

THE REPUBLICS OF THE MIDDLE  
AGES: ESSAY ON THE  
COMMUNAL CIVILIZATION

The bourgeoisie—that fundamental reality of our civilization—has not yet found its historian. Although there are more studies, relatively speaking, on the period following the Revolution, the evolution of the bourgeoisie prior to the eighteenth century is known to us only through fragmentary research, local and limited. The attention of historians is attracted solely to the exceptional cases in which the financial powers happen to play a direct political role—Colbert, Jacques Coeur, Fugger, Bardi, or Buonsignori. The great expansion of the northern cities during the thirteenth century inspired the researches of Henri Pirenne and his disciples; the high point in the development of Italian cities was studied by the Saponi-Luzzatto school, but the sum of this evolution has not been synthesized. There is not a single general history of the bourgeoisie, yet entire libraries are dedicated to feudal society.

Translated by Elaine P. Halperin.

Each time the problem of the "bourgeoisie" arises in regard to a period prior to the Revolution, historians add the adjective "nascent"; each time it manifests itself, we are led to believe that it has just come into being.

In reality, however, bourgeois and feudal societies were constituted at the same time, amid the anarchy of the ninth century, and they developed side by side, without interruption, until 1789. Since then, however, until the eighteenth century, the bourgeoisie did not emerge from obscurity, save for rare burgeonings, and there was a tendency each time to look upon its appearance as a beginning, although it was, in fact, the culmination of a long evolution.

While we know how unclear historical divisions are, how inexact in reality are their boundaries, still we must divide the history of the bourgeoisie into two cycles: a communal cycle that extends from its origins to the end of the eighteenth century and a state cycle that begins in the fourteenth century and in which we still live. (We are deliberately avoiding the term "national"; we know that only in France and England do the notions of "state" and "nation" begin to be fused as early as the fourteenth century; in other European countries states alone were constituted during this period; the formation of nations occurred much later.)

Since communal civilization is not too well known except among specialists, a synthesized outline of it will therefore be helpful. It does not exist within the French, Italian, or German framework, because the communal zone has a contour different from that of modern countries. Urban civilization developed along an axis that traversed Europe from south to north; the first bourgeoisie appeared in Italy and in Flanders, then spread along the route that connected them and, above all, at the halfway meeting point in Champagne, where the market towns sprang up.

"When the State is faltering, when, generally speaking, anarchy reigns over vast areas, a social organization tends to take place, arising from the need for protection. This is order in disorder."<sup>1</sup> It was amid the general anarchy of the ninth century, in a Europe devastated by invasions, that both feudal manors and urbanization began to take form.

The ninth century is the darkest age in history. In spite of the first invasions and the downfall of the Roman world, vestiges of ancient civilization subsisted until the Carolingian epoch, to the time of Alcuin. Despite the encroaching barbarism, instruction in classical literature and the circulation of gold money persisted until 800; the arrival of the Normans finally destroyed the last vestiges of civilization. Around the year

1. H. Berr, *Évolution de l'humanité*, XLI (1934-53), vii-viii.

800 utter darkness reigned. Civilization disappeared, and iron money, a sign of the direst poverty,<sup>2</sup> replaced gold. Europe became an open continent, yielding without resistance to the Norman, Saracen, and Hungarian devastators. This ravaged world was to return to prehistory and even to cannibalism; according to Guilbert de Nogent,<sup>3</sup> human flesh was sold at the market place in Tournus. The local lords survived only by adopting the invaders' warlike, plundering, and seminomad way of life.

In all catastrophes and in all panics there are always among the disturbed throngs a few realists who consider the circumstances lucidly, judging the situation in political and economic rather than in mystical terms. In this starving and destitute world, in which there was a crying need for goods, the Italians were the first to show both the necessary intelligence and the capacity to import consumers' goods. This was done at first by the Venetians, owing to their geographical position and the relations they maintained with Constantinople and Alexandria. Their first imports of oil, wine, wood for construction, pepper, and Byzantine silks brought them considerable profit.<sup>4</sup> The commerce of Venice and the wealth of the Venetians grew with tremendous rapidity. While the invaders had not yet finished their task of destroying the ancient world, the modern world began to be constituted. It was in 811 that, for the first time after the fall of the ancient world, a non-feudal sovereignty emerged. Guistiniano Partecipazio, a merchant and shipper, who became in that year the first doge of Venice, began the history of the modern bourgeoisie.<sup>5</sup>

The commercial movement spread to the interior of the continent and reached Pavia; the list of the rights of the city of Pavia, the *Honorantiae civitatis Paviae*,<sup>6</sup> demonstrates the existence of an already rather well-developed commercial organization in the ninth century. The fairs that took place in this city were meeting places not only for merchants who came from Venice, Amalfi, Gaeta, and Salerno but also for ultramontane merchants who brought horses, slaves, Flemish woolen goods, English

2. Robert Boutruche, "La Circulation monétaire au moyen-âge," *Revue historique*, July-September, 1949.

3. Guilbert de Nogent, *De vita sua* (Paris: Édition Bourgin, 1907).

4. Gino Padovan, "Capitale et lavoro nel commercio veneziano," *Rivista di storia economica*, Vol. XIX, No. 1 (1941).

5. Cf. G. Luzzatto, "Les Activités économiques du patriciat vénitien," *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, 1936.

