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Published on H-War (November, 2023)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

In his recent book, *Citizens without Nations: Urban Citizenship in Europe and the World, c. 1000-1789*, Maarten Prak reevaluates the origins of European citizenship. His fundamental argument is that the idea and practice of citizenship have a long history in Europe, especially in urban settings, and did not just begin with the Age of Revolutions. The book is “a comparative study of different historical forms of citizenship and their impact both in particular polities and on the wider world” (p. 18). For Prak, it is clear from the evidence that ordinary citizens in premodern urban areas participated actively in political life, and that the French Revolution destroyed elements of local citizenship forms and initially made Europe less democratic, not more democratic (p. 5, emphasis mine). This follows a Tocquevillian argument that the French Revolution strengthened national government against local governmental practice. Therefore, for Prak, to best understand the development of a variety of citizenship practices, we need to include a study of premodern and early modern versions of local citizenship in addition to the national idea of citizenship that grew out of the revolutionary period. Prak argues that the older forms of urban citizenship were not as bad as the revolutionaries claimed and that the revolutionary national citizenship was not as perfect and not as far-reaching as contemporaries believed.

Prak claims that the struggle over early citizenship was consistently evolving in these urban areas. He makes the fundamental argument that between roughly one thousand and eighteen hundred urban citizens in Europe could tap into a similar set of institutions. However, for Prak, the premodern European model of urban citizenship was not as widespread as previously thought and is only found in its complete form in the three exceptional areas of Italy, the Low Countries, and England (e.g., p. 302). Rather than using later national boundaries, others have pointed to the band of urban areas of Europe stretching from Italy through the Low Countries and extended to England, but this band of mostly medium-size towns could include Swiss towns, Mack Walker’s German...
Hometowns of the Rhineland, and the towns of eastern France. These towns drove the development of urban citizenship practices, an “urban republicanism” of the premodern world. These towns also successfully incubated thriving economic practices. In short, Prak argues that urbanization was a proxy for economic and social development.

The book compiles an impressive breadth of research into a variety of urban settings and practices. It is more of an overview of existing secondary research than Prak’s own primary research on a global level. It would be almost impossible for an individual historian to get at all the local research necessary to avoid a top-down view of citizenship practices and really home in on the actions of local urban residents across Europe, although Prak, at appropriate moments, integrates his own research focused mostly on Dutch citizenship practices. Furthermore, Prak seeks to broaden the historiography by including sociological studies and work by political scientists.

Prak divides his sweeping book into three parts. Part 1 examines the nature of citizenship in European towns prior to the modern universal democratic era. Part 2 shifts to a structural look at the impact on social processes in these urban areas, while part 3 takes a brief look at citizenship practices in Asia and the Americas. In his chapters, Prak uses a practice-oriented approach to demonstrate that early modern urban republicanism was more than just an idea. Indeed, the practice of premodern citizenship offered more equality in rights, according to Prak, while offering less equality in participation than the idea of citizenship developed during the revolutionary age. With this practical approach he is able to focus on local conditions in the towns and to use medium-size towns to examine the relationship between local and national governance. Prak takes this perspective in order to test Max Weber’s thesis about the nature of European citizenship. This focus on “ordinary people” and their role in early modern politics follows on Wayne te Brake’s study although Prak expands the geographic and chronological scope of the examination.[1]

Prak’s practice-oriented approach goes through the stages of leading urban examples. In part 1 he tells the story of citizen agency. His chapters focus on the political, economic, and military domains of citizenship and look at governmental models, guilds, confraternities, social welfare charities, and other civic institutions and how they work in order to examine the role of urban citizens in their own governance. For Prak, the greatest impact of formal citizenship was access to the guilds of the town and to elective office. However, in addition to the different types of possible citizenship (inherited, purchased, nonresidential, performed), plenty of these citizen practices were available to noncitizen residents as well (with the exception of office holding). There was a balance between the collective civic interests and the individual members of the formal citizenry. As Prak explains and emphasizes, the distinctions between formal and nonformal citizenship were messy in practice even if there were clear theoretical divides.

On an economic level, guilds often drove development. Most often the guilds regulated themselves, and membership in the guilds implied membership in the wider civic community, making them quasi-political institutions as well as economic institutions. In fact, in the northern and southern Netherlands (as well as some other towns such as Zurich), this was an explicit relationship. While in many cases the urban elites dominated the guilds as well as city government and office holding, the elites in these developing urban societies recognized the need to promote the entire civic community, and their citizens promoted public welfare and charity through guilds, confraternities, and other social welfare institutions as well (ch. 4). For example, the urban elites had a stake in prioritizing poor relief in order to
maintain public order, health, and the labor market.

