

BOOK REVIEW

Jan Dumolyn and Jelle Haemers, *Communes and Conflict. Urban Rebellion in Late Medieval Flanders*. [Historical Materialism, Vol. 289.] Brill, Leiden 2024. xvi, 470 pp. € 195.11. (E-book: € 195.11).

This volume brings together fourteen essays written over a period of fifteen years by two highly accomplished and innovative historians whose work has significantly advanced the study of popular politics, communications, and urban history in late medieval Europe. While their subject material is centred on the cities of Flanders, their deep knowledge of the historiography of other regions and active participation in international conferences has enabled them to place their work in dialogue with a broad spectrum of medievalist scholarship. The breadth of sources they use – ranging from political speeches and legal documents to popular songs and slogans – together with methodologies drawn not only from history, but also from anthropology and the social sciences, have revealed a hitherto unexplored world of ideas, discourses, and practices that shaped late medieval politics and society. Building upon a venerable historiographical tradition of Belgian medievalism, encompassing pre-war giants such as Henri Pirenne and Johan Huizinga, as well as more recent historians like Peter Arnade, Wim Blockmans, and Marc Boone, they have also contributed extensively to a twenty-first-century transformation in the study of non-elites and urban political culture.

The authors open the book with an autobiographical preface outlining their intellectual formation, followed by an editorial introduction highlighting some of the common themes that appear in the essays, including urban spatial analysis, performative speech and semiotics, and competing ideas of authority. The essays are divided into four sections: “Urban Rebellion”, which focuses specifically on revolts in the wider context of political culture; “Assembling the Commune”, which delves into the practices through which political culture was made and manifested; “Oration and Whispers”, featuring some of their most exciting work into linguistic practices and performances revelatory of late medieval political mentalities; and “Law and Authority”, which explores confrontations between cities and their rulers in legal fora.

While every article collected here is a serious and valuable work of scholarship, this review highlights the ones that have become staples of my research and teaching. Chapter Two, “Patterns of Urban Rebellion in Medieval Flanders”, co-published in the *Journal of Medieval History* in 2005, traces the development of a tradition of revolt in Flemish cities, from the murder of Charles the Good in 1128, through the period of guild dominance in the late thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, to the Burgundian dukes’ centralization and co-option of elites in the fifteenth century. Of particular interest in this chapter is the use of sociologist Charles Tilly’s idea of “repertoires” of revolt

as a heuristic tool to understand rebel actions. Chapter Five, Haemers's "A Moody Community? Emotion and Ritual in Late Medieval Urban Revolts", also published in 2005 in an essay collection edited by Élodie Lecuppre-Desjardin and Anne-Laure Van Bruaene, focuses on the phenomenon of *wapenings*, a major tool in the repertoire of Flemish revolt, which entailed guild members gathering in the marketplace bearing the weapons kept in their guildhalls to manifest their discontent. Chapters Nine and Ten, "Political Poems and Subversive Songs: The Circulation of 'Public Poetry' in the Late Medieval Low Countries" and "'A Bad Chicken was Brooding': Subversive Speech in Late Medieval Flanders", co-authored articles originally published in the *Journal of Dutch Literature* in 2014 and in *Past and Present* in 2012, respectively, mark a fascinating move into the recovery and analysis of subversive speech in what we might cautiously call popular culture. Chapter Six, Dumolyn's "The Vengeance of the Commune: Sign Systems of Popular Politics in Medieval Bruges", published in 2014 in an essay collection that he co-edited with Rafael Oliva Herrero, Vincent Challet, and María Antonia Carmona Ruiz, demonstrates the internal logic of many rebellious acts and their correspondence to a common political culture. The earliest essay to appear in this volume, Chapter Twelve, Dumolyn's "The Legal Repression of Revolts in Late Medieval Flanders", published in 2000 in the *Tijdschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis*, observes the parallel development of *lèse-majesté* and authorities' pardoning in reaction to rebellions. Now part of the scholarly consensus, at the time it was a pioneering perspective.

Marking a moment of initial accomplishment rather than a summative retrospective of their entire careers, *Communes and Conflicts* opens many avenues for further investigation. Haemers and Dumolyn have focused productively on a wide range of discourses: what was said; how it was said; who heard it; and how its meaning could be construed by people in history, as well as by historians now. Inevitably, this raises the question of what was not said or done and who did not – or could not – hear or see those things. What lies outside and excluded from the discourses in – and of – this book? The silences of the archives, highlighted especially by feminist and subaltern historians in recent decades, can reveal aspects of the past that the very profusion of documents tend to exclude or conceal.

Peasants and rural communities are one area of exclusion. *Communes and Conflicts* is, of course, explicitly a work of urban history, but the medieval city was existentially dependent upon and sometimes predatory toward its hinterlands, whose people supplied many of the products, as well as immigrant labour, that kept it running. Although the Flemish countryside had its own traditions of revolt, described by Bas Van Bavel and others, this book gives almost no attention to the 1323–1328 Maritime Revolt – arguably the fourteenth century's most important revolt – which began in the countryside and remained most radical there. Flanders was the most urbanized area in medieval Europe outside northern Italy, but that still meant that the majority of its people lived in the countryside. The dynamic relationship between urban and rural political cultures and mechanisms by which rural people acted with but also struggled against their urban neighbours is a lacuna in our historical understanding that requires urgent attention.

Another, rather baffling, omission is women. Haemers has recently published on women and contentious speech both solely and with Channele Delameillieure, Andrea

Bardyn, and Lisa Demets, but, as the book's editor observes, "gender and sexuality, notably, are categories that are largely absent" from *Communes and Conflict*. (Tellingly, the editor's statement also does not actually mention "women".) The authors note in passing that women "remain conspicuous by their absence in the context of revolts", but this begs the question rather than answering it. "Revolts" is a constructed category, one defined by most modern historians largely around activities, like armed violence, that were predominantly male in the Middle Ages. Yet, as "revolts" unfolded, the female half of the population surely did not remain in suspended animation, nor could any of these uprisings have occurred without women's work, as quotidian and "uninteresting" as it might initially appear. Women do make an appearance as singers of subversive songs and even distributors of printed copies of them, as well as marriage partners forging links between adherents of particular parties or factions. Whether these women did more than serve as passive carriers of political or social capital is not a question even posed. This is particularly puzzling given that the authors argue that it was through families and households that political memories and practices were transmitted. Surely, women played a key role in those processes of transmission? Yet, half the historical population is so marginalized in this book that the term "women" does not even appear in the index.

Unfortunately, the silence surrounding women extends into modern scholarship. Although female scholars have been prominent in the study of non-elites, urban history, and popular politics for decades, few of them are cited. Only about fifteen per cent of the book's bibliographical entries feature a female author's name. Even giants of the field, such as Monique Bourin, appear only once, while others, such as Miri Rubin and Natalie Zemon Davis, are absent altogether. The authors' autobiographical account of their intellectual formation over the past fifteen years mentions only two female historians, both in passing. Notably, not only the book's authors and editors but also the book series' entire editorial board are male.

Communes and Conflicts is nevertheless a brilliant volume, despite its serious blind spots. It represents the first fruits of what promises to be a plentiful harvest of scholarship from two of today's most compelling historians. There is much to celebrate here, and even more to look forward to.

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