6. Cited by J. Lestocquoy, *Villes de Flandre et d'Italie* (Paris, 1952), p. 16.

pewter, and German weapons. Thus the barbarian world was traversed from the south to the north by a great commercial current that followed the large natural routes formed by the valleys of the Rhine, the Meuse, and the Scheldt. Feudal Europe was established during the ninth century with, in its midst, a heterogeneous element—bourgeois dynamics.

The creation and maintenance of this commercial current encountered great difficulties; to traverse Barbary with a load of merchandise was a heroic undertaking. The heavy chariots or mules that transported the bundles of merchandise wrapped in packcloths and skins moved very slowly,<sup>7</sup> and, under the most favorable conditions, it took about twenty days to go from Pavia to Provins in Champagne. But scarcely a trip took place under “normal” conditions. One merchant tells how he was blocked by the Alpine snows for thirty-five days; another, that he was stopped for six days by the swelling waters of the Rhone; still another, that he had to make an unexpected detour because the bridge he planned to cross was washed away by floods.<sup>8</sup> But it was not only the elements that the merchants feared; there were far graver dangers in the nature of hazardous encounters, for the roads were haunted by barbaric hordes and by bands of robber-barons who “specialized,” one might say, in plundering caravans. Moreover, armies of robbers traveled with empty chariots in their wake which they used to transport their booty.<sup>9</sup> The pillaging of merchants was not only not dishonorable; it even became the subject matter for epic poems. Bertrand de Born, exhilarated by the announcement of an expedition of this kind, lightheartedly sang:

Trumpet, drums, flags and horses, forward! And the weather will be fair! And the weather will be fair! For we will rob the usurer of his goods, and the beasts of burden will no longer safely travel the roads by daylight nor will the bourgeois be free from fear, nor the merchant, journeying to France. But he who robs lustily will become rich!<sup>10</sup>

To counteract these difficulties, the bourgeois organized; naturally, they traveled armed to the teeth. Espinas made an impressive list of knives, swords, shields, crossbars, boarspears, and clubs which constituted the equipment of an itinerant merchant;<sup>11</sup> but there were far more important

7. See H. Laurent, “Un grand commerce d’exportation au moyen-âge,” *Bulletin des Commissions Royales d’Histoire* (Belgium), No. 23 (1934), pp. 375 ff.

8. See Cipolla, “In tema di trasporti medievali,” *Boll. storico Pavese*, Vol. V (1944).

9. See Marc Bloch, *La Société féodale* (Paris, 1940), p. 21.

10. Bertrand de Born, ed. Appel, 10.2 and 35.2, cited by Bloch, *op. cit.* pp. 21–22.

11. G. Espinas, *Une guerre sociale interurbaine* (Lille, 1930).

## *The Republics of the Middle Ages*

means of protection: association and solidarity. At St.-Omer,<sup>12</sup> Genoa, Milan, and in all the more important cities, guilds and fraternities or friendly societies were set up. An association bound its members by an oath of solidarity:<sup>13</sup> each member promised to help his cojuror "as he would a brother." Refusal to come to the aid of a cojuror was heavily penalized.

Historians of the nineteenth century often confused the guilds, the traveling and the transportation associations, with the communes which were sedentary and institutional associations. Current researches tend to dissociate them, although, in the last analysis, the principle was the same in both instances: the solidarity, consecrated by oath, of the bourgeois who had identical interests to protect.

The history of communes was little known before they achieved legal recognition. This is true for several reasons. Their ecclesiastical chroniclers, to whom we owe our information about this period, were categorically opposed to the communal movement. Guilbert de Nogent, speaking of communes, says: "This new word is detestable." Clandestine conspiracies, pursued by the authorities, were not anxious to have their activities recorded in documents. Furthermore, they were not yet interested in their own historiography. In the ninth century the leaders of the most important bourgeois power, the doges of Venice, were still illiterate.<sup>14</sup>

All that has come down to us are echoes of the activity of communes everywhere against the feudal powers. The episcopal and abbatial organizations that administered the territories of the communes included a fiscal and juridical administration which hindered commercial development: transactions concluded at the Grande Place du Marché of Arras were subject to a triple tax; the canons of the cathedral of Notre Dame en Cité, the monks of the Abbaye St. Vaast, and the agents of the count of Flanders all collected a series of taxes. Battles even occurred between the canons of the cathedral and the abbey monks who interfered with each other in the collection of taxes. The bourgeois of Modena and Turin twice revolted against the bishops who governed them: once<sup>15</sup> in 891 and again in 897. In 924 the merchants of Cremona rebelled at a time when the Hungarian invaders, a few hours distant, were ravaging Pavia. The bour-

12. See A. Giry, *Historie de la Ville de St.-Omer* (Paris, 1877), who sees in the guild the origins of the commune.

13. For communal oaths see Ch. Petit Dutailis, *Les Communes françaises* (Paris, 1947).

14. See Molmenti, *La Storia di Venezia nella vita privata* (Bergamo, 1910), pp. 401-10.

15. Cf. Chiapelli, "La formazione storica del commune cittadino," *Arch. st. it.* (1930).

geois, we see, did not await the end of the invasions to demand their autonomy.

