen, and sword, it was up to the Northern European countries to give the Renaissance its true intellectual direction.

To Burckhardt, as well, the Italian despots were almost animalistic—to be admired for their fierceness and political effectiveness, to be sure, but still ruled more by a fiery heart than a cool mind. Ignoring the history of the communes, so important to the development of civic humanism and such movements as the Savonarolan millennial community in Florence, emphasis was placed on the “tyrants,” the great political powers and artistic patrons. Their epitome was Cesare Borgia, who was the despotic son of a Spanish pope of few scruples, and who was the admired hero of Machiavelli, whose very name was a byword for political cynicism and moral indifference. The Italians had genius, to be sure, as is seen in the art of Michaelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci, but the history textbooks then switched their focus (as they still do today) from the Italian wars to the theology of Luther and Calvin, or to the consolidation of the French state in the seventeenth century. The Italians were ruled by “tyrants,” the French by “autocrats.”

Fencing, likewise, was held to have been perfected by the “refined” French, who in this period pioneered the “small sword,” or “walking sword,” as Hutton calls it, that combined the functions of masculine jewelry and self-defense.^[8] Even today, few costume dramas set in the seventeenth or eighteenth century seem complete without an affair d’honor settled at sword’s point.^[9] Italian technique, meanwhile, remained “coarse” and “primitive,” using a heavier weapon that was little more than a scaled-down rapier. Physical labor and brute strength, in the most courtly fashion, were considered uncouth. The featherweight small sword provided a personal weapon as light, elegant, and refined as the spirit itself. Even if the profession of the gentleman was to carry a sword, the fashionable courtier of the Age of Enlightenment was determined that his “work” would involve as little actual sweat as possible.

This perception is borne out by a well-known anecdote of the famous fencing master Domenico Angelo defeating a certain Dr. Keys in a celebrated early-eighteenth century contest. Keys, an Irishman of considerable size and strength, challenged the French-schooled Angelo to a fencing match in a London tavern, which often served as venues for such entertainments. According to Angelo’s son, the challenger cut a “a tall, athletic figure... his shirt sleeves tucked up, exposing a pair of brawny arms, sufficient to cope in the ring with Broughton or Slack [two famous pugilists of the day].” Angelo, however, easily put by all of Keys’ powerful attacks with small, skillful, and effortless motions, and then went on to score a number of unanswered hits on his exhausted adversary.^[10]

Clearly, what this meant to contemporaries can be easily interpolated: the intellect and science of the Enlightenment, or at least of the self-made gentleman and courtier of that era, had triumphed over brute force, as personified by the uncouth Irish. Angelo went on to become an enormously influential and successful teacher of fencing and other manly graces to the gentlemen of England, and is a significant reason why Hutton and Castle would eventually come out as such aficionados of the French method.^[11]

Similarly, improvement in technique, with all its moral implications, is the logical result of technological development. In fact, it is the logical result of it. As Hutton says, “[The] change of pattern in the sword necessitated a change in the method of using it.” Moral, artistic, and ethical development go hand-in-hand with mechanical progress; the industrial revolution, according to this mindset, could only produce beneficial results. Technical improvement leads to overall improvement, just as oil painting is superior to panel painting.

However, despite Hutton and Castle’s impressions, it is not the case that the Italians were, in practice, inferior in any wise to the French in the practical application of the art of the sword. We find in contemporary accounts of contests between fencing masters that the southerners at least held their own.



Whereas it is true that, the style of the “home team” was preferred as the most beautiful, elegant, and effective, we see in such events as the French tour of the Italian *Scuola Magistrale* in 1889, the visitors gave as good as they got.^[12] Fencing was a common and widely followed sport in the late nineteenth century in such places as Paris, at least amongst the upper classes. Newspapers even employed fencing critics who, in many ways, filled the roles that both sports writers and theater critics do in modern mass media—for fencing was, as we have said, an aesthetic as well as an athletic exercise. As one such critic, the French fencing master Rupiere, remarked with obvious nationalistic bias:

“The Roman masters have not yet abandoned theatrical postures, useless movements and contortions, and the continuous beating of the adversary’s blade, which they search for in a monotonous fashion... but the attack executed from immobility [i.e. in the French manner] is always superior to the attack performed with an advance [a typically Italian maneuver]...”^[13]

However, another French master, Victor Maurel, disagreed with the “sour grapes” approach and wrote this on the difficulty the French fencers had with the Italians:

“Above all, the purpose of fencing to the Italian fencers is combat; their aim is to hit and not be hit. **We, instead, admire, above all, aesthetic bouts.** Here is the habitual expression, and we hear this heresy daily: ‘One beautiful hit equals ten bad ones.’ With this attitude, one can obtain only a conventional art that is no longer combat [i.e. no longer has practical martial applications], and that places one in a position of inferiority when faced with men who fence seriously.”^[14]

The boldfaced words are significant. What can we read into this preference for “aesthetic bouts,” that rhymes so well with Castle’s earlier comment on “the courteous and academic ‘assault’ of modern days”? Clearly, to this mindset, the artistic and the scientific are one—“truth is beauty, and beauty is truth,” as Keats said. But why, as far as fencing goes, was beauty more important than effectiveness?

