Communes and Conflict: Urban Rebellion in Late Medieval Flanders

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Authors' Preface: Fifteen Years of Systematic Research on Communes and Conflict in the Towns of Late Medieval Flanders

Jan Dumolyn and Jelle Haemers

The research leading to this collection of essays started twenty to twenty-five years ago when – with some years between because of a slight difference in age – we each wrote a *licentiaatsverhandeling* (Master's thesis) at Ghent University with Marc Boone as our supervisor. These dissertations were, respectively, about the revolts of Bruges (1436–1438) and of Ghent (1449–1453) against Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy.[1] We then subsequently both obtained PhD positions and continued to work on the history of the 'Burgundian state' in Flanders, mostly applying the prosopographical method. Both state formation and pre-industrial collective action had become major fields of interest for medieval historians in the 1990s. The influence of Charles Tilly's historical sociology was especially strong in our department. Wim Blockmans, a Ghent graduate and a leading historian of the medieval Low Countries who, by then, had become a professor in Leiden, cooperated with the well-known American historian and social scientist using, among others, the history of Burgundian state-building as a case study. Furthermore, Blockmans' and Tilly's work also put the collective action of political contenders on the forefront of historical change, which is essential to explain the genesis of local and national power structures (both of the state apparatus, as well as of representational institutions).[2] We owe much to their legacy. In the same line of investigation, of central importance to us has been Jean-Philippe Genet's insights in medieval state-building and his analysis of the sign systems it generated, a method inspired by historical materialism as much as by semiotics.[3]

At the same time, the study of the history of the great cities of medieval Flanders had been a long-established tradition in Ghent. We were fortunate to be trained by scholars with a worldwide reputation like Adriaan Verhulst and Walter Prevenier, who were also the teachers of our own supervisor to whom they passed on this line of research. Verhulst and Prevenier were at the same time classical source-oriented Rankeans and humanist scholars with a great

1 Dumolyn 1995, published as Dumolyn 1997; Haemers 2002, published as Haemers 2004b.

2 See Tilly and Blockmans 1994, and many other publications mentioned in the bibliography.

3 For instance Genet 1992 as well as many of his later publications.

deal of imagination and a very open attitude towards young people. Eventually we would both end up as lecturers, one of us staying in Ghent, the other being employed at the University of Leuven. Also, while we developed different interests in other historical fields, and we broadened the geographical and chronological scope of our respective fields of research, we never lost our common interest in popular protest, both perhaps guided by a psychological condition making it difficult to accept authority and abuses of power in general. This includes the injustice we ourselves have done to our friends and colleagues, who have been tormented by our restless minds more than once, just as they have inspired many of our thoughts which you can read in this book. The same goes for the PhD students whom we have started to oppress at both universities for at least a decade. Fortunately, all of them tackled and rejected many of our ideas as they navigated academic life, simultaneously conforming to and challenging it.

We started our systematic study with a first article on the patterns of urban rebellion in medieval Flanders in 2005.[4] Our collaboration eventually resulted in twenty-two joint journal articles and book chapters, of which six are published in this volume (the other ones published here being individually authored by one of us). And more are certainly yet to come.[5] Some of these papers were published in volumes which are difficult to find; others here have been translated into English to make them more easily accessible. We never worked in isolation of course: many, if not most, of the ideas in this volume were discussed during conferences and workshops, or during fellowships, in among other places Oxford, Durham, York, St Andrews, Glasgow, Rome, Paris, London, Boston, New York, Santander, Seville, Gavere, Bruges, and Ghent. Not to forget the lively debates in restaurants, inns and pseudo-medieval alehouses. The discussions with colleagues led to fresh insight in many of our findings, and to new interpretations of previously published thoughts.

The gradual evolution of our ideas on the subject was the main reason why we were initially somewhat reluctant to reprint some of our pieces when it was generously suggested we do so by Andy Murray and Joannes van den Maagdenberg for Brill's Historical Materialism series. Although some of our opinions on various matters evolved over time, we did not rewrite the chapters of this book. Only very minimal changes were made: the correction of some errors, an exceptional bibliographical addition here and there. The result is that this volume is inevitably not a coherent monograph, which would have approached

4 Dumolyn and Haemers 2005.

5 See the bibliography. The latest one is Dumolyn and Haemers 2020, in the *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, which will also appear in an online English version.

the problem of Flemish medieval urban revolt with a more focused set of viewpoints and methodologies. We do not think that this is a problem, as the book rather shows a quest of more than fifteen years, looking for novel ways to study the phenomenon of medieval urban revolt, in dialogue with other historians and under the influence of the social and political sciences, law, literary theory, cognitive psychology, linguistics and other disciplines.