The insurrectionist movement reached Genoa, Bergamo, Brescia, and Verona, spread toward the north, along the great route of the Rhine; revolts broke out at Worms and Cologne, then in Flanders, Cambrai,<sup>16</sup> Arras, Noyon, etc. In spite of these revolts, the administration of the cities remained in the hands of the bishops. For more than two hundred years the bourgeois continued to struggle. Rebellions broke out in 1035 and in 1044 at Milan, in 1074 at Cologne, and in 1078 at Cambrai. The uprisings were too numerous to list—the movement was a general one.

Results were achieved slowly: a few bourgeois were admitted to the episcopal councils that administered the cities—in 1024 at Pavia, in 1030 at Milan, in 1095 at Flanders, in 1111 at Arras, in 1115 at Douai. In 1127 an unforeseen event provided the Flemish bourgeoisie with a chance for real progress: the murder of Charles the Good caused a governmental crisis in Flanders. The current rivals attempted to win the support of the cities by granting them “franchises.” Thus, in 1127, Guillaume Cliton granted to Bruges, St.-Omer, Ghent, Ypres, and several other cities of the county charters which bestowed considerable prerogatives on the bourgeoisie.

His successor, Philip of Alsace, attempted to limit these prerogatives, but after his death in 1194 Philip Augustus granted almost total freedom to the northern cities. The king of France required financial support from the cities because he had embarked upon a very costly campaign against England. “A Prince without money will never be a good warrior,” wrote Jean Bodel of Arras, who, around 1190, composed an epic song in which the emphasis was placed not upon the valor of knights but upon Charlemagne’s financial and fiscal problems.<sup>17</sup> One might say that the bourgeois really “bought” their independence. From this period on the great commercial cities became veritable bourgeois republics.

“The principle of the communes in the Middle Ages, the enthusiasm which caused their founders to brave dangers and misery was indeed that of liberty,” Augustin Thierry wrote in his *Lettres sur l’histoire de France*. In the light of subsequent developments we know that this movement led to a progressive liberation of the bourgeoisie, but the bourgeois of the

16. Cf. F. Vercauteren, *Étude sur les “civitates” de la Belgique Seconde* (Brussels, 1934), pp. 226–27.

17. Jehan Bodel’s *Saxenlied*, ed. F. Menzel, E. Stengel, and A. Heins, (2 vols.; Marburg, 1900), *Laisse* LI.

twelfth century did not seem to be clearly aware of this. The famous charters of freedom which historians of the Romantic era praised were actually very modest documents. They did not contain the slightest trace of a political idea. "These charters appear to be improvisations. . . . Confusion, contradictions and puerilities abound."<sup>18</sup> One can imagine the committee meetings in which the participants were mainly concerned with their immediate and perhaps even quite trivial interests, demanding provisions that occurred to them at the time. For example, at Orléans there was an encumbrance of wagons at a time of day when the Porte Dunoise was being used to bring in food. In the charter of rights an article was inserted ruling that "wagons must yield the way to others as soon as they have been unloaded."<sup>19</sup> Of course there were clauses pertaining to the protection of the bourgeois from abuses of seignorial power, but these liberties were not at all Ciceronian. The bourgeois of that era conceived of liberty in barbarian terms; communal charters dealt with the rate of fines payable for attacking a bourgeois. The documents contained detailed tariffs: the fine for one finger cut off of a non-bourgeois was two sous; it went up to four sous if the victim was a bourgeois. The bourgeois "blood price" rose; members of the bourgeoisie became "more expensive" and thus were better protected.

This communal bourgeoisie, which, according to the 1194 charters, actually established the foundations of modern liberty, conceived its emancipation in Merovingian terms. History marched on, holding a lantern aloft, without intellectuals to lead the way. The heads of the communal movement did not as yet know how to read or write. It was only during the ninth century that the bourgeoisie began to acquire culture, but even this must be regarded as a very modest start. The appearance of "communal" schools was first noted in 1020 in Florence, Ravenna, Siena, Bologna, Salerno, and Pistoia.<sup>20</sup> The first great bourgeois institution of learning was a law school inaugurated in Siena, but this occurred only in 1173.<sup>21</sup> In the north the bourgeoisie did not found its own schools until the twelfth century. Ghent was the first northern city to have a communal school.<sup>22</sup> The records of the monk Guiman inform us that in Arras, before

18. Dutaillis, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Cf. Saponi, "La Cultura del mercante medievale italiano," *Studi di storia economica medievale*, p. 285.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Henri Pirenne, "L'Instruction des marchands au moyen-âge," *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, I (1929), 13.