Peter Gay, in *The Cultivation of Hatred*, the third volume of his great psychological study of the nineteenth century European bourgeois psyche, does not specifically handle fencing, though he does discuss the German student ritual of the *mensur*.^[15] Still, Gay may give us a methodological pointer that can help us arrive at an answer. We would suggest that, by the formalization of violence, it is, in a way, controlled. The world is thus ordered, and the raw id, while acknowledged and given vent to, is removed one step from reality and thereby both diffused and taken out of sight. The violent instinct, in other words, is both socialized and hidden, acknowledged and denied. Gay says the *mensur* “is a superb instance of the clash between the two meanings of cultivation, an exercise in aggression checked by accepted rules,” but this may be said, to an extent, of similar ritual, or indeed, of any sport.^[16]

Further, in agonistic fencing, at least, the reality of conflict and death is given a veneer of sociability. In civilized society, which is to say *progressed* society, one is not in daily peril of one’s life. Saber-toothed tigers do not haunt Picadilly Circus, waiting to pounce on unsuspecting pedestrians, and Genghis Khan almost never leads his Mongol hordes down Bond Street, stopping to loot Sotheby’s on the way to Buckingham Palace. Likewise, we do not die in polite society; we “pass on,” and we are not fired, but rather “let go.”

By sweeping these grim realities under the rug, the euphemistic hiding away and disguising of war, death, sickness, and other unpleasantness, is thus maintained. The reality of death at a sword’s point was likewise masked by the extreme academic formalization of the training. One does not *really* penetrate another man with one’s steel, one achieves a “*touche*” with the “*fleuret*.” (The Freudian overtones of this



need not be remarked upon.) The fact of violence is thus incorporated into the socially constructed, self-referential web of ideas that constitute “culture.”

Even when the bourgeois gentleman was willing to lay down his life, such as in a duel or in the opening days of World War I, it was for an abstract idea such as honor or love of country—an aesthetic ideal taking on the substance of an ethical concept in his mind and in the minds of the onlookers. The duelist makes himself the subject of the onlookers, wishing to win acclaim, objectifying himself and his opponent. In their *agon* is played out both their own drama, upholding their status in the eyes of their peers, and exorcising the collective insecurity of their entire class, perched midway between *chevalier* and shopkeeper. Nor should it be forgotten that this ideal was one that began with the feudal knight, who collected rents and rode off to defend Christendom, or at least his own bit of it, and was passed to the new *nouveau riche*, who, even if they were the “nobility of the robe,” still armed themselves. Thence, third-hand, was it traded down to the gentlemen of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If the duellist of the sixteenth century went out into the field to prove himself worthy of the esteem of his peers; the duellist of the nineteenth, with his internalized sense of honor, may perhaps be said to have followed his footsteps of his predecessor to prove to his peers that he was worthy of his *own* self-respect.

The French duel of the nineteenth century, as Kevin McAleer points out in his excellent book on *Duelling*, was a comparatively bloodless affair, usually conducted with epees, or else wildly inaccurate smoothbore pistols. Though there was much *elan*, pomp, and circumstance, there were relatively few fatalities, since it was usually stopped before a lethal wound was inflicted. Neither side truly wished to be killed or be killed—to try one’s courage, or at least make a good show of it, was enough.^[17] Indeed, it was more of a social happening, and the supposedly illegal affair would be well-covered by the press, with reporters remarking on the style and panache with which the duelists had conducted themselves. So, even what was in theory deadly combat was, in fact, extremely conventional in all its aspects.^[18] Therefore, we should not be surprised if *The Devil’s Dictionary* defines a duel as “a ceremony necessary before the reconciliation of two enemies. A long time ago, someone died in a duel.”

On the other hand, the favored dueling weapon of the Germans (as McAleer records) was a much more lethal rifled version of the pistol at murderous ranges, or, on other occasions, the dangerous and disfiguring saber. McAleer further suggests that this, along with the brutal *mensur*, may have something to say about the essential character of German society, as opposed to the character of French society.^[19] A large segment of the German population, apparently, was more willing to risk death, pain, or other unpleasantness for peer approval, and was more conformist and obedient to authority, not just because it was authority *per se*, but because it was socially expected to be obedient.^[20] Accordingly, the German duel was much deadlier than its French counterpart.

It should be noted, though, that both sides, come 1914, died in the trenches with equal aplomb. The aesthetic appeal of a beautiful death was revealed to be no more than a mask, the rouge-brightened cheek of an aged courtesan who was yet acknowledged the most beautiful woman to ever live. It has been suggested, both by McAleer and others, that the carnage of the World Wars, more than the anti-duelling societies, was what helped to put a brake on the frivolous shedding of blood.

