

# Hard Food for Witnesses. Reading Notes on Alexandra Shepard

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## 1. Mass autobiography

Historians have begun to work with a certain assiduity, in recent years, on civil courts in early modern Europe, producing a body of research of considerable depth and novelty. Without going too deep, it is enough here to recall the work of Muldrew on credit in early modern England, that of Cerutti on summary justice, or of Caracausi on litigation in guild courts.<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt, in any case, that Alexandra Shepard aims to use these sources in a new way. Her research in this book,<sup>2</sup> as will be seen, is of a quantitative nature: Shepard's intent was to collect a large number of testimonies from civil trials in order to produce a "mass autobiography." What she uses, therefore, is not narrative in nature but gives an indication of the amount of wealth possessed by the witness at a trial. Obviously, the figure produced in such declarations before the judge is not objective, but is rather a social product, that

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<sup>1</sup> C. Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation. The Culture of Credit and Social relations in Early Modern England*, Houndmills, London, 1998; S. Cerutti, *Giustizia sommaria. Pratiche e ideali di giustizia in una società di ancien régime*, Torino, 18° secolo, Milan, 2003; A. Caracausi, *Dentro la bottega. Culture del lavoro in una città d'età moderna*, Venice, 2008, the latter two unfortunately not translated into English. Alexandra Shepard, *Accounting for oneself: worth, status, and the social order in early modern England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015

<sup>2</sup> A. Shepard, *Accounting for oneself: worth, status, and the social order in early modern England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.

is to say the representation of a person's self-estimate of worth. The data can therefore be studied to analyze not only quantitative variations in wealth levels but also (or perhaps above all) the processes of social estimation by people.

Along this line, Shepard comes to deal with a topic of great importance: self-evaluation in history, a topic also recently addressed by the sociological debate: one thinks naturally of the great ethnomethodological research of Cottureau and Marzok on how a Moroccan family that emigrated to the Costa del Sol evaluates its own economic survival strategies and thus modifies its behavior.<sup>3</sup> However, it should be noted that the background to Shepard's research is certainly not to be found in ethnomethodology, or in sociology, but in a series of recent British and American works in social history that have reflected intensely on the ways in which people fit into a social hierarchy.

The debate into which the book fits is the language of "sorts". Anglo-Saxon historiography, as is well known, has devoted much attention to the theme of social classification and the production of group identity, from the middle class to popular culture. The discussion has focused in particular in recent years on the so-called "sorts", a historiographical object of undoubted interest. Shepard tries to clarify this by referring, first of all, to Keith Wrightson (which is at the basis of much of the work of recent English social historians), who identified sorts as anticipations of the social classes that subsequently formed, thus showing how the social order was already fragmented into a series of different identities and interests.<sup>4</sup>

Shepard, anyway, criticizes recent English historiography, which has never seriously reflected on how the middling sort represented themselves. In other words, this historiography only proposes etc,

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<sup>3</sup> A. Cottureau, M. Marzok, *Une famille andalouse. Ethnocomptabilité d'une économie invisible*, Paris 2012.

<sup>4</sup> K. Wrightson, "Sorts of people in Tudor and Stuart England", in J. Barry, Jonathan, C. Brooks (eds.), *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800*, London 1994, pp. 28-51.

not emic, descriptions.<sup>5</sup> To fully understand this critique, another element must not be neglected: namely, the clear gender perspective of the author, who takes up a series of important studies by historians working on gender and social identity. According to Shepard, the debate on sorts as it has developed so far has been too neutral from a gender point of view, not having specifically dealt with the socio-economic role of women in the formation of the middle classes (p. 8). In particular, the role of manager of the household, the domestic unit, exercised by wives was neglected.

Somehow, the answer of Shepard on how to measure social mobility, and the formation of “middling sorts”, is different from that of other social historians, as it is based on very extensive quantitative analysis, what we would call a “quantification of quality.”