1150, there were “adulterine” schools, probably secular ones functioning in the city alongside abbatial and episcopal schools.<sup>23</sup> However, their level still seemed to be elementary.

Who were these first bourgeois and where did they come from? The existence of these groups of free men in the midst of a world of serfs bound to the land raises a question. According to Henri Pirenne, they were fugitive serfs who came from far enough away so that their lords had lost all trace of them—adventurers, mainly, who grouped together in a new community. In a period when civic status was still a privilege reserved for princes, there is very little information about the common people. Only when they reached the summit of their destiny did the bourgeois think about their ancestors, and not for the purpose of ascertaining the truth about their origins, but in order to invent a glorious heritage. Such were the famous Tolomei of Siena, who claimed to be direct descendants of the Ptolomean dynasty, a genealogy concocted out of whole cloth and inspired by the fortuitous resemblance of names.<sup>24</sup>

According to the most recent studies, the inhabitants of cities did not come from so far away. Canon Lestocquoy’s researches in Flanders and those of Luzzatto in Italy even prove that they came from quite nearby; they were principally small landowners of the area and functionaries of the abbatial or county administration—in short, vavasors and nobles of lowly rank.

Between 800 and 1100 the commerce of the cities was mainly concerned with agricultural products. Most of the transactions registered in the markets of Champagne until about 1100 have to do with commodities of this type, principally sheep, cattle, leather, wine, etc.<sup>25</sup> The first bourgeois were both merchants and landowners in Venice. This might seem curious in a city constructed over water, and yet the Partecipazio were landowners. Their property was situated on the lagoon, along the banks of solid earth and in the territory of Treviso,<sup>26</sup> as well as in Florence, Genoa, Arras, Brussels, Douai, St.-Omer, etc.

The beginnings of what we can already call the “industrial revolution” occurred around 1100. The method of production that prevailed in the cities from this time on constituted a revolution in comparison to the

23. See *Cartelaire du Moine Guiman*, ed. Van Drival (Arras, 1877), p. 51.

24. Cf. E. von Roon-Bassermann, *Siennesische Handelsgesellschaften des XII-ten Jahrhunderts* (Mannheim and Leipzig, 1912).

25. Cf. E. Chapin, *Les Villes de Foires de Champagne* (Paris: Champion, 1937).

26. Cf. Marancini, *La Costituzione di Venezia* (Venice, 1928).



## *The Republics of the Middle Ages*

manufacturing systems in use during the same period in neighboring areas.

In manorial organizations the manufacture of cloth—for the textile industry represented the most important production of the Middle Ages—was reserved exclusively for women. During the early period there were some male artisans and specialized male workers among the very first groups. Guiman's records on Arras and the *Honorantiae civitatis Pavie* mention the existence of artisan-weavers well before 1100. But the weavers do not seem to be very different from other artisans; in Pavia they were even put in the lower category of the non-privileged trades.

The sudden change that occurred in the twelfth century was determined by the intervention of the capitalist patrician. The bourgeois, who had already acquired a considerable fortune, thanks to his commercial activities and revenues from land, organized a group of artisans who were to work exclusively for him. This did not, as yet, constitute a factory or even a small manufacturing enterprise. It was merely a group of small domestic workshops,<sup>27</sup> and in these "house-cells" the artisans lived and worked with their families and their apprentices. The houses, the tools (the owner of the tools was not always known to the workers), the raw material, and the management belonged to the employer. This industry developed with prodigious rapidity. By the beginning of the thirteenth century the employer was already the head of a real trust; he controlled the spinning, weaving, cloth-fulling, and dyeing groups as well as the shipping companies and counting-houses.<sup>28</sup> His purchasing offices in England acquired the best English woolens and saw to their steady shipment to Flanders. These shipments did not take place as precisely as clock-work; in the thirteenth century it was an adventure to cross the Channel. Around 1260 Adam Esturion, an industrialist from Arras, asked for a tax exemption on the ground that one of his ships laden with wool had foundered between England and Flanders.<sup>29</sup> The company organized everything from the purchase of raw materials to the sale of textiles at the international counting-houses that had opened in Champagne, Genoa,<sup>30</sup> Pavia, Venice, and even in Constantinople and Alexandria.

27. Cf. G. Espinas, *La Draperie dans la Flandre française au moyen-âge* (2 vols.; Besançon and Paris, 1923).

28. Cf. De Poerck, *La Draperie médiévale en Flandre et en Artois* (Bruges, 1951).

29. Cf. *Chansons et dits artésiens*, published by A. Jeanroy and H. Guy (Paris and Bordeaux, 1898), XXIV, 97.

30. Cf. Renée Dochaerd, *Les Relations commerciales entre gènes, la Belgique et l'Outremont aux XII<sup>e</sup> et XIV<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Brussels and Rome, 1941).

