

BOOK REVIEW

Jelle Haemers and Ben Eersels (eds.), *Words and Deeds: Shaping Urban Politics from below in Late Medieval Europe*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2020. 224pp. 3 plates, 3 figures. €85.00 hbk.

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For urban historians of medieval Europe, *Words and Deeds: Shaping Urban Politics from below* provides current cultural and political approaches to the methodology of ‘history from below’. In the introduction, editors Jelle Haemers and Ben Eersels chart one of the most prominent recent developments in the methodology of ‘history from below’ for medievalists: the shift away from using rebellion as the framework for studying public opinion. Violence – usually symbolic and deliberate – was, rather, deployed at the very end of a series of political processes already exhausted by those wishing to enact/institute change in the late medieval city. Each of the essays in this collection seeks to reconsider the involvement of citizens in urban politics.

Words and Deeds demonstrates the power of a strong introduction in an edited collection: Haemers and Eersels’ is persuasive, argumentative and firmly rooted in the long durée of medieval urban historiography. Despite being a collection of essays, there are two important arguments that Haemers and Eersels make about the experience of urban politics across western European towns. First, that a shared vocabulary was deployed by citizens, centred around an ideology of the common good. Second, that citizens were active: they demanded financial accountability, they often corroborated important political decisions made by urban councils, and they deployed collective action when it was required to enact change. These commonalities were, the editors conclude, a result of dissemination of ideas through highly connected urban cities, bolstered by a shared Christian faith. This claim is made credible by the range of cities studied by the contributing authors. But while the essays demonstrate similar patterns of citizen participation across Europe, the editors are keen to stress that the success and form of political activity varied due to local and regional contexts.

The first section of the collection is entitled ‘Institutional Bargaining’ and comprises essays by François Otchakovsky-Laurens, Pablo Gonzalez Martin and Sofia Gustafsson which seek to uncover the ways in which political participation could be exercised by those excluded from membership in the principal governing institutions. Pushing back against what appears as an impenetrable divide between the ‘governors’ and the ‘governed’, these authors reveal a complex environment in which disenfranchised individuals were able to influence decision-making processes. In Marseille, Otchakovsky-Laurens found that craft guilds and marginalized individuals (such as the poor, women and Jews) used councillors to support petitions to the town council. Gustafsson’s essay likewise focuses on urban councils, primarily the

existence of, and processes associated with, a large council in fifteenth-century Stockholm. The simultaneous existence of large and small councils within a city could – and did – lead to collaboration, particularly in reinforcing the legitimacy of council decisions. Like Gustafsson, Gonzalez Martin's study of Burgos leads him to argue that moments of conflict should not overshadow the collaborative nature of urban politics. He persuasively argues that historians should not view political participation in terms of numbers, or by the amount of power that different groups possessed: each group was treated according to the way in which they affected a political system.

The second section has a tighter focus, with Dominique Adrian, Sabine von Heusinger and Ben Eersels each demonstrating how electoral rights were the lynchpin to political power wielded by craft guilds in Swabia, the middle Rhine and the Meuse valley. Eersels' essay – a masterclass in presenting statistical data alongside qualitative evidence – argues that the combined political actions of petitioning, consent-giving and striking was integral to the political position of guilds in Maastricht. In Maastricht and Swabian cities, both Eersels and Adrian uncover informal influences upon urban political decision-making. This, of course, makes Adrian's task difficult: unlike in Maastricht, where a plethora of petitions survive, there is limited documentary evidence that expresses the demands of the guilds to the council, as political participation was mostly oral and indirect (p. 118). In a turn from informal (or 'soft') power, the last essay in this section focuses on office-holding in German towns. Through an examination of the three regiments of urban government (upper patrician, lower patrician and the guilds), von Heusinger concludes that the fourteenth century was when merchants and artisans gained a voice in city politics and the power of guilds underlined.

The final section explores the ideology of urban politics. In Jesus Solórzano Telechea's essay, the priorities of the commons (again seen through the lens of petitions) are held to be the accountability of governmental bodies and the prioritization of common good over self-interest. The 'common good' also appeared in the conflict present in Castilian cities in the early sixteenth century, as Beatriz Majo Tomé's essay argues, with exceptional clarity and persuasiveness: the commoners, in advance of the Revolt of the *Comuneros* in 1520/21, had determined a full political programme laced with rhetoric of the common good. The focus on urban discourse, and the centring of the 'common good', is continued – and complicated – by Jelle Haemers' study of the language used by both governors and the governed in the southern Low Countries. Concluding that the language that justified protest was little different from that used by governors in accounting for their own actions, he argues that there was a shared conceptual framework, wherein the same forms of communication were deployed by those engaged in urban politics, comprising medical terminology, moral/biblical discourse and reference to both the common law and urban legislation. Eliza Hartrich's essay also looks at language but focuses on the recording of slanderous speech. In doing so, she asks a crucial question: who had access to this information? Record-keeping practices, she argues, are an important route through which to uncover political participation.

The conclusion to this collection (written by Jan Dumolyn) once again places *Words and Deeds* in the context of historiographical trends. While historians once turned to economic considerations (such as famine, taxation, poverty) as instigators of popular revolt, recent work has stressed the political focus of uprisings. Dumolyn asks whether future studies should be more holistic, seeking to combine social and

economic history into the political-culture framework. In short, *Words and Deeds* finishes as it starts, with a strong historiographical focus and a call to future historians to think critically about their methodological approach to popular politics.

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