

Money and honour

Honour is a strange commodity. Unlike money or wealth, honour is not tangible, and for many of us today it is only noticeable when it is injured. Today, it sounds antiquated to talk about honour. That's why some people don't take it seriously any more. Nowadays we prefer to talk more about "prizes" and «distinctions», rather than «honours».

But the fading of honour as a concept or a value by no means cancels its effect; it only changes it. Precisely because honour is easy enough to possess, but not easy to obtain, unlike wealth, for example, it is worth taking a closer historical look at the many functions honour may have in a society. We can best obtain a view of the nature of honour by concentrating on the 18th and 19th centuries. In those two centuries, ideas on the nature of honour became established which may seem very strange today, but which continue to influence our social reality today.

In the German Brockhaus encyclopaedia of 1892, honour is defined as «the recognition of our personal value by others». According to this description, then, honour is a kind of spin-off effect induced by social recognition. But in our society, recognition is not only expressed by honour but also by money. Real recognition requires both money and honour. «Great honour, little money» is hardly a worthy goal – that has changed little in the course of time. Next to money, honour is the second route to social recognition – in biographies one often reads «he acquired wealth and honour». The connection between wealth and reputation makes it clear that wealth is important, but can only have its full effect if it can be connected with recognition, i.e. honour.

The age of honourable men

Never before or since was honour spoken about as much as in the 19th century. Honour was extremely highly regarded. The loss of honour meant more than a loss of social esteem. For a man, especially for an aristocrat or a military officer, to lose one's honour, or even to regard it as threatened, was life-threatening. He was expected to be ready to fight to the death for his honour. Fights over honour were always fought as duels. If one combatant lost the fight, he might also lose his life; if he won or simply survived the duel, the victory not only ensured his life, it gave him back his honour.

Countless novels from the 17th to the 19th century have duels as their central subject. Most of them raise duels to the status of heroic challenges, mostly won by the «good» combatant.

Reality was different. Duels concerned with the defence of wounded honour were seldom entered into freely on both sides. When one man challenged another to a duel following some insult or other, a duel had to be fought. Voluntarily avoiding a duel, or suggesting a compromise or some other form of agreement, did not bring reconciliation but the loss of honour and social ostracism. That meant that it was impossible to resolve insults except by a duel – any other arrangement was regarded as cowardly and unmanly.

In 1841 the German writer Heinrich Heine was publicly accused by the Frankfurt banker Salomon Strauss of having insulted Strauss's wife. Initially Heine did not react to this unpleasant encounter. Then Strauss put the rumour about that he had given Heine a box on the ear in the street.

For a man in those days, receiving a box on the ear in public was an unimaginable insult to his honour, which in upper-class circles unavoidably led to a duel. It was not necessary for there to have been a real box on the ear to cause a duel; in the 19th century it was enough for people to believe that someone had been boxed on the ear in public. Thus by circulating the rumour that he

had boxed Heine on the ear, Strauss left Heine no alternative but to challenge him to a duel, otherwise he would have been regarded as a coward. From that moment on it was no longer possible for Heine to ignore the infuriated Strauss; he had to issue the challenge to a duel.

Strauss and Heine eventually met at dawn for a duel with pistols. Both survived, but Heine was hit on the hip by the ball. He gladly accepted that, however, since his honour and his reputation as a brave man who could put up a fight had been restored by the duel.

Women's honour: once gone, lost for ever

With women's honour, the case was quite different. Women were not expected to be brave; it would have been inconceivable for a woman to defend her honour with a weapon. In matters of honour, then, women were dependent on men. If a woman's reputation was called into question, a man had to defend her, generally her brother or husband. As we saw above in the example of the duel between Heinrich Heine and Salomon Strauss, the dispute was not exactly a quarrel between the two men, but hinged on Strauss's suspicion that Heine had insulted Strauss's wife.

The sources do not tell us exactly what Heine said about Strauss's wife, but we can form a shrewd idea about what it must have been. Women's honour was always closely connected with sexual honour.

Whereas it did not affect a man's honour to have sexual contacts outside marriage, this was utterly taboo for women of the upper and middle classes.

Sexual contacts before marriage or extramarital affairs could cause a lifelong loss of honour and result in social ostracism. It did not matter if a woman was actually having an affair, or if it was merely a rumour. Women's honour was therefore particularly precarious. For women, this meant not only that evil rumours could jeopardize their social position, but that they were compelled to practise complete marital fidelity without being able to expect it in anything like the same measure from their husbands. It was social concepts of honour which meant that until the mid-twentieth century women were dependent on the protection of men for reasons of honour.

It was not until the changes following the First World War brought about the demise of this rigid code of honour that women acquired more freedom of action, and hence considerably more rights of self-determination.

But the basic difference in the concept of honour as between men and women has remained present in the background until today. (CS)