

Bert de Munck, *Guilds, labour and the urban body politic: fabricating community in the Southern Netherlands, 1300–1800*

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Carolien Boender

Institute for History, Leiden University

Bert de Munck's *Guilds, labour and the urban body politic* is a rich history of guilds in the southern Low Countries between 1300–1800. The author has written a synthesis, bringing his own research into dialogue with a vast body of Dutch (and French) literature on the medieval and early modern Southern Netherlands to come to a more multi-layered interpretation of the history of guilds.

Yet, this book is not solely a historical study. As De Munck has done in previous work, he challenges the way historians study and argue about transformations in history. Confronted with what he sees as teleological or anachronistic thinking, De Munck argues that our modern conceptions of politics have obscured our interpretation of medieval and early modern politics and narrowed down our view of long-term transformations. Some researchers have even presented medieval and early modern cities as 'hotbeds of a vibrant and healthy civil society' so as to present them as the advent of modernity (p. 1). De Munck also pleads against 'monocausality' and in favour of the entanglement, lamination and 'loose ends' of historical processes, and in doing so positions his study in a broader debate on the rise of modernity, and the interpretation of the medieval and early modern period as part of this process.

Each chapter contains a different perspective on guilds. De Munck begins by questioning the privilege given to socio-economic explanations of urban revolts, emphasising their underlying cultural and ideological causes. Revolt was, according to De Munck, part of the creation of a corporative ideology, and the goal of the labouring class 'was to be included in the body politic and to enjoy privileges similar to those of the oligarchic elites' (p. 31). In the second chapter, De Munck turns to the position of guilds in the political arena of the city, investigating the influence of their communal ideology upon the formation of the urban body politic during the late medieval period. He illustrates this through an analysis of the election processes for both guild representatives and magistrates or aldermen. These elections were mixed, indirect and multi-stage and show how over time a body politic based on corporative ideology materialised. Thereafter, most cities in the southern Low Countries experienced oligarchising, which is something that previous historians have noted. Yet, De Munck argues that oligarchising was part of a broader

process: due to professionalisation and bureaucratisation, the corporative sense of politics was replaced by other conceptions of politics and participation. This is one example of the author's multi-layered explanations.

The third chapter addresses why and in what context guild regulations on, for example, product quality and apprenticeship emerged. De Munck argues that material culture is key to understanding the political economy of guilds. According to medieval and late medieval religious thought, God was present in matter. Consequently, objects bore an 'intrinsic value' (p. 146 and further). This determined the appreciation of crafted products and skilled labour. Though this, in itself, meant that skilled labourers belonged to the realm of nature rather than politics, the vanishing dichotomy between nature and artifice allowed artisans a place in the urban body politic. In short, in the late Middle Ages master status, patriarchal status and being a political subject became interwoven. In the last two chapters the author explains how these three spheres gradually drifted apart. De Munck's new insight is that changes in religious thought strengthened economic and political transformations as both the divine character of products and the sense of community, based on gathering around the body of Christ, waned in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. This book is impressive in its broad approach and careful reasoning. De Munck compares his case study on the Southern Netherlands to its Italian, German, French and northern Low Countries' counterparts, showing the transnational nature of the developments he investigates.

It is interesting to see how De Munck himself deals with the transformation to modernity bearing in mind the broader debate on the roots of modernity that this book engages with. He argues that the Middle Ages cannot serve as the cradle of modernity because of the transformations that took place between the medieval and early modern period. But he mostly leaves open the question of how the medieval and early modern periods relate to modern times. This question becomes more significant because De Munck argues in his introduction that 'the crux of the matter is that the most efficient institutional forms will mostly *not* emerge or totally erase the older ones' (p. 14). Moreover, according to the author, the past always influences to a certain extent the shape of the present. For De Munck it is, therefore, important to examine in what way pre-existing forms 'are either appropriated or *bricolaged* upon' (p. 14), and he does explain how the early modern guilds 'bricolaged' upon the legacy of their predecessors. When it comes to the next wave of transformations, between the early modern and modern period, De Munck seems to drop his perspective of the lamination of historical processes. For this wave he indicates several changes, which he qualifies as 'total' or 'fundamental' (pp. 287–9). This might be the case, because in the Southern Netherlands the revolutionary period led to more structural changes than in the northern part.

However, as recent research has shown – for instance, by Katherine Aaslestad on Hamburg, Judith Pollmann and Henk te Velde on the Northern Netherlands and Jeroen Duindam on Germany and the Dutch Republic – it is not convincing to depict the advent of modernity mainly as a rupture, precisely because of the complexity of transformations. This also applies to craft guilds during the transformation to modernity. Indeed, in the eighteenth century revolutionaries saw the guild system as outdated or a shackle to be freed from (p. 287). However, in several cities in the Northern Netherlands craft guilds existed until the end of the 1830s

and transport guilds even later. This is not to play down the rise of factories nor the changes in labour relations. Yet, the ‘survival’ of craft guilds inevitably points to the question why they apparently still supplied a need. Moreover, early nineteenth-century labour associations in the Northern Netherlands resembled guilds in their organisation, claims and cultural position in urban society. When talking about *bricolage*, the relation between the early modern and modern period seems to be complex and multi-layered as well. The consequence of De Munck’s understandable fear of indicating continuities, because of lurking teleological or anachronistic reasoning, is that on some occasions his answer to the question how the medieval and early modern period relate to the modern era remains unsatisfying.

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Elaine Chalus and Perry Gauci (editors), *Revisiting the polite and commercial people: essays in Georgian politics, society and culture in honour of Professor Paul Langford*

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Adrian Green

Department of History, Durham University

This *Gedenkschrift* by former students and colleagues celebrates the career of an Oxford historian of eighteenth-century Britain, whose scholarly legacy will be furthered by the research and reflections collected here. Paul Langford (1945–2015) was Professor of History at the University of Oxford, where he spent his entire career. On completing a doctorate supervised by John Owen and Lucy Sutherland, he published *The first Rockingham administration, 1765–66* (1973). As Tutor in History at Lincoln College, Langford taught a great many undergraduate and graduate students how to achieve a historical understanding of Britain between the Glorious Revolution of 1689 and the political and cultural crises of the American and French revolutions. Langford’s early career focused on high politics, with influential articles and books including *Walpole and the Robinocracy* (1986). He spent the 1980s amassing research for two major outputs – *A polite and commercial people, England 1727–1783* (1989) and *Public life and the propertied Englishman, 1689–1798* (1991). Langford served the wider academy in a series of prestigious offices, including General Editor of the *Writings and speeches of Edmund Burke*, but his major books are both very Oxford products. *Public life and the propertied Englishman* arose from his Ford Lectures, while *A polite and commercial people* remains a landmark in the *New Oxford history of England* series, rarely matched in its pithy summation