

them, the “grand and everyday changes” in which local and national polities intervened.

In this masterful, tightly woven work, Scholliers demonstrates his facility in conveying a wealth of historical information to illuminate all aspects of bread that shaped individual beliefs and experiences, corporate pursuits and obligations, as well as societal needs and wants.

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Wim Blockmans, *The Voice of the People. Political Participation before the Revolutions*, translated from the Dutch by Michiel Horn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024). 440 pp. ISBN9781032063942.

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In 1978, Wim Blockmans published a PhD dissertation on the representational institutions in the County of Flanders during the Middle Ages. In the following 45 years, Blockmans embarked on an eminently productive and successful career that included professorships in Rotterdam and Leiden, but more notably the involvement in many international projects which have given his work a distinctly comparative European perspective. Blockmans has now done us all the great service of summing up what he has learned about medieval and early modern representation in a single volume. The book was first published in Dutch in 2020 but has now been translated into English in an amended version. Out is a chapter on political participation today, but in are reflections on the development of representative institutions in especially the English colonies in Northern America, which were absent from the original text. According to Blockmans’ acknowledgements, the translator, who is based in Canada, had proposed this addition.

This book provides two fundamental contributions to that literature. In the first place, Blockmans gives us perhaps the best and most comprehensive summary of the literature on representative institutions and state-formation during the pre-modern era. It can be comprehensive, because the author is able to read an unusually large number of European languages, allowing him to bring the full range of national literatures to bear on his argument. This book well and truly covers all regions of Europe in often remarkable detail. It is an outstanding treatment of the subject, because the author offers his

readers an analytical framework for this complex history, and at the same time adds popular representation to a history that is still often presented as one in which professional politicians and bureaucrats and army generals are the only significant actors. Instead, Blockmans focuses on the possibilities for farmers and citizens to participate in decisions that were bound to affect them, often deeply.

Blockmans tells his story first as a series of episodes. From around 1100 two developments emerged. One started in the Roman Catholic Church but quickly spilled over to princely courts: councils were created, where rulers took advice from those who helped them execute their decisions. In other words, these decisions were now supported by a wider group of people. The other started in the cities, and sometimes also villages, where residents began to clamour for a say in local governance. These developments were consolidated between 1300 and 1600, when regional and national parliaments began to meet regularly, and in many places invited not only the nobility and prelates, but also the commoners to have their say. In the sixteenth century, however, two new developments started to undermine the involvement of these commoners. The Reformation encouraged rulers to become more controlling of their subjects, while at the same time the Military Revolution gave them more raw physical power and simultaneously increased the need for the extraction of more revenue from their populations. As a result, popular representation declined during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

However, these processes did not play out in the same manner and with the same intensity in all regions. Here Blockmans' comparative methodology comes into play. In his analysis, differentiation is caused by two variables: the domestic economy, shaped, in Blockmans' view, by geography, and international warfare. In this he follows the model that Charles Tilly developed in his 1990 book *Coercion, Capital and European States*. But whereas Tilly looked at institutions, Blockmans' focus is on the historical actors and especially the so-called Third Estate.

The Third Estate was the parliamentary representation of (rural) farmers and (urban) citizens, next to the clergy (First Estate) and the nobility (Second Estate). Its role depended very much on its financial and military leverage in confrontations with the other actors. It helped, in Blockmans' interpretation, that during the Middle Ages princes were in a constant struggle with the Church. During those struggles, the Church developed ideas and practices about self-rule that could also be applied to villages and towns. Feudal law provided a model

for contracts and representation that also benefited the Third Estate. Opposition against princely power was easiest in regions where the Third Estate could avail of concentrated economic power, i.e. in the most urbanized parts of Europe. By forming urban alliances, also called 'Hansa', the Third Estate could operate with greater effect. Especially in regions where the state had difficulty applying its military force, such as mountains and coastal marshlands, farming communities could likewise achieve self-rule and parliamentary representation. From this emerged, during the High and Late Middle Ages, practices and ideas of political representation that included ordinary people.

Elites were not inclined to voluntary power-sharing. They had to be forced into it. Hence, rebellions and revolutions were crucial to achieve popular representation. In line with the modern views on the topic, Blockmans presents these, not as exceptional incidents, but as part and parcel of pre-modern politics. He also demonstrates how these were not only successful in 'republican' environments (Italy, Swiss Confederation, Low Countries), but across Europe. In the long run, nonetheless, representative institutions proved durable in some areas, whereas in others they withered during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Continuity happened especially in four countries: the Swiss Confederation, the United Provinces (or Dutch Republic), England and Sweden. Two were republics, two were monarchies. The two republics were federations, where much power was devolved on regional and local institutions. Two were monarchies, with high levels of centralization. The book suggests that what united all four was their distinctive economic growth. I had the impression that a contributing factor might have been their geography, which made them difficult to invade or conquer.

A short review cannot do justice to the qualities of this book. It offers a survey as well as an interpretation of the process of state-formation in pre-modern Europe from the perspective of ordinary Europeans. As a historian, Blockmans is sensitive to variations in time and space. As a polyglot he covers all of Europe – from Russia to Ireland, and from Sweden to Sicily. The complexities of this story could easily have led to a piling of one detail upon another. Blockmans, who has been exposed to and collaborated with numerous social scientists, returns to the larger picture time and again. Therefore this book is offering, next to its superb state-of-the-art, also a launch-pad for new research and interpretations of its fascinating and nowadays also chillingly topical subject.

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