

What was a historian of South Africa doing at a conference on the European town?

Last year I met Elaine Chalus at Bath Spa University where I was talking about my current research on social identity in 18th century Cape Town. In particular I am looking at the ways in which Capetonians who came from across the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds shaped new identities for themselves in a port settlement with a highly transient and mobile population of soldiers, sailors, trading company officials, artisans, slaves, convicts and the remnants of indigenous Khoen pastoralists. I am trying to get to grips with the extensive and rich literature on the social and cultural history of European towns to contextualise some of this material. How far did a Dutch colonial settlement such as Cape Town replicate the patterns of its north European origins, and how far did it diverge from them?

Elaine had a solution for me: to come to the Odense conference and find out what current work is going on. A particular problem I faced was that most of the work I knew concerned either southern Europe or the British Isles. I was looking for other comparative work on northern Europe, especially the North Sea and Baltic regions, whose social, religious, cultural and economic features were more closely related to the experience of Dutch Cape Town. A conference in Denmark which attracted so many scholars from northern Europe was thus particularly appealing.

There was perhaps another motive. Just as I needed to find out more about the work of European scholars, so too might their work benefit from thinking about the European town in a wider context than the geographical confines of Europe itself. Not only might comparative study of towns outside Europe highlight features of the European urban experience, but an examination of the extent to which European urban formations were transplanted to the colonial world could tell us much about their stability and fluidity in differing political, geographical and social environments. Were colonial urban slaves treated in similar ways to European domestic servants? Did kinship and household structures survive in a new colonial environment? How far did indigenous Asian, African and American material and mental cultures change European ones in a colonial town, or were they totally subsumed into them? And in gendered terms, did colonial men and women work, speak, socialise and protest in different ways to their counterparts in Europe? What happens to men who live in a colonial town where they have no political power and only limited public status? Or to women who find themselves a tiny minority in an overwhelmingly male port city?

So thanks to Elaine I was able to benefit from an extraordinarily rich gathering where some of these questions began to be answered – and where more questions were raised in my mind, surely the sign of a good conference. I learnt a huge amount not only about familiar places but also ones of whose histories I was completely ignorant (Riga, Helsinki, Poznan) and in some cases whose names I heard for the first time (Ebeltoft and Grenaa?) but I also found to my surprise much that was very familiar. Eighteenth-century Scottish men and women hurled almost exactly the same gendered insults to each other across streets, doorways and market stalls as did Capetonians, Florentines used gardens for cross-gendered encounters in the same ways as they did in the garden plots on the slopes of Table Mountain, Finnish women brought cases of slander when their husbands were insulted because it affected their own honour in the way that Cape Town women did, lodgers were both interlopers and sexual suspects

in Parisian households as they were in South Africa. I was thus able to make many links with people working on very similar issues to myself but in a different part of the world.

As a result we are now seeking to develop research which will draw on and extend the projects of members of the Gender in the European Town network to other parts of the European-influenced world. Pam Sharpe is planning a workshop in Sydney in December which will bring together Australian, South African and European urban historians of gender where a key question will be in what ways the gendered patterns of European cities were modified in a colonial context. The impact of Odense is thus spreading far and wide.

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