Thus far, we have seen several obvious nineteenth century ideas—progressive moral positivism, nationalism and racialism, and the conflation of aesthetic ideas, ethics, and scientific truth—crop up in our discussion.^[21] Likewise, displaying another sort of “pop Darwinism,” both Hutton and Castle, in *Old Sword-Play* and *Schools and Masters*, completely discount any offshoots of, or strange Pleistocene antecedents to, what was seen as the final development of the evolution of the art. An excellent example of this is the Spanish school of fence, which in itself was a remarkable cultural artifact and which most probably was the antecedent to the Italian school, yet is mysteriously glossed over in Hutton’s work, and



denigrated in Castle's:

"It is a remarkable fact that in Spain, the reputed birthplace of systematic swordsmanship, so little progress should have been made towards what may be called the more practical use of the sword. Whilst the Italians, and, after their example, the French, Germans, and English, gradually discovered that simplification led to perfection, the Spanish masters, on the contrary, seemed to aim at making fencing a more and more mysterious science, requiring for its use a knowledge of geometry and natural philosophy, and whose principles were only explainable on metaphysical grounds."^[22]

Castle likewise completely discounts the possibility of there having been a valid school of arms at any time before the Renaissance:

"The rough untutored fighting of the Middle Ages represented faithfully the reign of brute force in social life as well as in politics. The stoutest arm and the weightiest sword won the day, even as did the sturdiest baron or the most warlike king. Those were the days of crushing blows with mace or glaive, when a knight's superiority in action depended upon his power of wearing heavier armor and dealing heavier blows than his neighbour, when strength was lauded more than skill, and minstrels sang of enchanted blades that nought could break."^[23]

Later, he makes such ridiculous statements as, "...the habit of wearing defensive armour in battle, and, indeed, on most occasions out of doors, caused the sword to be regarded in the light of a weapon of offense only, sufficient reliance being placed on headpiece and carapace for protection," and: "The chivalrous science never had anything but a retarding effect on the science of fence."^[24]

Whereas this is to some extent true, to the degree that there was no specifically *civilian* form of armed self-defense for settling affairs of honor, this is not to say that there was no evidence of a system of systematic swordplay. Because of his selective blindness and prejudice (for, no doubt, there were a great many Zulus and Hindus who would have disagreed with his position on "the reign of brute force" in British politics), Castle apparently did not even bother to look close to home for evidence. The Royal Armouries are in possession of the first known *fechtbuch* ("fighting manual"), written in Germany in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, and catalogued as Cotton MS I-33. Whereas the sword-and-buckler play shown therein is quite different from both Castle's "modern" fencing and from what we are used to seeing as "medieval sword fighting" in the movies, the work is obviously Scholastic in flavor in that it seeks to systematize and explain a methodological system of all-purpose armed self-defense.

Later, Castle even handles, in a semi-favorable light, the German *Marxbruder*, one of several German guilds (*federfecthten*) that taught *der ridderiche kunst*, a systematic style of fighting with the long sword, and which incorporated such weapons as the rapier and smallsword as they came into fashion. This school may even be traced back to the mid-fourteenth century, placing it firmly as a "Medieval" school that taught "Medieval" weapons.^[25]

The cultured art of fencing, to this mindset, was necessarily a rational, humanistic invention, one that involved a degree of thought and sophistication impossible to what was seen as the superstitious, backwards Medieval mind. Therefore, it was something that would naturally come into being with the Renaissance in Italy and the rediscovery of classical learning. Castle generally regards the early Spanish school as an offshoot of the Medieval school, despite the fact that a perusal of surviving manuals will show that its intent was likewise to resolve civilian affairs of honor.



Castle seems to contradict himself, on not one, but on several accounts, in his attempt to fit established historical facts into his scheme. He states that “beyond that fact that there were regular and well-known schools of arms in Spain during the fifteenth century, and the fact that Spanish bands—the best trained in the use of arms of all European troops at that period—overran Italy and the Low Countries during the sixteenth century, there are no reasons, notwithstanding the current opinion to that effect, to ascribe to Spain the birthplace of the art.”^[26] Yet, he also says that Achille Marozzo (a Bolognese master of the early 16th century) “is generally looked upon as the first writer of note on the art of fencing. It would perhaps be wiser to consider him as the greatest teacher of the old school, the rough and undisciplined swordsmanship of which depended as much on violence and sudden inspiration as on carefully cultivated skill,”^[27] but does not say how Marozzo was any different from the Spanish. The wide cultural contact between Spain and Italy, such as the occupation of the Kingdom of Naples or the election of a Valencian, Rodrigo Borgia, to the office of Pope, and the ascendance of duels “in shirtsleeves” during this period, which we have negative evidence of in the form of the practice’s denigration by the Milanese master-at-arms Pietro Monte,^[28] does not figure into his history.