The focus on Flemish cities, and by extension also on the cities of the other Netherlandish principalities, also including what is now northern France, might seem a limited national point of view. However, we always felt that it was justified to focus on our own homeland, albeit with a constant concern to compare it to other parts of medieval Europe. After all, this region was one that was exceptionally urbanized and economically developed during the medieval period and that made it also into a laboratory of political change. We also brought in comparative perspectives studying the secondary literature on revolts in medieval France, Germany, Italy, Spain and England, but nevertheless decided to continue focussing on one place and its rich source material in depth. In some ways we were also fundamentally challenged by the grand synthesis by Sam Cohn, who had compared Flanders with France and Italy and was working at the same time as us.[6] We agreed with most of what was in his book but certainly also opposed some of his points of view. In fact, it was probably a great deal thanks to Sam that we continued this path so steadfastly, maybe with the unconscious determination to refute what we thought were inaccuracies in his work for, in spite of his vast knowledge, he has not mastered Dutch and did not access a large number of sources and literature in our language. More often his work was inspiring, but we believed could have been explored with greater depth and clarity. Soon, our 'opponent', with his sweeping sense of generalization and brilliancy in seeing the bigger historical picture, also became a good friend with whom we could exchange many sarcastic observations, mostly – and preferably – in less rainy countries than Scotland and Belgium.

Likewise, together with the research of colleagues such as John Watts, Patrick Lantschner and Christian Liddy, our approach challenges the far too often accepted 'national uniqueness' of popular protest. More than ever before, the revolts which we study in this book have been approached from a comparative and international perspective, far away from the focus of 'insularity' that torments the historiography (and even the minds of some inhabitants) of strongly centralised states such as, for instance, England or France. Perhaps the fact that the Low Countries are, since the Middle Ages, a busy crossroad of people,

6 Cohn 2006.

languages, and ideas, has inspired us more than we realise in this comparative approach. Furthermore, the multi-lingual environment of Belgian academic life has been very fruitful to our work because interpreting discourse is at the centre of historical work. 'Though they look often similar, the same words mean different things in different languages and different contexts', as Susan Reynolds once gently reminded us on the Piazza Navona in Rome, after a confrontation with the French eloquence of Claude Gauvard during one of the many occasions Jean-Philippe Genet invited us into the 'École Française'. The mobilising power of words is enormous, as Peter Burke also taught us, in particular when raising socialist (considering the location, some would say 'subversive') songs with the late folklorist Roy Palmer at High Table in Hertford College in Oxford. Such hilarious international encounters, too many to mention here, and their stimulating discussions about the interpretation of language, for instance during long evening (or night) dinners at Spanish tables, have been essential to our work. We are sure that this international collaboration will continue to inspire us in the near future and will survive nationalist tendencies such as Brexit or the dire consequences of a pseudo-medieval plague that hit Europe at the moment when we wrote this introduction.

During these fifteen years of working together there have been clear lines of development in our work, although parts of our focus have also remained the same. The emphasis on the craft guilds as the main organisations mobilizing for popular protest in the medieval cities and towns of Flanders and some other parts of the Low Countries and north-western Europe, for instance, or the role played by the 'patrician' merchant class, have been classic features in any narrative on the political history of the later middle ages since the nineteenth century and they obviously also remain present in our work. 'Political guilds' and 'guild politics' were fundamental in the politically, economically and culturally advanced county of Flanders. We were certainly not the first historians to point this out.[7] But perhaps what we were able to show is how politically and socially self-conscious the artisan class was, especially in the great textile towns such as Ghent, the most important centre of the artisanal industry in medieval Europe, or Bruges, the commercial metropolis of northwest Europe. Wageworkers, unskilled proletarians and marginal groups in the medieval town certainly also played a role in revolts, but it was the 'middle classes' of petty commodity producers which were always dominant in the alliances that rebels formed.

