

## BOOK REVIEWS

STURM, BEATE. “Wat ich schuldich war”: Privatkredit im frühneuzeitlichen Hannover (1550–1750). [Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte: Beihefte.] Steiner, Stuttgart 2009. 336 pp. €62.00; doi:10.1017/S0020859010000325

People in pre-industrial societies were often linked by credit relations. They extended credit to others, borrowed, or did both in order to make ends meet. These complicated credit networks have recently drawn the attention of scholars interested in their socio-economic implications. The main problem they face is how to get an impression of these credit relations, and particularly the multitude of petty debts that were recorded in contracts.

This is exactly where Beate Sturm’s study of private credit in early modern Hanover aims to make a contribution. Taking a rather novel approach, she has sampled thousands of debt cases brought before the court of Hanover between 1550 and 1750. This take on the subject should provide a view of the entire spectrum of credit and debt, including that which was not put in writing. Indeed, Sturm was able to uncover how credit was used in a great many transactions, ranging from the purchase of land and houses, as well as of textiles and food-stuffs, to the financing of weddings and funerals, and the payment of wages.

The litigants involved in the lawsuits included women and Jews, and people seem to have been drawn from a wide part of the social spectrum: Sturm was able to identify creditors and debtors from a great many occupations. She uses these occupations to arrive at a rough social classification, which indicates that the “upper layer” of Hanover’s urban society participated most in litigation, and most often as creditors seeking debt recovery. The “middle layer” was also well represented, but more often as debtors defending themselves against accusations. However, the poor rarely appeared in court. Perhaps they had trouble incurring debts due to their low credit-worthiness, but it is also possible that Sturm’s sources are somewhat biased towards the more affluent, who could afford to incur the expenses involved in civil litigation and who might also have been more familiar with Hanover’s legal system.

The poor may thus have preferred to resolve disputes outside court. Indeed, Sturm’s sources do provide some insight into what form this might have taken: in many cases creditors first tried to persuade their debtors to repay them, and only when this failed to have the desired effect did they turn to litigation. In this preceding stage, of repeatedly reminding debtors of the debt outstanding, speaking ill of a debtor, or even issuing threats, credit networks would have been of crucial importance, if only because creditors could try to cast aspersions on their debtors’ credit worthiness.

Once the dispute had been taken to court, litigants and their lawyers would try to win their case by pleading legal arguments. Sturm describes how some debtors claimed they refused to pay because the goods they had bought on credit did not meet agreed quality standards. Others referred to economic crises which prevented them from paying; some even appealed to notions about Christian love – or the exact opposite, the greediness contemporaries ascribed to Jewish moneylenders.

Although Sturm’s approach to the subject is clear enough, she would have been well advised to limit the scope of her study: there is little arguing against the claim that this is

“the first comprehensive analysis of economic, social, psychological, cultural and everyday life aspects of early modern private credit”, but at times the reader cannot help but feel somewhat lost. This is owing particularly to the absence of hypotheses providing some direction. Instead, references to the extensive literature on early modern credit serve as the main touchstone. This does not mean that Sturm has taken a comparative approach, but merely that she repeatedly points out that some aspects observed in studies on other towns were not to be found in Hanover. This tends to get a bit tedious, particularly since Sturm often goes no further than such observations, leaving the interpretation of the data to the reader.

It is my impression that private credit in early modern Hanover strongly resembles late medieval practice. It is therefore regrettable that Sturm has chosen not to draw on the literature of the students of Rolf Sprandel, who have taken a quantitative approach to many aspects of private credit in the north of present-day Germany in the late Middle Ages. Even though they used registers of formal contracts, which were kept by towns from the thirteenth century onwards, a comparison would have allowed Sturm to make at least some statements about developments over time. And it would also have provided some context for her claim that credit systems appear to have been a quite modern aspect of early modern society.

Also, however novel and useful Sturm’s approach is, ultimately the reader might still end up feeling that the analysis of debt litigants has some shortcomings. This is particularly owing to Sturm’s silence on the question of how representative litigation was for participants along the entire credit spectrum. To what degree were wealthy people in a better position to institute proceedings than less wealthy creditors? Were there impediments to bringing lawsuits against those who were social equals? Sturm’s study might not provide clear answers to these questions, but it does provide some building blocks for future research. For example, combining Sturm’s “litigation approach” with an analysis of formally contracted debts could help improve our understanding of socio-economic impediments to litigation, and tell us whether wealthy people were overrepresented in litigation because they were more involved in credit systems, or whether they simply had better access to the legal system.

To conclude, Sturm provides a comprehensive study in which she draws a wealth of data from legal records. Her approach provides insights into many aspects of early modern credit systems, and perhaps even suggests some possibilities for enhancing our knowledge of those credit systems. However, the picture she has painted of creditors and debtors in Hanover is still very much open to interpretation.

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MULLER, JERRY Z. *Capitalism and the Jews*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 2010. 267 pp. \$24.95; £16.95; doi:10.1017/S0020859010000337

More than six decades after the annihilation of European Jews and in a time of reviving anti-Semitism, the historian Jerry Z. Muller, a professor at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, investigates the role of the Jews in modern capitalism. His book is an essay collection that consists of four chapters which were written during the last two decades. The book convincingly outlines the role of Jewish cultural capital as a