In this moral positivism, we may see reflected a supreme confidence in one’s own world, and at least lip service towards the fruits of “progress.” Yet, there is also doubt. Ironically enough, there is a certain amount of reactionary interest, even of antiquarism, inherent in the study of fencing, associated as it is with the privileges of the aristocracy. Even the emphasis on aesthetics above all is a strange and contradictory feature. Indeed, the entire purpose of Castle’s friend Alfred Hutton’s work on *Old Sword Play* is the study of historical weapons. We may then, if it is not too general a statement, include this nineteenth century interest in swordplay, old and modern, as an element of the “romantic” movement.

Yet, what is this chimera called “romanticism?” Like the Questing Beast from *Le Morte D’Arthur*, many have sought to capture its quintessence, but it has eluded them all. There are so many varieties, from the retro-Medievalism of Scott and the Pre-Raphaelites to the utopian idealism of the Chartists and the Socialists, to Lord Byron’s aristocratic rejection of the world and his foppish dissipation, that no definition can possibly encapsulate them all. In fact, romanticism can only be defined by what it is not, or, in other words, what it is in opposition to: modernity.

The romantic is disaffected with the modern age, with its soot-darkened skies and its replacement of vast tracts of countryside with housing developments, with its weapons of mass destruction and its poverty-stricken slums. Machines are efficient, but they are unbeautiful, replacing personal handiwork with mass-produced product and reducing the individual to no more than a variable in an equation of profit. The modern city, moreover, is an alienated place, where displaced strangers, brought in from intimately small villages, are housed in impersonal, identical apartment buildings.

Instead, the romantic longs for a utopia, either in the past or in the future, or hidden away in some undeveloped corner of the world, where their own vision of happiness is realized. Modernity is ugly and unaesthetic; the romantic vision is beautiful and aesthetic, a chiliastic hope for the ideal world. And, as the contemporary or near-contemporary writings of Sir Walter Scott and the paintings of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood amply demonstrate, the image of the long-ago and far-away romanticized Middle Ages were seen as a more aesthetic, if brutal, time, when idealists, not accountants, held sway over public life. In France, this is reflected in the writings of Alexandre Dumas, where D’Artagnan and the Three Musketeers carve out their destiny in Riechlieu’s France with a rapier’s point. The image of the sword in such as John Waterhouse’s *The Accolade* is one of the tool and symbol of the just idealist, the fantastical knight-errant of Mallory who fought for love and honor, good and right, God and country, not for profit and money.



Learning to use the sword in the age of the six-shooter and Gatling gun is most certainly a rejection of unbeautiful modernity. Certainly, both Castle and Hutton seemingly identify with the weaponed gentleman of a bygone age. The duel, the idea of a man defending himself and his honor, was an anachronism in an age of shopkeepers, where a person's worth was increasingly considered only as what could be quantified into figures of production and consumption, and where the law court had replaced the dueling field.

However, these nineteenth century romantics are not alone. Indeed, they were dreaming a dream that we have never quite woken up from. Certainly, we can detect such biases in the work of historians, such as E.P. Thompson, who study the pre- or early- modern era. Since Thompson's work deals with the English working class, rather than the aristocracy, he looks at his era as an age of moral economy, of a time when a person was considered as part of a community, not as an individually quantized wage-earner, and where economic transactions had a social, not just a fiscal, aspect. As an avowed Marxist, it would seem that he would clearly prefer this social milieu to that of the capitalist world.

Though there have been few recent works on the history of fencing *per se*, there have been several which deal with dueling, thus giving us some sort insight into what contemporary historians think about these matters.[29] McAleer's somewhat iconoclastic, but thoroughly enjoyable, *Duelling* has already been mentioned. Another recent work is Billacois' *The Duel: Its Rise and Fall in Early Modern France*. This last work, however, has some serious flaws.

Billacois proceeds from a historical perspective admittedly influenced by the French Cartesian school. Though he admits the problems with attempting to reconstruct an extralegal practice through strict adherence to documentation,[30] he also makes use of a number of works, such as treatises on honor and dueling, in order to gain some perspective on the matter. Yet, nowhere amongst these is a fencing manual, in which fencing masters, the recognized arbiters of the extralegal duel, invariably also included essays treating with the implications of the code of honor. To attempt a history of the social implications of dueling without using such sources is like attempting a book on human anatomy without ever dissecting a cadaver, or attempting a book on the Roman law code without ever learning to read Latin. Because of this, he can not see the forest for the trees.

Furthermore, Billacois is unforgivably Francocentric, utterly dismissive of the significance of the duel in Spain or Italy. Whereas the English historians Hutton and Castle see the French as cool-headed and elegant, at least when compared to the Italians, Billacois subscribes to the myth of the Gallic fighting-cock. Had he, however, even made a cursory survey of schools and masters of fence, he probably would have realized that the duel was not merely an foreign phenomenon imported into France, where, like jazz, it achieved its "true realization" as a socio-artistic form. Rather, Billacois makes bald, unsupported statements such as, "the duel never had a properly native existence in the Iberian peninsula,"^[31] while seemingly insensate of all evidence to the contrary.

