

BOOK REVIEWS

LYNCH, KATHERINE A. *Individuals, Families, and Communities in Europe, 1200–1800. The Urban Foundations of Western Society.* [Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy and Society in Past Time, No. 37.] Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 2003. xiii, 250 pp. Ill. £25.99; DOI: 10.1017/S0020859007012965

The ties that bind, the ties we make and that make us, and that may be unique to the West, at least in some form and magnitude – that, in a nutshell, is what this book is about. It explores how and why European urbanites formed a variety of bonds with non-family members, and the consequences of these bonds for Western civilization. These are complex issues, and indeed this is a rich book covering a wide range of topics: demographic regimes, including migration regimes, urban history, poor-relief systems, assistance within the family and within pseudo-families such as fraternities and *beguinages*, the role of women in social and economic life, ideas on the polity in general and those of the French Revolution in particular.

Casting one's net so wide, even in the best of cases, inevitably means some loss of detail and/or some loosening of a central theme. Of course, the historical examples given could be easily multiplied, but the author is an experienced hand at demographic history and social history, notably of France, and she has found a fine balance between focus and detail. Indeed, the author acknowledges that "this study makes no claims to providing an exhaustive account of community building in European society or to the history of the family's importance to that process" (p. 23). Instead, she intends to identify recurrent fundamental patterns.

The first chapter sketches the demographic regime in European cities that was conducive to forming community life. High mortality regimes left many widowed or orphaned, who could not turn to support from their families (owing to migration or to the small number of siblings alive and capable of giving support). This created the need for communal poor relief, which in continental Europe was by and large run by the churches locally, and supported by gifts from the community. Poor relief depended on the community and the community in turn relied on poor relief. Chapters 3 and 5 deal with the organization of poor relief before and during the French Revolution, which may or may not have been a watershed for charity (at least in France, as the revolutionaries were not exactly fond of the priests and the elites dispensing alms).

Chapters 2 and 4 deal with the role of women in confraternities in urban Europe and, more generally, with their place in society. Male fraternities and their female equivalents, the *beguinages*, are seen as attempt to form a family outside the family. Women's participation in relief and voluntary organizations "gave women in European towns and cities a relatively high level of autonomy in their economic and associational lives in civil society" (pp. 214–215).

The book does not discuss the rich variety of mutual associations that existed in urban and rural Europe – such as those to cover the costs of burial or illness – or the equally rich tapestry of urban cultural associations such as those devoted to reading. But it already covers enough ground as it is. In the main text as well as in the footnotes very many major works, including

recent studies, are referred to. This volume may thus also be fruitfully used to introduce students in a succinct way to a large body of literature on social life in European cities.

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HILSON, MARY. *Political Change and the Rise of Labour in Comparative Perspective. Britain and Sweden 1890–1920*. Nordic Academic Press, Lund 2006. 352 pp. Maps. S.Kr. 290; DOI: 10.1017/S0020859007022961

This study sets itself a number of complex tasks. It seeks to engage with two sets of historiographical traditions within labour history (British and Swedish), to evaluate the concept of comparative labour history, and to employ these approaches in detailed case studies of two naval dockyard towns, Portsmouth in England and Karlskrona in Sweden. What this constitutes is a very heavy agenda, daunting for any labour historian. The structure of the volume takes the reader through a general discussion of labour historiography in both countries and an evaluation and affirmation of comparative history, before embarking on detailed studies of Plymouth and Karlskrona.

The period under consideration, 1890–1920, allows for a thorough examination of the years often seen as fundamental to the formation of a “modern” labour movement in a European setting. Its linkages to earlier liberal and artisanal interests are noted in this study but Hilson also stresses the significance of the impact of World War I upon the emergence of a more powerful set of labour identities. One of the key arguments in her discussion is the rejection of an “exceptionalist” line of explanation, whereby the formation of the British or Swedish movements is compared to some abstract or generalized notion of such a development. The critique of this approach, as articulated over recent years by historians such as Blackbourn, Eley, Geary, and Kirk, is one which finds particular favour with Hilson. She seeks instead to engage with a comparative framework which explores different historiographical traditions and therefore moves away from a simplistic and mythologizing notion of national specificity based on assumptions about how a country’s political evolution ought to have taken place. As Hilson explains, her concern is far more with specific historical processes than reliance upon situations at any fixed point in time. This allows, she declares, for a much more meaningful comparative approach.

A second chapter looks in more depth at the range of writing on the emergence of organized labour movements in both countries. For Anglocentric readers, the British literature is no doubt familiar, but it is interesting to note the perhaps less well-known Swedish historiography. Comparative studies between the two countries on such themes are still relatively rare and the analysis offered here demonstrates some of the problems associated with the deterministic models of the rise of labour. Over-simplified comparisons of the different political institutional frameworks within the two countries or a narrowly conceived notion of the different ideological perspectives within each movement are rejected. Hilson is able to point out very different facets within each national experience, arguing, for example, that the British labour movement contains a radical ideological strand from its early days, similar to those of many other European countries. She is also critical of the often advanced argument that Sweden had a much less liberal political regime in the nineteenth century and that this held back the emergence of a coherent labour movement there. The emphasis, for Hilson, ought to be on the weakness of trying to identify such determining characteristics of particular national paths.