Until 1100 there were not more clothiers than bakers or barbers, but from that time on their numbers multiplied. One could already speak of a workingman's corps. In the large industrial cities like Arras, Douai, or Florence workers accounted for almost half of the urban population. The group increased; the outskirts of cities inhabited by workers expanded; industrial civilization already had created tentacled cities. In Verhaeren's country, for more than eight hundred years, "people go off toward the big city."

The cities resounded with echoes of the noise made by the trades, with the thrashing of cloth. The poet Baude Fastoul, plagued by loneliness, poverty, and despair, composed two little verses about the "concrete" music of industry:

Now is my soul by these torments thrashed  
Like cloth by a washing woman.<sup>31</sup>

While modern industrialization blackens the air of cities, the textile industry of the thirteenth century made it blue. Woad, the main coloring used for cloth, tinted the people who worked with it with a blue dye. The mass of workingmen who peopled the industrial sections of the northern cities were called "blue-nails."<sup>32</sup>

The development of this new civilization created conflicts. In Florence, particularly, a violent antagonism existed between the old patricians, merchants, and landowners, who, by virtue of their ancient lineage, laid claim to a certain aristocratic superiority, and the rising industrial elite. The former, the white Guelphs who, in the thirteenth century, were almost reconciled with the feudal Ghibelines, had an illustrious spokesman: Dante Alighieri. In the struggle against the black Guelphs, the "industrialist" party, the latter triumphed, and we know that Dante and all his political friends were banished from Florence.<sup>33</sup>

There was no such conflict in Flanders. The statutes of the *Confrérie des Ardents* spoke of a difference of opinion between the "bourgeois" and the "knights" around 1190; we know that the "knights" were part of the first Patriciate of Arras, but this is referred to in such a summary fashion that we cannot draw any social conclusions from it.

Patrician governments headed the bourgeois republics from about 1200

31. V. Congé de Baude Fastoul, *Nouveau recueil de contes, dits et fabliaux* (Paris, 1842).

32. Cf. H. Pirenne, "Les périodes de l'histoire sociale du capitalisme," *Bull. Acad. Belg.* 1914.

33. Cf. A. Renaudet, *Dante humaniste* (Paris, 1952).

on. The governing assemblies, which were called "aldermanic councils" (a term derived from the Carolingian *scabinatus*) in Florence, "consulates" in Italy (with the exception of the word, these institutions have nothing in common with the ancient consulates), were recruited exclusively from the patrician class, which, meanwhile, had become a caste. In every city a group of families—always the same ones—maintained their power from about 1200 to the fifteenth century.

In the feudal world of that era, where sovereignty was always concentrated in a single person—the lord, for whom power possessed an individualist form—the existence of these collective sovereignties constituted an exceptional phenomenon. How did the bourgeois come to conceive of republican government?

Apparently the establishment of institutions was not preceded by any political theory; rather it can be explained by the natural play of a certain number of equal forces which, having opposed each other for a long time (we know how many times patrician families massacred each other in Venice, Florence, and Siena before they arrived at a system of collective government), finally acknowledged their equality and divided power among themselves.

During the thirteenth century, the bourgeois republics that had reached a high point in their evolution controlled all of Europe, thanks to their economic power. Their international activities from this time on are too well known to be stressed here. Let us merely recall that around 1250 the bourgeois of Siena possessed a network of banks and commercial counting-houses which included not only Italy, Flanders, and Champagne but also England, France, Spain, and Germany. They were the bankers for the crown of Aragon, the king of England, the Anjou family, and the Roman Curia.<sup>34</sup> We know that the Florentine company of the Bardi, who, around 1300, had a capital of almost 875,000 florins, owned sixteen branch establishments scattered over all of Europe and employed about five hundred people.<sup>35</sup> The Uten Hoves of Ghent were bankers for the king of England; the Du Markiets of Douai lent money to the Count of Flanders.<sup>36</sup> But Arras was by far the most important city of the north, the only one comparable to the Italian cities. In 1274 the count of Artois owed 114,000 pounds to the bankers of Arras. To understand the magnitude of

34. Cf. Roon-Bassermann, *op. cit.*

35. Cf. Yves Renouard, "Le Compagnie commerciali fiorentine del Trecento," *Arch. St. Ital.*, I (1938), 52.

36. Cf. H. Van Wervecke, *Gand: Esquisse d'histoire sociale* (Brussels, 1946).

this sum, the reader must realize that 3,000 pounds represented the price of a completely equipped galley ship. A single family of Arras, the Crespins, loaned more than 123,000 pounds in one year to various clients.<sup>37</sup> During the same period another family of Arras, the Loucharts, loaned 44,000 pounds to the king of France.

In 1296 the Crespin brothers, creditors of the city of Bruges, exerted such pressure upon that city that Pope Boniface VIII personally interceded in its behalf. A few years later another debtor of the Crespins, the city of St.-Omer, asked the king of France for protection against the "Crespinese people," probably an army of mercenaries who were attacking it. Then the cities of Ghent and Ypres asked for protection against these same Crespinese. Finally, the kings of France and England concluded a treaty in which they promised protection to the debtors of the Crespinese throughout their entire kingdoms.<sup>38</sup> This indicates the extraordinary power that the bourgeois republics possessed in the thirteenth-century world.