Nor does he examine the plethora of Italian fencing manuals, despite the fact that they were written in a fragmented and chaotic political and social climate that we would think more likely to produce duels than would 17th century France. In fact, it was the Italians, not the French, who exported fencing masters to England and the Low Countries.^[32] The French duel would seem to have been most in vogue at a time when the new "nobility of the robe," bourgeois rising in social status, were in conflict with one another and with the old "nobility of the sword," attempting to conform to the old military ideas of aristocracy and thus prove their worthiness. Billacois does not seem to handle this idea, either pro or con, in his book, instead merely pointing out that incidence of dueling diminishes in times of war, and that, in peace, Huguenots and Catholics were likely to find each other at the ends of each other's swords.



Finally, Billacois suggests, in the conclusion to *The Duel*, that dueling was a self-destructive method of resistance to the king's newly centralized power comparable with modern-day airline hijacking. Billacois' assertion is itself an excellent example of transferring the thought and concerns of one's own times onto a bygone age. Though, certainly, there is a political aspect that can be read into the duel, it was never meant as such. Dueling was, by definition, ostensibly a private affair, played out in front of one's peers, and not a public political act. That "sticking it to The Man" was at the fore of the minds of seventeenth century duelists seems unlikely in the extreme; more likely, they sought simply to stick it to the one particular man who they felt had insulted them, with or without the permission of centralized authority.

It would seem that researchers into early modern aristocratic culture would benefit greatly from a well-written secondary source on the matter. So, if Hutton, Castle, et al. are scions of the "modern" school of thought, what would a "postmodern" history of fencing be like fencing? We know what a Ranke or a Gibbon would say on the matter, and even what the modern Cartesian school would say, but what would a Foucault or a Diderot say? We must now cease criticizing, and attempt to answer the questions that we have raised.

First of all, it should be instantly recognized that fashions in weapons, be they part of one's costume or solely intended for use on the "field of honor," are, like the duel itself, social constructions. By its very definition, a duel is a combat by convention. The weapons used, be they rapiers, small swords, epees, sabers, pistols, or sledgehammers waist-deep in a Louisiana bayou, are an agreed-upon convention. The way of fighting, at an appointed place and time, with an air of nonchalance, is conventional.^[33] The code of honor is likewise a convention, being no more or less than what it is agreed to be by society. It is not based not on one's own feelings of self-worth and inner life, the bourgeois, nineteenth-century development of which Peter Gay has excellently chronicled in *The Naked Heart*, but on the acclimation of one's peers.^[34] It is a relic from a time when one's outer self was one's inner self. From the first insult to the final blow, and the resolution afterwards, all is dictated not by the duelists themselves, but by the code.

The technical aspects of the "science of fence," as well, might be seen as conventions. For instance, the hand positions for parries, numbered in the French school from one to eight, are pedagogical constructions, used to describe more accurately various actions that might be taken during a match. When Hutton transcribes exercises for the broadsword or two-handed sword, he also translates the actions into the commonly understood language. Thus, Marozzo's colorfully named "*Porta di ferro alta*" is "quarte," the "*Cinghiara porta di ferro*" is "tierce."^[35] While this would seem to indicate a continuity of tradition, in that the same physical motions are merely described by different names, we must ask if there is some overlooked cultural parallax here. Can a nineteenth-century Englishman fence like a sixteenth-century Italian, or would the conventions and training of his own school and his own time period—such as the supposed superiority of the parry-riposte action, as opposed to the counter-action in single time—limit him?^[36]

So, even the most necessary elements of the pedagogical system might be seen as no more than what they are agreed to be. Against this heresy, however, the "moral positivist" might reply that certain laws of physics (such as rate times time equals distance) will always apply to both swords and freight trains. Likewise, certain biomechanical principles will likewise always be true, even if much of the rest is an edifice built upon this bedrock. There can be no argument against the fact that there are certain principles and practices that, barring accidents of chance, will carry one through most any encounter. The "science" of fencing might be seen as a combination of both practical observation and cultural artifact. It is the application of human reason, and human culture, to coarse and brutal reality. As such, it might be described with equal accuracy as both an "art" and as a "science."



The overlooked Spanish school of fence bears some discussion here. Besides that fact that, as the first purely civilian system of combat intended for use in settling private affairs of honor, it was of great influence on the development of later schools of fence in other countries, it provides us with an excellent field, as it were, in which to set one historical construction up against another for a trial by combat. Sadly maligned both by Castle and by later historians, and contrary to what Billacois writes, the first Spanish fencing manuals, treating with civilian combat, if not *la verdadera destreza* itself, date from 1474.^[37] Thus, they precede by half a century the *Opera Nova* of Marozzo (published in 1536), which is widely regarded as the beginnings of the Italian school.^[38] By applying a different historical philosophy to the problem, we may arrive at some valuable insights into early modern Spanish culture, just as we used Hutton and Castle to explore the nineteenth century.

