

## Book Reviews

Justin Colson and Arie van Steensel (eds.), *Cities and Solidarities. Urban Communities in Pre-Modern Europe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017). 275 p. ISBN 9781138943612.

DOI: 10.18352/tseg.1157

Themes as community, identity and belonging have become popular themes in social and economic history for the past decades. The editors of this book argue that social and economic historians have shifted to a more socio-cultural perspective. The former preoccupation with 'class' and 'elites' has in their opinion gradually been replaced by 'communities' and 'networks', moving the focus to the binding aspects of cooperation, communication and identification. This book contributes to that field, but has a twofold aim: it also aims to illustrate the possibilities of digital humanities research methods.

The central research question guiding this edited volume is 'how the configurations of these communities shaped social and economic processes, and how social and economic factors moulded the institutions, networks, spaces and ideas that constituted urban communities'. This is addressed in case studies of diverse European cities such as Zagreb, Barcelona and Norwich in the medieval and early modern period. The book, published in 2017, is based on two conference sessions – the European Social Science History Conference (ESSHC) in Vienna and the International Conference on Urban History (EAUH) in Lisbon in 2014 – in which the authors participated. The chapters focus on different themes, which can be loosely grouped in three categories according to the editors, namely the political realm, the lack of cohesion in communities (for example through migration, competition or negotiations of positions) and, lastly, the provision of public and social services of solidarity. These contributions are not ordered in a thematic or chronological way. Instead, they form a recital of separate contributions ranging from neighbourhood topography to social gifts, conflict resolution and career-making. They provide insights into the ties that bind communities, for example social ties in legal transactions, the relations between intermediary neighbourhoods and community formation, or the different sub-communities of family and kinship that functioned within larger communities.

These case studies all employ some form of digital research methods, which is one of the other aim of the volume. They illustrate how far we have come as a discipline. The myriad of methods used, such as relational databases, GIS research and social network analysis, is inspiring. Some chapters focus explicitly on the opportunities of digital humanities, like the contribution on a late medieval Brussels database, which reads more as an explanation of the database and its

uses than as a research paper like most other chapters. The volume illustrates the current possibilities rather than experimenting with new methods. It is intended as such - readers should not mistake it for a digital history guidebook. The case studies illustrate how well-suited digital methods are for analysing previously less accessible dispersed data. Framing these analyses within contextual and theoretical frameworks, they are good examples of how to employ digital history without falling in the traps of non-contextualized 'big data' analyses.

There is one important side note to make. The use of 'solidarities' in the title is somewhat confusing. This concept deserves more discussion than it gets in the book, where it is only discussed briefly in the introduction, and then again only in the context of urban poor relief in Zagreb. Solidarity could be interpreted as the willingness to support others, or the connections between people in times of duress or need. That description does not fit all chapters, and one could even dispute whether the concept even fits with poor relief. As the chapter on Brabant guild boxes shows, relief was not just charitable giving, but also functioned as a disciplining tool and a means of exclusion in communities. This is also corroborated by the research school of poor relief as social control, which argues that relief formed a measure of socio-economic manipulation of the population. Whether that should be called solidarity, deserves more (explicit) discussion.

The concepts of community and solidarity are after all not interchangeable. Instead of 'solidarity', are the editors not rather looking for the ties that bind? Did they perhaps interpret solidarity as such, as the connections that make communities? The book also shows how certain binding forces such as conflict resolution were used as an income strategy of the association, or as a way of promoting the family's reputation, uses that are further removed from the charitable altruist connotations of solidarity. Although the introduction states that 'community' is difficult to define, the chapters have one common denominator, namely the search for ties between and within groups, such as acts of inclusion (in citizenship, in guilds, in professions), in case of conflict (shared social characteristics of guarantors vis-à-vis the accused; maintaining reputation of community through internal conflict solution), or caring for the poor. These demonstrate the tensions between community as inclusion and simultaneously as exclusion.

That tension is one of the most important merits of this book. It forms a welcome contribution to the field, as benchmark publication for the tensions inherent in research of community and solidarity. It shows us how communities function as constructions and how community ties go beyond markers of professions, crafts and trades. There is much to be learned from this book, especially from some of the outstanding case studies.

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