In the cities the patriciate constituted an elite, as we have seen. The rest of the people, that is to say, the great majority of the urban population, the "commoners" as they were called in Flanders, the "little people" in Italy, are far less familiar to us. The two sources of information at our disposal—professional statutes, on the one hand, and political and literary documents, on the other—provide viewpoints that do not always tally.

The communes of the thirteenth century have left us a mass of artisan regulations<sup>39</sup> which give a haunting image of a truly concentrated city. However, since we have found no precise confirmation of this in the evidence from various sources, and since we cannot ascertain to what extent these regulations were applied, we must view the documents of fraternal organizations with a certain reserve.

In principle, therefore, the commoner of the city was registered in an enormous fraternal organization, which in turn was divided into professional or geographical cells. The organization regulated not only the professional but also the private life of people with extreme precision and in great detail. The application of these rules was controlled by "watchers." They were authorized to enter the domestic workshop at any time in

37. Cf. G. Bigwood, "Les Financiers d'Arras," *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, Vol. III (1924) and Vol. IV (1925).

38. *Ibid.*, cf. "Le Régime juridique et économique du commerce de l'argent dans la Belgique du moyen-âge," *Mem. de l'acad. de Belgique, classe des lettres*, 2d ser., Vol. XIV (Brussels, 1921).

39. G. Espinas, *Les Origines du droit d'association* (Lille, 1942), Vol. I.

order to ascertain whether or not the artisan was actually living and working according to the rules—if he was using the prescribed tools and behaving as he was expected to, if he was eating in conformity with municipal orders, and if he, his wife, his children, and his apprentices were clothed in accordance with the regulations.<sup>40</sup>

The individual's freedom seemed reduced to little enough, for he could not leave the fraternal organization, or the house he inhabited, or the employer for whom he worked, or, of course, the city. Laws governing departure constituted an insuperable obstacle, in principle at least. The young man had to enter his father's trade, marry the daughter of a brother member, and remain practically all his life confined within the fraternal association into which he was born. The organization never released its hold on him, and, even when he died, he could not escape from it. It was the fraternal organization, not the family, that buried the "deceased brother," kept his memory alive, and celebrated his requiem.<sup>41</sup> Thus, even in the beyond, the brother member could not recover his individuality. On All Souls' Day the fraternal organization lit a single enormous candle, not in memory of a particular individual—some obscure Jehannot or Jakemon—but rather, if we can put it that way, in honor of the unknown artisan.<sup>42</sup>

Political documents constitute our second source of information about the communes. The majority of communal documents deal with rather serious social disturbances that occurred at the end of the thirteenth century. There were strikes at Douai in 1245, and the aldermanic council banned certain associations that seemed seditious. Trouble was noted in Arras in 1253 and in Siena in 1257. From then on agitation never ceased; the revolts and social upheavals that succeeded one another until the end of the thirteenth century were to become one of the main causes of the decadence of the communes. But the complaints that preceded or accompanied the uprisings did not place the blame upon the fraternal organizations; nowhere was indignation expressed against their restrictions upon man's freedom. Like the charters at the end of the twelfth century, the complaints in the year 1300 had to do far more with details than with principles. The letters that the commune of Arras addressed to the Countess Mahaut of Artois<sup>43</sup> on the eve of its insurrection accused a certain

40. *Ibid.*, Vol. II: *Documents*, pp. 17–27, 67, 79, 100.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*

43. Cf. J. Lestocquoy, *Patriciens du moyen-âge* ("Mem. de la Com. des Mon. Hist. du Pas-de-Calais" [Arras, 1945]), pp. 137 ff.: "Pièces justificatives."

Mathieu Lanster, industrialist and alderman, of swindling. The insurgents of Douai complained of the meanness and errors of a certain Jehan Boinebroke, also an industrialist and an alderman. The commune's indignation was far more personal than social. The general characteristic of the phenomenon is apparent only when one notes the similarity of the antipatrician disturbances in the communes of Flanders and Italy.

The principal cause of discontent was excessive taxation, but it must be added that the patricians were not reproached so much for taxing the populations heavily as for exempting themselves from taxes.

Disturbances broke out again at Douai in 1275, at Ypres and Bruges in 1280, at Tournai and Provins a little later. According to Espinas, the theme of these revolts was everywhere the same: the petty bourgeoisie's desire to participate in the administration of public finances.<sup>44</sup> Another source of dissatisfaction was the slowing-down of textile production caused by increased competition among Flemish, Italian, and Champagne industries, and the ensuing crisis, the reduction in wages and unemployment.

Italian cities experienced identical difficulties. Many Flemish emigrants were to be found among the "Ciompi" who rebelled in Florence. The inhabitants of Parma, Siena, Navarre, Pisa, Pistoia, and Florence who revolted from 1255 on demanded that the tax on income be made to apply to the "fat people" as well as the "little people."<sup>45</sup>

These struggles did not lead to the complete eviction of the patriciate either in Flanders or in Italy; its strength was merely reduced. Better-balanced institutions were to emerge; they represented what Pirenne calls "the democracies" of the fourteenth century.