In this sense, without using a lot of theoretical jargon, we have always remained inspired by undogmatic readings of historical materialism. Conflicts

7 Wyffels 1951; Xhayet 1997; Boone 2010.

between various social groups were essential in the medieval town, though wage relations were not the only or even the most determining factor in these struggles. The principal economic sector of medieval Flanders, the cloth industry, was organized as a complex matrix of power and interdependency between merchant capital, small producers and various groups of wage workers, male and female. Also local producers and retailers, as well as disgruntled parts of the dominant merchant and landowner classes, could participate in rebellious coalitions. At the same time, we have also been fundamentally inspired by Weberian historical sociology, pointing to the importance of types of legitimate authority, for instance, and by a general *Annales* style of structuralism that combines such various influences, including also the importance of demographic movements.

All this, of course, was also not very revolutionary or innovative from our side. The two pioneers of the study of medieval revolt, Michel Mollat and Philippe Wolff, had in fact already combined a *marxisant* view on socio-economic struggles with a Weberian ideal-type approach and an interest in economic movements and cycles.[8] Moreover, the combination of these theoretical influences was always rather easily compatible with older approaches to the study of revolt, including that of our own empiricist 'Ghent school' of medieval urban history. This tradition is still influenced by the fundamental work of Henri Pirenne, a genius historian not because everything he wrote is still valid but because of his sense for grand narratives and synthesis, followed in this regard by Hans van Werveke and Jan Dhondt with their emphasis on technical source analysis and the auxiliary sciences, as well as by traditional insights from legal and 'constitutional' history. Other of his followers and successors, such as François-Louis Ganshof, Egied Strubbe, and Raoul Van Caenegem, made us conscious of the impact of law and custom. And to also appreciate Jelle's now home institution of Leuven: we also owe much to the robust scholarship of twentieth-century historians like Jan Van Houtte and Émile Lousse, on economic history, on 'constitutional' principles, and corporatist thought, not to forget the diversity of topics studied by the late Raymond Van Uytven, particularly about the social, cultural and economic history of towns, a brilliant and authentic scholar who also always supported us.

This more materialist approach, the study of socio-economic causes of revolt, of the role of craft guilds in organizing medieval townsfolk, of states and institutions increasing their power and most of all their capacity for violence – all these are classic features of the debate on contentious politics during the

8 Mollat and Wolff 1970.

Middle Ages and they are and will remain present in our work as well. However, we also derived additional perspectives from the social sciences, notably in our work on networks and factions in medieval popular politics. In itself this attention to 'vertical solidarities', as emphasized by conservative historians such as Guy Fourquin, Jacques Heers and, for the Flemish case, David Nicholas, was also not new in itself, but perhaps some of the insights we brought in from social anthropology were, including those of Jeremy Boissevain and Pierre Bourdieu, who allow for a combination of 'class' and 'faction'.

But, perhaps most importantly, there has certainly been a 'cultural' and 'linguistic' turn in our work as well as a 'performative' one, and neither have we escaped the wave of interest in 'memory studies' and even 'emotions' in history. Following the example of the great generation of *Annales* medievalists like Le Goff and Duby, we soon turned our interest 'from the cellar to the attic', from 'base' to 'superstructure' as it were. How else were we to discover what medieval rebels actually thought and said than to focus on their own discursive production? There was much to discover there and apart from historians like Richard Trexler and our friend Peter Arnade, inspired by the interpretative anthropology of Clifford Geertz, who had emphasized the ritual forms of medieval protest, almost no cultural approaches to the phenomenon had been published, be it for Flanders or for other European regions. This new research agenda implied a thorough engagement with historical lexicography and semantics, as well as with more recent perspectives on the dialectical relation between language and society. Notably the classic approaches to hegemonic ideologies by Antonio Gramsci and James C. Scott's more recent elaborations of Gramscian thought, Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of dialogism in the sign, Dell Hymes' sociolinguistics and Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis all influenced our approach a great deal. In addition, studies on collective and social memories by Maurice Halbwachs and many other scholars (notably Chris Wickham and James Fentress) have taught us to take care of the selection criteria medieval people used when writing down (or 'forgetting') their memories.