In her book, Shepard sets out the results of a work on a database she personally collected of 13,686 depositions of witnesses in civil trials, coming from the courts of seven different dioceses, two archdeaconates and the University of Cambridge. The period covered is from 1550 to 1728. About a quarter of the database, or 3,331 depositions, consists of women’s testimonies. In particular, Shepard is interested in the data on wealth declared by the witnesses, requested in the courts before interrogations, in order to evaluate their creditworthiness, and therefore their credibility from a judicial point of view. Judicial sources have been widely studied by English social historiography, but according to the author the depositions of witnesses have scarcely been exploited. In fact, the source has almost never been used for quantitative analysis. The reasons seem obvious, at least at first glance: the apparent subjectivity and discretion of those who answer in court. Shepard discusses this point at length,

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<sup>5</sup> Shepard takes up this criticism already made by Henry French, who has worked extensively on sorts in the countryside and in provincial towns; see H. French, “The Search for the ‘Middle Sort of People’ in England, 1600-1800”, in *The Historical Journal*, 43.1, 2000, pp. 277-293; H. French, *The Middle Sort of People in Provincial England, 1600-1750*, Oxford 2007. On social mobility as a reaction to economic and social downgrading threats see M. Mascuch, “Social Mobility and Middling Self-Identity, The Ethos of British Autobiographers, 1600-1750”, in *Social History*, 20.1, 1995, pp. 45-61.

in particular in chapter 3, arguing that the source is instead reliable both for understanding the self-representation that each person makes of themselves on the social scene, and at the level of fidelity of the information provided.

The question is of course decisive: how to unify the analysis of individual cases, based on answers that seem to be deliberately designed to elucidate a single position, to create an aggregate? The idea is, starting from individual data, to construct a “mass autobiography.” Shepard intends actually to distance herself from collective biography or autobiography, which has to do with the study of the formation of the cultural identity of a group. She is not interested in the cultural world of witnesses, but in the economic sphere. We are faced with an attempt to make a *histoire serielle* of self-representation.

## 2. The reliability of self-representation

The main problem in using the data lies in the standardization of the answers (recognized by Shepard herself), which limits the richness of the survey. In fact, the depositions are limited to indicating a quantity of wealth owned, which is necessarily approximate. Shepard is forced by this paucity of information to veer towards a purely quantitative analysis, explicitly forgoing individual case studies. In general, Shepard’s point is that the distinction between quantitative and qualitative analysis is basically anachronistic (p. 27), a methodological annotation of great interest but which should be studied and above all motivated in detail. According to Shepard, quantitative analysis leads to qualitative.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Actually, it seems to me that Shepard is influenced especially by cliometric methods of investigation on wealth, and in particular by Van Zanden. It is worth noting, anyway, that at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the source studied by Shepard in fact runs out, making it difficult to continue the analysis except by resorting to the latter’s long-term series; see J.L. Van Zanden, “Tracing the Beginning of the Kuznets Curve: Western Europe During the Early Modern Period”, in *The Economic History Review*, 48.4, 1995, pp. 643-664.

In principle, according to Shepard, it is necessary to analyze the monetary values cited by the witnesses as data capable of revealing several aspects, since they specify not only the person's social but also political and administrative functions. The use of a monetary value expresses "the legal rights, eligibility for office, taxation thresholds" (p. 82). According to Shepard, the self-assessment of wealth is in itself accurate since it represents a status, thus leading to distinctive social classes. Shepard also tries to measure the truthfulness of the testimonies by studying the match between statements made at different times, and generally finds a high level of reliability. The recurrence of certain figures therefore refers to two co-present factors, which in reality appear to be contradictory, that is, on the one hand a value that is truthful (also given the system of court sanctions against mendacious declarants), and on the other the expression of a status and therefore of a condition (and related rights) constructed subjectively. For example, many witnesses say they are worth 40 shillings since this figure is the minimum value for voting for members of parliament. To become justices of the peace, until 1745 it was necessary to have a land income of 20 pounds a year. The values indicated are benchmarks and measures of social as well as political condition, or rights that can be exercised as a result of having a certain wealth. At the same time, however, the expression of these values is not only a social construct; according to Shepard declared wealth was close to what one really possessed.