The communal epoch ends at about the beginning of the fourteenth century. While Italian cities evolved toward the establishment of principalities—the power which patrician collectivities had retained earlier came to be concentrated in the hands of the princes—the might of the northern cities decreased as a consequence of the economic crisis and also because of the centralizing policy of the kings of France.

What was the reasoning of the bourgeois of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries? How did they look upon the future of the world? How did they conceive of us, their descendants? Did they experience a metaphysical shiver? Did they wonder what was their place in the universe?

Certainly in the Italian cities there were enlightened spirits who looked ahead, but in the northern cities there was none. Despite the similarity of

44. Cf. G. Espinas, *Les Finances de Douai* (Paris: Picard, 1902), p. 70.

45. Cf. Rodolico, *La Democrazia fiorentina nel suo tramonto* (Bologna, 1905).

## *The Republics of the Middle Ages*

historical situations, despite cultural contacts between Arras and Florence, despite Brunetto Latini's visits to Arras and those of Adam de la Halle to Italy, there was an enormous difference between the Arras school and the Florentine culture of the Trecento.

In both places literature was written principally by the patricians and the elite of the communes. The zone of culture was like the highest level of the atmosphere: only the greatest reached the heights.

In an almost word-for-word way we know who constituted the literary public of Arras. The *Confrérie de Notre-Dame des Ardents*, an association of bourgeois and poets which directed the entire literary life of Arras, has left us its statutes, a list of its members, and its programs. Nowhere else has the literary activity of a society been so minutely recorded. It comprised about two hundred poets and two hundred bourgeois. The entire patriciate of the city belonged to it as well as people whose names are unfamiliar to us. The *Confrérie* organized about twelve large meetings a year. It gave Pantagruelian banquets followed by musical and poetic entertainment. Literary prizes were awarded for the most inspired poems. But the public participated actively, collaborating and improvising with the poets. Bourgeois and bards competed in literary contests organized in the Provençal fashion. "Party-games,"<sup>46</sup> improvised on the subject of polite casuistry, went something like this: if you love a lady, would you prefer that she give herself to you when her thoughts are on someone else or that she give herself to someone else while thinking about you?<sup>47</sup> Each of the two competitors was entitled to compose three stanzas of eight verses to argue his point of view. Then the two poets chose two judges, who were to decide. Adam de la Halle and Jehan Bretel excelled at these poetic exercises, hundreds of examples of which have survived.<sup>48</sup>

The king of England, the count of Anjou, and counts and countesses from Flanders and Artois who came to consult their bankers participated in these literary sessions as guests of honor.

The introduction of chivalric poetry into patrician circles is quite understandable in view of the increasing desire on the part of the patriciate to imitate the way of life of the noble courts and to differentiate between themselves and the lower classes. And yet there must have been a profound incompatibility between that way of life and the spontaneous tendencies

46. Cf. A. Langfors, *Recueil général des jeux partie français* (Paris, 1905), Introduction.

47. *Ibid.*, I, 203, "Jeu parti," No. LIV.

48. Cf. for the biography of Jehan Bretel, merchant and clothier from Arras, A. Guesnon, *Nouvelles recherches biographiques sur les trouvères artésiens* (1900), p. 29.

of the bourgeois spirit. The party-games afford proof of this fundamental difference. Jehan Bretel was asked: "If your lady promised to bestow her favors upon you only ten times during your lifetime, would you prefer to enjoy them immediately or to space your pleasures?" (The question lacks poetry, of course, but it remains a part of the tradition of gallantry—a tradition that stems simultaneously from arithmetic, logic, and medieval scholasticism.) Bretel answered: "It is better to preserve a pledge from which one anticipates money than to spend it rashly. He lives in happiness who awaits payment"—which is an interpretation of moral gallantry in banker's terms.

The gallant poems written in Arras are at times reminiscent of the misogynic spirit of tales in verse. "One must never trust a woman in anything," Colart le Bouteiller wrote. And Jehan Bodel declared: "Woman is changeable, of a weak nature, and does not deserve the importance attributed to her." All this definitely does away with the cult of women which underlay chivalric poetry.

Moreover, this gallant spirit is, in final analysis, so foreign to the poets of Arras that they could not resist a tendency to make sport of it. Colart le Changeur suggested to a friend a game on the following theme: "I love two ladies both of whom love me, but one tears out my hair while the other strangles me. Which should I prefer?" And the two friends proceeded to discuss this dilemma throughout six stanzas written in the most precious and elegant style.