Our interest in subversive language also meant that we looked for new types of sources apart from the traditional charters, account books and chronicles. Thus we started using learned legal arguments, rhetoricians' plays and poems, folk songs, and even names themselves. Could we distinguish 'urban ideologies', 'artisan ideologies', or 'state ideologies' in these discourses? Could we also consider forms of violence, ritual types of mobilization and even customary law as languages, in a general social-semiotic approach? And what about the relations between 'memories' or 'emotions' of rebellion to the dominant ideological framework of the time? These were the main issues we have tried to

develop. Most of all we feel that we have been able to show that oppositional discourse was not always concealed muttering in the clandestine sphere with, as a following step, probably an outbreak of uncontrolled, indiscriminate and politically uninformed rebellious violence, but that the talk of popular politics was often uttered out in the open or written down in petitions asking for change. In the same way that Sam Cohn made clear once and for all that popular collective actions were part and parcel of daily medieval politics, especially in the urban environment, we have made a plea to consider subversive speech acts as something equally ubiquitous.[9] The ideology and political control of the leading elites were often less hegemonic than is usually tacitly supposed when it comes to medieval society.

But most of all, we insist that languages of opposition, dissent and revolt should always be studied in conjunction with material realities and social relations: our approach is certainly not a 'postmodern' or constructivist one in the sense that only these cultural and semiotic forms would matter. Once again: a classic empiricist source-based approach as well as a materialist point of departure, grounded in the economy and in power relations, have always remained at the core of our work. And in fact, perhaps now is the time to return to some of these older approaches that have recently been neglected, such as the socio-economic frameworks that determined revolts, including classic analysis of relations of production, wage labour etc. And certainly, other topics need more elaboration as well, notably a gender history of medieval revolt, a field in which especially our PhD students have taken some steps.[10]

And as we have said, our opinions also evolved on some subjects and we would formulate some things differently now than they are printed here. Apart from some errors and details nothing fundamentally has been changed in the chapters that follow and they should all be considered in their original year of publication. On some questions we now have somewhat different opinions. For instance, in 2005 we wrote that medieval Flemish rebels almost never demanded structural changes to society; they just wanted concrete improvements in everyday life (see Chapter 1 in the present volume). Clearly, whatever social tensions Flemish rebellions reflected, rebels almost never attacked an entire social class or fundamentally attempted to overthrow the existing social formation. We stay firm on that, but we disagree now that rebels primarily focused on the defence and restoration of ancient liberties or privileges, striving for an

9 See Chapter 12 in the present volume, and Dumolyn and Haemers 2015; Dumolyn and Haemers 2018a and b; Haemers and Demeyer 2019; Vrancken 2017; Haemers and Lecuppre-Desjardin 2020; Eersels and Haemers, eds 2020.

10 Haemers and Delameillieure 2017; Demets 2021.

idealized 'golden age in the past', with an ideology of renovation, not of innovation. This might sometimes have been the case, but on other occasions rebels made truly 'progressive claims' as well, and certainly in late medieval Flanders they fundamentally modified its political culture.

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la politique communale en Flandre médiévale', an article originally published in *Territoires, lieux et espaces de la révolte XIVe–XVIIIe siècle* (2017). The Freie Universität Berlin and the *Journal of Dutch Literature* have permitted the reproduction of 'Political Poems and Subversive Songs. The Circulation of "Public Poetry" in the Late Medieval Low Countries', which appeared in the aforementioned journal in 2015. Oxford Academic Journals have allowed the reproduction of two articles: '"A Bad Chicken was Brooding": Subversive Speech in Late Medieval Flanders', a work that initially appeared in *Past & Present* in 2012; and 'Factionalism and State Power in the Flemish Revolt (1482–92)', which was first published in *Journal of Social History* (2009). Taylor & Francis allowed us to reproduce three articles. These are 'Social Memory and Rebellion in Fifteenth-Century Ghent', a work that initially appeared in the journal *Social History* in 2011; 'Patterns of Urban Rebellion in Medieval Flanders', a work that appeared in *Journal of Medieval History* in 2005; and '"Let Each Man Carry on with his Trade and Remain Silent": Middle-class Ideology in the Urban Literature of the Late Medieval Low Countries', which was published in *Cultural and Social History* in 2013. The University of Seville gave permission for 'The Vengeance of the Commune: Sign Systems of Popular Politics in Medieval Bruges', a work that originally appeared in 2014 in the collected volume *La comunidad medieval como esfera publica*. Wiley-Blackwell and the editors of *History: The Journal of the Historical Association* have allowed us to republish 'The "Terrible Wednesday" of Pentecost: Confronting Urban and Princely Discourses in the Bruges Rebellion of 1436–8', a work that appeared in their journal in 2007.