A recent article by Hillary Taylor, which analyzes similar sources, points up some critical issues in using these civil court testimonies. She highlights a clear problem of witness selection. Basically, only some of those called to testify accepted, while others refused. For both groups, there were reasons of greater or lesser interest in doing so. In other words, it is possible to find in the depositions only a certain type of witnesses, those who consider it in their interest to testify, and not the others. Such groups have different characteristics and therefore pose different analytical problems (and, ultimately, also arguably produce different data). Moreover, as Taylor observes, many poor witnesses dependent on others agreed to

testify for money, thus not only casting serious doubt on their reliability, but also making their own testimony an asset capable of modifying the level of wealth.<sup>7</sup> Another aspect to be considered is the psychological process leading to the declaration of certain figures. The data provided in the course of the testimony, far from being prompted by the simple fear of punishment or the expression of a status, were the result of complex calculations. These calculations, which took into consideration different elements, inevitably ended up producing a “datum” that is the result of a process of evaluating the pros and cons, and only in small part aimed at providing realistic testimony. The data provided by the witnesses are not raw, naked, but instead incorporate in a money figure a synthesis of personal aspirations and abilities. Furthermore, they express this figure at a given time, and as such are subject to changes due to the changeable nature of the self-assessment.<sup>8</sup>

Are these data reliable? The answer can only be articulated: they are truthful as a synthesis of a self-evaluation process, but they do not, alone, allow us to understand the process itself.

### 3. Cash is the measure

An important part of the book is devoted to the conception of individual wealth and its relationship with money, credit, and cash. What does an individual in early modern England need? Shepard argues that witnesses apply a hierarchy in which certain assets count more than others because social esteem is based on them. The conclusions are two: namely that social esteem depended mainly on moveable goods and not on land; and that money was almost absent

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<sup>7</sup> H. Taylor, “The Price of the Poor’s Words: Social Relations and the Economics of Deposing for One’s ‘Bettors’ in Early Modern England”, in *Economic History Review*, 2018, pp. 828-847.

<sup>8</sup> According to Cottureau, a fundamental aspect of the self-assessment is that while a person evaluates themselves, they perform a series of quite complicated calculations to correct the self-assessment *in fieri*; Cottureau, Marzok, *Une famille andalouse*, cit.

among the goods indicated by the witnesses, but was inevitably used as a measure for the calculation of wealth. Witnesses invariably respond by translating the value of their assets into money, however few of them claim to own money in property. Money is the gauge of how much a man or a woman is worth in society, but it is merely a measuring instrument, hardly present in the baskets of goods actually available to people. As Shepard puts it in extreme fashion, the value of witnesses' word was determined by a simple equation with their cash value. In other words, cash is not king, but yardstick.

These considerations owe a good deal to Muldrew's analysis of the credit market, which is the true field of application of social estimation. How much a person is worth represents the fundamental parameter for estimating their creditworthiness. And this, in a society where everything moves through credit, is the most important economic evaluation parameter, closely linked to a person's social esteem. According to Muldrew, physical money was used in just 10% of transactions, while everything else was settled through various forms of credit.<sup>9</sup>

This raises an important question. How does exchange take place in the old regime, given the scant use of money for acquiring goods? Muldrew and Shepard teach us that exchanges were handled along the lines of a clearing house: a field of analysis neglected by economic history.

Muldrew's consideration that economic theory (and economic history as well, one might add) has never analyzed the social context of exchange must certainly be extended; in reality, what has been neglected is the form itself, the way in which the transaction takes place, in a socio-economic universe that reasons in terms of temporally extended compensation. Of course, this forces us to think of "credit" as a much larger realm than is usually imagined to consider it in terms of a regulatory body for transactions in general. Therefore, the concept of "credit" should be completely purged of any eco-

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<sup>9</sup> C. Muldrew, "'Hard Food for Midas': Cash and Its Social Value in Early Modern England", in *Past & Present*, 170, 2001, pp. 78-120.

conomic interpretation, in order to place it correctly in a perspective of the general functioning of social relations and the exchange of goods. This implies, in turn, that every transaction was a local transaction, and thus to be understood only through an analysis of the reference context. Each individual transaction is a market in itself.