In practice, the Spanish method, as it took its final form in the seventeenth century, appears far different from what we are accustomed to regard as fencing. It is a conventional, formalized, even ritualized, combat, appearing more like a dance than a sword fight. The two combatants face each other, walking the perimeter of an imaginary circle inscribed on the floor. Their posture is upright, their knees locked, as in the manner of a Spanish court dance, and their swords are held out at arm's length. The fencers and their weapons circle about one another, seeking an advantageous angle. When an attack is made, it is by stepping off along an angle, in effect, inscribing a chord in the circle. If done correctly, this will carry one's own blade home, while avoiding the point of the adversary—fencing by numbers, if you will. The overall appearance is one of elegant menace.

However, to understand the Spanish school of fencing, it is first necessary to understand the culture that it proceeds from. We must begin, strangely enough, with Scholastic philosophy and the problem of universals, an ancient dilemma that was revived in the Middle Ages and, strangely enough, is repeated in the twentieth century (see Figures A-C). At its heart, the controversy is one of certainty: Is there absolute truth, or is there not?

The problem of universals proceeds from a classical philosophical argument over the Platonic Ideas first proposed by the philosopher Porphyry. The “realist” position, held by orthodox thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas, affirms the existence of these Ideas, which St. Augustine located in the mind of God. There is an essential “quiddity,” or essence, of, for example, “man,” that is common to all men. Likewise, there is an essential characteristic common to all combs, another common to all horses, and others common to immaterial concepts, such as “love” or “justice.”

Meanwhile, the “nominalist,” position, as might be guessed, holds that these “universals” exist only as mental constructions. One Medieval objection to the Realist position, for instance, is how a singular essence can be divided amongst many objects and still remain singular.^[39] This debate is not of interest just to philosophers and zoologists. For the Catholic believer, for instance, it calls into question the theology of the Holy Trinity, where three persons partake in the same essence.

Likewise, it places us in a moral conundrum: is there, then, such a thing as good or justice, which are located in and identified with God? Can anything be known for certain? Without sure knowledge, how can we apply our intellect to act in a wise, rational, and moral manner? “Is this a dagger I see before me, or is it but a dagger of the mind?” We can see that, in many ways, the nominalist position is echoed, at least on a basic level, by the New Linguistics: Concepts only have existence in the mind, since they are social constructions. The old problem of universals has applications in such things as statistics and feminist theory: How are all women alike? Does what applies to one woman apply to all, or vice versa, or both, or neither?^[40]



One ancient proof of the Realist position, which also has hermetic, Pythagorean, and kabbalistic overtones, is through mathematics and geometry. For instance, the square of the hypotenuse of a triangle will always be equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides.^[41] Indeed, in Renaissance manuals, the Platonic forms were envisioned as geometrical forms, just as were the “crystal spheres” that were the homes of the planets.^[42] Thus, the position of geometry in the Medieval academic curriculum: To demonstrate mathematical truths.^[43]

Castle summarizes the work of the famous Spanish master Don Jeronimo de Carranza thusly: “[his] is the first of the long series of ponderous Spanish treatises on the ‘raison demonstrative,’ in which the ruling principle, after the Aristotelian method, is the ‘conocimiento de la cosa por su causa,’ and the purpose, to demonstrate that a perfect theoretical knowledge must infallibly lead to victory, notwithstanding grievous physical disadvantage.”^[44] Whereas we may disagree as to how “ponderous” it was, it was certainly Aristotelian. Castle has hit the nail right on the head: the Spanish method was a rational method of fighting, proceeding by established principles in a way that could not help but succeed.

The Spanish school of fence was thus “scientific” in the sense that it used geometry as a proof of the efficacy of its system. The entire scheme, while conventional, as suits a ritualistic combat between equals, was also geometrically based. We thus see how it was enmeshed in a complex teratogenic web of Scholastic philosophy, Christian doctrine, aesthetic taste, and scientific knowledge. It embodies the idea of *gracia* in all its connotations. Without understanding all of these, the affair of honor in early modern Spain is impossible to comprehend. The swordsman trained in the Spanish school uses his knowledge of the underlying foundations of the universe to affirm himself in a cool, detached, and scientific manner that, incidentally, is also a type of kinetic art. As Carranza himself said, “*la solucion de la dubda es el invencio de la verdad.*”^[45]

It is these Medieval and Renaissance philosophical roots that are the direct antecedent to the “scientific moral positivism” of the nineteenth century that claimed to have a monopoly on truth. Ironically, the historians of the “modern,” “perfect” mode of fencing would later overlook these intellectual antecedents, just as they overlooked the school itself. Yet, without what had gone before, what came later would never have been. Rather than being the capstone of history, the “modern” era was, instead, both the heir and the *traditor* of a long legacy.