There is no affinity between the spirit of gallantry and the bourgeois mentality. The "experiment in gallantry" failed, and, after a few years of popularity, gallant poetry completely disappeared. Gallantry implied a morality based upon precepts that were actually antisocial; there was a basic incompatibility between gallant love, which was, by definition, adulterous love, and family morality, which, in bourgeois circles, was very strict. Indignant protests were registered when, in the Game of the Bower, Adam de la Halle announced his intention of leaving his wife. Didactic poems composed in Arras during the thirteenth century stipulated very precisely the rules of family morality and the duties which husband and wife owed each other. We have the impression that, in bourgeois society, the fundamental and indivisible unity was not the individual but the family. In the history of communal bourgeoisies the question of personalities was never raised. Acts were the deeds of families and dynasties. Thus the experiment in gallantry was decided by defeat. The patriciate of the north did not find in it its cultural expression.



*The Republics of the Middle Ages*

In contrast to gallant literature stood realistic and satirical literature which was illustrated by the elite of the commune; it is interesting to observe that a comparison in the ways of life illuminates a social division so plainly. The Game of the Bower, anonymous songs, and Robert le Clerc's "Verses on Death" were violent attacks on the Crespins, the Loucharts, the bankers, the aldermen, the count of Artois—in other words, on the ruling caste. It was a revolt that lacked breadth and, quite frankly, thoughtfulness as well. Such-and-such an alderman swindled the treasury of 20,000 pounds, another reported a false income, a third listed imaginary expenses in his accounts—in short, all of them were rogues and liars. Furthermore, the people were told that such-and-such an alderman, who was supposedly all-powerful, actually was terrorized by his wife and that such-and-such a banker was a drunkard. One great lady was supposedly more stupid than a goose; as for the millowner who possessed an incalculable fortune, he was so stingy that he ate only putrid fish.<sup>49</sup>

Where, among these petty slanders, do we find a revolutionary current or an ideal of liberty? All this was hopelessly trivial. Among the two hundred poets of Arras not a single one was inspired by a deeper vision. Concerned only with detail, they were incapable of transcending the local and the immediate, of rising to the level of ideas.

Of course there was an incommensurable distance between the songs improvised by the people of Arras and the Florentine humanism of the thirteenth century. To what can we attribute this if not to cultural differences? The poets of Arras knew versification and music and had heard the songs and tales in verse that were popular at the time. Except for this, their education was summary. Jehan Bodel thought Africa was situated in the outskirts of Arras, or, in any case, not very far from Auxerre,<sup>50</sup> and he asserted with assurance that the Saxons had never ceased being Moslems.<sup>51</sup> The only reference to culture that we find in the work of Adam de la Halle was an allusion to the "gesture of Audigier and Graimberge."<sup>52</sup>

Bourgeois civilization developed in Flanders on a basis devoid of intellectual tradition. The only sources of culture were medieval, that is to

49. Cf. *Chansons et dits artésiens*, ed. Jeanroy and Guy, Pièces V, VI, XV, and XVIII (Bordeaux: Feret, 1898).

50. For matters concerning the history of the literature of Arras see my study: *Société et littérature bourgeoises d'Arras aux XII<sup>e</sup> et XIII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Arras, 1955).

51. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 208.

say, recent: popular literature represented by tales in verse and the gallant poetry of the noble courts.

The Italian communes developed in a country nourished by cultural traditions, upon soil that preserved the memory of antiquity. Naturally, the influence of gallant literature made itself felt even there; in Italy, as well as in Arras, there were patricians who composed poems about the "delicate folly of love." Bartolomeo Zorzi of Treviso and Parsifal Doria of Genoa wrote songs that were entirely comparable to those of Arras. The *sonnetti burleschi* of Ceccho Angiolieri were the Sieneese response to Adam de la Halle's drinking songs. But the center of Italian culture was Florence. There, in Encyclopedist and philosophical circles, one met Brunetto Latini, Cavalcanti, and the already-famous Dante. Brunetto Latini had begun to teach his disciples the finest doctrines of medieval philosophy: Thomism, Augustinianism, the Arab rationalism of Averroës. He taught them the Bible and acquainted them with the writings of Aristotle, Cicero, Virgil, Ovid, Lucan, Statius, Boetius, etc.<sup>53</sup> Florentine humanism already had assumed the gigantic proportions of the Renaissance; the period of communal civilization was over.

We can affirm, then, that between the feudal and the bourgeois epoch there was contemporaneity, but not succession. Feudalism and the communes developed in parallel fashion from the beginning of the ninth century, and their first cycle of evolution ended at the same time—the close of the thirteenth century.

Emerging under favorable circumstances, the bourgeoisie created its institutions "in the dark." No over-all plan or project preceded the establishment of urban magistracies. At no time during these four hundred years of history did the patriciate or the lower classes become clearly aware of themselves and of their tendencies. Neither their political documents nor their literary works suggest the existence of social or political thought.

At a moment when the bourgeois communes had attained a sufficiently high degree of evolution to embark upon their own cultural career, they were hypnotized by the example of feudal civilization. For more than a hundred years, unconscious of their own originality, they thought of themselves in feudal terms. Only contact with ancient culture in the Italian cities enabled the bourgeoisie, after protracted searchings, to become aware of its authenticity.

53. Cf. Renaudet, *op. cit.*