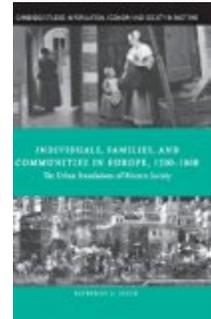




Katherine A. Lynch. *Individuals, Families and Communities in Europe, 1200-1800: The Urban Foundations of Western Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xiii + 250 pp. \$28.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-64541-6; \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-64235-4.

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Creating Communities in Medieval and Early Modern Europe

In this unusual study, Katherine Lynch offers a broad and complex argument about the nature of community in the urban centers of medieval and early modern Europe. Her goal is to investigate “European family and social life by examining families and their members against a background of other types of relationships and institutions that have long typified western Europe” (p. 1). Lynch is particularly interested in exploring the role of individuals in creating and maintaining their communities, many of which were modeled on church institutions. The purpose of these communities was to supplement the kinship ties that were more tenuous in Europe’s urban centers than in rural areas. By including the family in her analysis, Lynch hopes to offer a new understanding of the place of women in pre-modern Europe. Although women were denied a role in urban politics, their work and participation in the life of the community gave them a vital role in public life.

As she notes in the introduction, a study of such temporal breadth is quite unusual, but the logic behind her decision to take this approach is compelling. Her goal is not to examine the changing nature of European communities during these centuries, but to explore the continuities in family and community history over the *longue durée*. Unfortunately (and ironically) the work itself suffers from a serious lack of continuity: after dedicating the first four chapters of the book to the period from 1000-1650 and covering all of western Europe, Lynch makes a sudden and jarring transition to eighteenth-century France, discussing government efforts to create a na-

tional community during the Revolution. Despite this rather awkward end to the book, there is much of value here for historians of gender and society in pre-modern Europe.

The ambition inherent in an exploration of family and community throughout Europe and over a period of six centuries is clear, and presents a number of serious challenges, not least of which is mastering an enormous body of secondary literature. And it is here that Lynch is most successful. In the course of the first four chapters, she deftly synthesizes local studies from across Europe, and provides a valuable overview of the literature on community and family in the urban environment. Lynch opens with a broad overview of the urban environment, and the story she tells is well known to scholars of the medieval and early modern periods: urban mortality meant that a city’s population could only be sustained through migration. Women generally worked in a domestic setting, and while integral to local economies, they were often excluded from skilled professions. After laying this groundwork, Lynch offers a number of striking comparisons that are the signature of this book. She compares the experience of working women in northern and southern Europe, and concludes that due to cultural and economic differences, “single, and perhaps also married, women enjoyed greater legal and physical autonomy in towns and cities of northern Europe than in the south” (p. 51). Lynch also explores changes in women’s labor over time, arguing that women did best in the wake of demographic crises, when they were able to fill positions traditionally

held by men. As the population recovered, however, they once again were forced into more marginal employment.

In chapter 2, Lynch argues that “the medieval Church was a fruitful source of ideas and organizational models that laymen and lay women ... would use to construct extrafamilial forms of community life” (p. 68). The most dramatic example of this is the rise of “beguines,” groups of devout women who drew on the model provided by Europe’s burgeoning mendicant orders to create communities on the limen between the secular and religious worlds. In many ways, beguine communities resembled convents, but most came to the community voluntarily as adults rather than children, and they remained in control of their (often substantial) personal estates even after joining. More common than beguinages were the urban confraternities. According to Lynch, medieval confraternities (which should not be confused with all-male professional organizations) provided men and women with both a sense of community, and a source of spiritual and material support vital in an unfamiliar urban environment, often far from rural kin. Not surprisingly, Lynch finds that while both communities had religious origins, they were transformed by the laity to meet their own particular ends.

Lynch then continues her exploration of the relationship between religious and civic institutions by examining the development of poor relief and the formation of urban communities. Drawing on the work of Abram de Swaan, Lynch argues that poor relief was not created by pre-existing urban communities, but that the communal institutions came into existence in order to meet the needs of the poor.[1] The medieval period saw increasing lay involvement in poor relief which, in turn, led to the creation of civic and parochial bodies to oversee its distribution. While some historians have argued that this signals the secularization of poor relief, Lynch convincingly argues that “laicization” is a better term, for the civic communities accepted the religious assumptions underlying their efforts, and often worked hand-in-hand with church officials. The problem of poor relief became even more complicated in the sixteenth century, as Protestant rejection of the doctrine of good works and intercessory prayers undermined the spiritual calculus behind charitable giving. In cities with a strong Calvinist presence, questions of community were even more problematic, as doctrinaire religious leaders battled more pragmatic civic officials over the distribution of relief. The former argued that charity raised by a given church should be limited to members of that religious community, while the latter quite rightly saw this as an assault on the civic commu-

nity.

Chapter 4 continues the discussion of the Reformation, and enters into debates over its effects on women. While Lynch notes that Protestant emphasis on household order undermined the status of working women by confining them to the domestic sphere, she also argues that these changes were accentuated by broader economic and demographic forces. During the early modern period, many guilds worked with civic officials to exclude women from lucrative professions, and an oversupply of labor in many cities led to increased hostility towards working women even among poorer journeymen. Taken together, these factors led to the feminization of poverty, particularly among unmarried women. While this chapter is satisfying up to this point, it is here that Lynch’s argument loses much of its force. After this excellent discussion of the effects of the Protestant Reformation on women and family life, one would hope for a corresponding examination of the impact of the Catholic Reformation on domestic life in southern Europe. Instead, Lynch explores the role of convents in the distribution of charity and the tensions that could develop between a woman’s family and her religious house. While this discussion is stimulating in its own right, the two sections are clearly incommensurable, and it is hard to see what larger point has been made.

In the fifth and final chapter, Lynch makes a startling methodological and temporal transition, introducing analysis of primary sources for the first time, and taking the reader from seventeenth-century Europe to Revolutionary France. Here Lynch examines efforts by the National Assembly and subsequent governments to create familial bonds among all citizens. During the early years of the Revolution, there was a deliberate effort by the National Assembly to de-institutionalize the poor and reintegrate them with their families and communities, resulting in a “family-oriented civic approach to poor assistance” (p. 176). More significantly for the modern period, poor relief was used as a means to create a national community, as poverty became a national rather than a parochial issue. While there is no doubting the importance of issues of national identity in Revolutionary France, it is not entirely clear how this part of Lynch’s argument relates to all that has come before. The leap from Reformation to Revolution, coupled with a shift in focus from Europe to France, leaves the reader wondering what happened between 1650 and 1789, and how the French experience compared to the rest of Europe.

Despite these thematic and temporal discontinuities,

Individuals, Families and Communities in Europe has a number of strengths. For newcomers to urban or family history during the medieval and early modern periods, it offers a succinct overview of a vast body of literature. For specialists, Lynch's exploration of the relationship between poor relief, the family, and civic order is fascinating. And for the period prior to the Reformation, Lynch fruitfully compares the experience of women in northern and southern Europe, and demonstrates the

importance of church institutions to the foundation and maintenance of secular communities.

Note

[1]. Abram de Swaan, *In Care of the State: Health Care, Education and Welfare in Europe and in the USA in the Modern Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

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