#### 4. Towards a consumer society

The transition to capitalism is achieved through two phenomena that are actually related, namely the increase in economic inequality and the changing role of labour, which is becoming increasingly important. The polarization of wealth is the main cause cited by Shepard for the end of early modern society, since inequality and war erode "creditworthiness secured by goods" (p. 287). The widening of inequality of wealth led to a different system of social estimation by separating the winners (i.e. the accumulators) "from a growing pool of marginal and marginalized producers." Thus, "a gulf emerged between people of substance and those who had nothing but their labor on which to live" (p. 313).

The shift described by Shepard can be summarized in terms of a growth in the productivity of occupations with respect to that of goods (p. 272). Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the conception of wealth changes: what is produced increases in value at the expense of what is owned. Work takes precedence over income. In other words, the flow of consumables reaches and surpasses the stock of goods as a symbolic deposit and measure of wealth. In this context, the language of "sorts" emerges as a new way of representing social relations and status in a more "elongated" form.

In any case, it is inevitable that along these lines Shepard ends up intercepting the theme of economic development, one of the great mantras of economic history. It is evident that she proposes an evolutionary idea of the economy. Studying the economic change that led to capitalism by analyzing self-representation and the parallel construction of social identities is no easy task; in the end, this ap-

proach leads the author to deal with the great theme of the consumer revolution. This is a famous thesis, much discussed in British and American historiography since McKendrick coined the term, and recently revived by De Vries in a more highly articulated form.<sup>10</sup> Shepard explains that the transition to capitalism implies a progressive distinction between saving and consumption, which were previously united or, better, incorporated into one another. Separating consumption from goods means assigning supremacy to the former over the latter, and therefore finding the engine of development in a new and more aggressive idea of consumption. It is worth noticing that this new type of consumption snuffs the good out at the moment of purchase, severely limiting the type of secondary market in goods that had flourished in the old regime. For example, in the early modern period credit instruments were continually re-traded, because the income they generated could be used from time to time for different payment purposes, from priests' salaries to pensions. The gradual disappearance of a financial market for social purposes (to be verified through empirical investigation, however) would appear to indicate a new idea of "non-renewable" consumption.

Shepard sets out a broad critique of linear narratives of development and modernization, and of the older, teleological interpretations of the industrial revolution, as well as of the birth of early capitalism, most notably in McFarlane's famous version of the back-dating of English individualism to the late Middle Ages. Indeed Shepard asserts that even in the "new world" of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, contractual individualism and the cash nexus were not universally paramount. Individual personality remained important in judging creditworthiness (p. 302).

How to define the consumer society that according to Shepard's

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<sup>10</sup> N. McKendrick, *The Consumer Revolution in Eighteenth-Century England*, in N. N. McKendrick, J. Brewer, J.H. Plumb (eds.), *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-century England*, London 1982, pp. 9-33; J. De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution. Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present*, Cambridge 2008.

data arose between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in England? The main and perhaps inevitable point of comparison is De Vries' "industrious revolution." According to De Vries, the debate on the causes of the industrial revolution, traditionally divided between demand-side and supply-side, should be rethought by shifting the axis of the analysis to basic economic and social units, i.e. households, in which production and consumption are intimately connected. It is inside the black box of the household, De Vries tells us, that we should measure the balance between work, wages and the desire for goods. The household is the true laboratory of economic development. How households' aspirations are translated into actions is the crux of the matter, the real turning point for empirical research on "industriousness."

These new behaviors are demonstrated by both De Vries and Shepard through emphasis on the emergence of a new idea of luxury, attributing great importance to sumptuary legislation and dress codes. Luxury is fully expressed within the household's consumption-production sinolo through the rhetoric of domestic comfort, a new category that would guide economic development from then on. The birth of a consumer-driven (or even comfort-driven) society is to be found here.