While all this may seem to be another example of social construction heaped upon social construction, it must be remembered that these techniques, or, we should say, technologies, work, just as medicine and aircraft and light switches do. Men (and women) were willing to stake their lives on the theories of these fencing masters, just as today, we trust our doctors, airline pilots, and electricians. To the Spanish gentleman of the “early modern” era, or the duelist of fin de siecle France, this was not a perspective or an idea; it was truth itself laid bare in steel. A proof of its lasting quality is that it did not apparently die out until the nineteenth century, and that, in fact, that the Spanish were long held to be some of the deadliest swordsmen around. Certain things are always going to be eternally true, and there is nothing quite like staking one’s life on a mathematical formula to make one appreciate this.

So, what is the point of this cockfight of ideas that has been presented in the guise of a discussion of the context of schools of fence? It is simply that many works of culture besides historian’s text, the art historian’s painting, or the archaeologist’s pot sherd can give us insights into the culture that produced them. It is unfortunate that the study of relations between equals, be they kinetic or otherwise, is mired in a century of outdated ideas. Besides, if the task of the historian is to “interpret the past to the present,” then in understanding these artifacts of culture, we better understand ourselves.



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NB: Manuscripts and books out-of-print are available in reproduction from Dr. Patri J. Pugilese, 39 Capen Street, Medford, MA 02155. (781-396-2870), save for I-33.

[1]Though many of the events of the 1960s and 1990s have come close (the L.A. riots and the “levitation” of the Pentagon come to mind. For the latter, see Abbie Hoffman, Revolution for the Hell of It.)

[2]We differentiate here between the “classical” fencing of the 19th and early 20th century and the modern sport of fencing, which is a conventional game based on athletic strength and endurance, utilizing an electronic scoring apparatus to determine touches.

[3]Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages, p. 58

[4]Gaugler, The Science of Fencing, p. xxiv. (Maestro Gaugler is both a professor of classical archaeology and a fencing master of great repute).

[5]Castle, Schools and Masters, p. 312.

[6]Castle, Schools and Masters of Fence, p. 2. Emphasis has been added to the most telling statements by printing them in boldface.

[7]Alfred Hutton, Old Sword-Play, hypertext version prepared by Bryan Maloney at <http://www.people.cornell.edu/pages/bjm10/hutton/hutton.html>.

[8] The small sword is also significant for being the direct ancestor of the modern sport fencing weapons used since the nineteenth century. The foil was the training tool for the small sword; the epee, a dueling weapon that came into use after the sword ceased to be a part of male costume, is employed in much the same manner. Once the technique for the weapon was established, it did change, but not as much or as radically as it did during the transition from rapier to small sword. (The history of schools of use of the dueling saber is complicated, but it is interesting that, as for foil, the Italian school uses much the same technique as was used for earlier weapons).

[9]Dangerous Liasons comes to mind.

[10]Castle, Schools and Masters, p. 302.

[11]Nick Evangelista, The Man Who Invented Sport Fencing. The Americian Citizen, Summer 1993, p. 30.

[12]William Gaugler, Epic Encounters between Italian and French Fencing Masters, 1881-1911, The Sword, July 1988, p. 13. (The Sword is the publication of Britain’s amateur fencing association.)



[13]Gaugler, *Epic Encounters*, p. 13.

[14]Gaugler, *Epic Encounters*, p. 13.

[15]For those unfamiliar with the mensur, it bears some discussion here. Tracing its lineage back to the student duels of the Middle Ages and continuing on to this day, the mensur, or “measure,” is more a ritual or rite of passage than a sport. The adversaries, who are invariably drawn from two different studentkorps (duelling fraternities), are made to stand a sword’s length away. The shorter is given a platform to stand on, so that they are of equal height. They are dressed in thick leathers, with their necks well protected, their heads covered by a leather cap, and their eyes shielded behind mesh goggles. However, their cheeks, chins, and faces are completely bare to the attacks of their opponent’s razor-sharp schlaeger, which come in a lightning flurry as soon as the signal is given. The scars (schmiss) gained by this are permanent, but are a mark of pride amongst mensur aficionados. Indeed, a hundred years ago, such scars were quite fashionable, and a well-marked veteran would be considered quite a catch by the young ladies, for membership in a studentkorps indicated wealth, education, breeding, membership in the ultimate “old boy’s club,” and a very bright future indeed.

Moving, flinching, crying out in pain, or disobeying the rules, the referee, the doctors, or any of their orders in the slightest are absolutely verboten. Obedience and the maintenance of a stiff upper lip (provided that it is still attached to one’s face) is all in the mensur. One can easily understand why this was thought to be an excellent manly exercise in Bismark’s Germany. In fact, Bismark himself had engaged in not a few student duels, in the days before they took this final form of immobile stoicism. (“In my day, we didn’t parry with our faces!” he is recorded as saying. Still, when the command came from high up to storm that trench, the trench was stormed.) Violence is still controlled, by the control is “Apollonian”-placed under the domination of the will-rather than “Dionysiac”-transformed into an artistic form.