While the guilds remained a key feature of citizenship and urban republicanism in premodern Europe, so did the idea of citizen military service. The classical idea of the citizen soldier did not die out only to be resurrected by the French Revolution’s *levee en masse*, much like the French Revolution did not invent citizen democracy. Rather, the political importance of militias remained throughout the period under study even if their military role became less effective. The civic militias served as spokesmen for the civil community and played a political role in serving as a vehicle for citizen agency since the authorities listened to armed citizens.

Overall, part 1 outlines emerging urban communities across Europe and how they involved citizens in local governance in regulating their own economies, organizing welfare, public order, and civic involvement. This fluctuated across time and space, but largely these civic arrangements lasted from central Middle Ages to the end of the old regime. Part 2 of the book, on the other hand, shifts from the purely local to an institutional emphasis that connects to the way states are organized and which structures are open to civic involvement. In part 2, Prak turns to a chronological study of the structural processes of the three most successful phases of urban citizenship: the city-states of Italy from the eleventh to the fourteenth century, the urban federations of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Low Countries, and parliamentary rule in post-Reformation England. He adds a final chapter of the section on the Holy Roman Empire and east-central Europe, where urbanization was much less frequent than in the emphasized examples.

The developments Prak highlights occurred more or less simultaneously in different places. In Italy urban growth and economic expansion happened within the context of political tension between the pope and the Holy Roman emperor. This growth saw communes transform into city-states as leaders of territorial states sought alliances with urban elites and ordinary citizens. With these three exceptional cases of urban development, local contingency played an important role. There was a unique environment in Italy, which included a long-standing network of towns, the importance of the Roman Catholic Church, and landowners who were urban residents, which led to a strong connection between town and countryside, and the fact that the Holy Roman emperor had mostly moved to Germany and removed himself from the Italian political arena. These factors allowed the Italian city-states to develop modes of self-rule.

In the Netherlands, the Dutch Golden Age is linked with prosperity and urbanization. In many ways the Dutch revolt against Spanish rule was an aristocratic rebellion with urban citizens participating, producing the Dutch Republic based on the Union of Utrecht, which was a treaty among towns. Thus citizenship was at the core of the Dutch Republic. In the northern Netherlands, citizenship was a local institution that was widespread. According to Prak 50 percent of the urban population had citizenship rights (p. 191). Therefore, the urban elites (regents) were vulnerable to political pressure from well-organized middle classes. These middle-class citizens used civic organizations to shape local politics by means of elections, petitions, meetings, and other modes of participation.

All of Prak’s exceptional urbanized examples (Italy, the Netherlands, and England) managed to align the interests of cities and states, town and nation. Elsewhere there was a lack of coordination of urban interests, most often because of local factors (ch. 9). Certainly the Reformation mattered since religious affiliations challenged political solidarities. However, in areas that demonstrated a greater degree of centralized political power, towns became weaker and princes were stronger, which made urban citizenship less important.
since it could not affect national policies. At a fundamental level, citizenship was a mechanism in Europe for coordinating actions between individuals and the authorities in charge of a local or national community. For Prak, the basic features of urban citizenship were uniform across Europe, but the effects of these features were not uniform. There were different ways to connect the local to the national and this explains temporal and geographic variations.

In his last chapter, Prak provides an introduction to a global look at premodern citizenship. Prak’s decision to focus on the practice of citizenship, and not just the legal forms, pays off in this section. Previous attempts to think about legal citizenship on a global level fall apart as a comparison, but Prak demonstrates that focusing on practice can let us use both Asian and American examples to compare to European customs. In this case, Prak shows that citizenship existed in China and the Ottoman lands. In the context of the New World, Prak argues that there are differences in the lands of the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British Empires. He demonstrates that both local circumstances (including the forms of the imperial power) and native traditions affected the practice of citizenship in the New World. Prak’s definitions of North and South America do not line up with current US definitions of the continents, but he is actually arguing about cultural zones and that Mexico as part of Latin America and the Spanish Empire developed different patterns than the British areas of North America.

Prak’s successfully demonstrates the varied modes of citizenship that existed before the French Revolution and corrects the historiography that suggests all modern citizenship was developed during the revolutionary age rather than that there were varied paths of citizenship before the late eighteenth century, during the revolutionary period, and after. He hopes that this course correction will enable us to reconsider how we think about issues of citizen participation in government in our own period and to solve some of our societal problems that have developed by thinking too narrowly about potential democratic forms of government.

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