[16]Gay, *The Cultivation of Hatred*, p. 9.

[17]See McAleer, *Duelling*, Chapter VI.

The great Italian champion Aldo Nadi, in his recollection of his own duel in his book *On Fencing*, is both introspective, as only the modern mentality can be, and worried about the possible legal consequences of his encounter.

[18]McAleer, *Duelling*, p. 190.

[19]The issue that enters into this, of course, is that of whether there is an “essential character” to the German national psyche. This has been of no small importance to historians of the Holocaust.

[20]The case of the German execution units in World War II, as recounted in Browning’s *Ordinary Men*, comes readily to mind. Browning suggests that these groups, composed mainly of poorly-trained reservists, were willing to commit war crimes not so much out of obedience, but because it was expected of them.

[21]Another example of moral positivism, ethics, and scientific truth is embodied in the racialism of the imperial era. “Taking up the white man’s burden,” as Kipling wrote, involved acting in a paternalistic fashion to the “less developed” races that, incidentally, happened to be wholly favorable to one’s own economic interests.



[22]Castle, Schools and Masters, p. 95.

[23]Castle, Schools and Masters, p. 6.

[24]Castle, Schools and Masters, p. 19.

[25]S. Matthew Galas, Kindred Spirits. The Journal of Asian Martial Arts Volume 6, Number 3, 1997.

[26]Castle, Schools and Masters, p. 46.

[27]Castle, Schools and Masters, p. 48.

[28]Monte is mentioned in Castiglione's Book of the Courtier as a master of feats of arms. Anglo, Sidney. "The Man Who Taught Leonardo Darts: Pietro Monte and His 'Lost' Fencing Book." The Antiquaries Journal.

[29]No doubt corresponding to the unfortunate decline of the "art" of fencing in favor of the "sport" of fencing. Recall what Foucault said about competition.

Authors such as Matthew Galas and William Gaugler seem to write for an audience of fencers who are more interested in the technical aspects than in the sociological implications thereof. Though their works, particularly Dr. Gaugler's recent History of Fencing, are of excellent quality, their historical observations tend to be episodic and anecdotal-concentrating on the phenomon, rather than the nomenon, as it were. There has been little move towards an overall reappraisal of the philosophy of fencing history in its sociocultural context.

[30]Billacois, The Duel p. 72. Also see p. 60 and p. 72.

[31]Billacois, The Duel, p. 36.

[32]c.f. George Silver's Paradoxes of Defense (1597), in which the proponent of good, old-fashioned English broadsword-play rails against the "false fight" of the Italian rapier.

[33]Errol Flynn returning his adversary's fallen weapon, for instance, is tactically ludicrous, but expected by the audience-Captain Blood or Robin Hood is a "good guy," and expected to abide by rules of "fair play."

[34]A recent movie, Rob Roy, has said that "honor is the gift that a man gives himself." Nothing could be further from the truth.

[35]These names occur at least as far back as the fifteenth century.

[36]The difference between these two is that the parry-riposte, performed with a lighter, quicker weapon, such as the "walking sword," puts aside the attack, and then replies, in two actions; the counter-action seeks to deviate the oncoming steel in the process of striking back, in one action.

[37]These manuals, by Jayme Pons and Pedro de la Torre, are now, unfortunately, lost, but reference is made to them in works by later masters, such as Narvaez, Palla Vicini, and Marcelli, who published in 1600, 1670, and 1686, respectively. (From the Martinez Classical Fencing FAQ). (It would be much appreciated if these incubalae could be found!)



[38]Gaugler, *Science of Fencing*, p. xxiv.

[39]Practitioners of sympathetic magic will object that this essence is not, in fact, subdivided. What affects a wax doll of John Silber, for instance, will affect him.

[40]For an example of the legal application of this, see Joan Wallach Scott's essay on "The Sears Case" in *Gender and the Politics of History*, p. 167.

[41]The objection to this, of course, is that the triangle is likewise a social construction. This objection is dealt with by means of what has become known as the "big rock" proof. To wit:

"You say that this triangle is naught but a social construction?"

"Yes, I do."

"Is this big rock here likewise a social construction?"

"I would have to say that it is."

"Then may I throw this nonexistent rock at your head?"

"Er..."

[42]Today, of course, we know that the planets follow elliptical orbits.

[43]For further discussion of this, c.f. Thomas Aquinas' *On Being and Essence* and his *Summa Theologica*, chapter LXXXV.

[44]Castle, *Schools and Masters*, p. 96. Oddly enough, the same might be said for Castle's own school of thought.

[45]Carranza, *De la Filosofia de las Armas*. (1569).

