

## Words and Deeds. Bottom-up Initiatives in the Making of Late Medieval Urban Politics

This workshop reconsiders the involvement of urban commoners in politics during the Late Middle Ages (13th-15th centuries). In recent decades medievalists have shed new light on the drive of common people to gain a political voice. Initially scholars argued that the image of the violent, uncontrolled or even anarchistic uprisings in the late middle ages needed nuance. Building on the work of Thompson and Hobsbawm ('History from Below'), these scholars demonstrated that protesters were often privileged citizens who used sophisticated discourse and structured forms of 'collective action', as Charles Tilly termed it, to pursue common interests. Insurgents did not wish to overthrow existing governmental institutions; they demanded concrete changes in their everyday lives and acquisition of rights of representation in existing political institutions. The fact that commoners wished to be included in these institutions instead of destroying them led Peter Blickle to conclude that political change and institutional reforms did not occur exclusively from the top down, but within a wider process involving participation of the *Gemeinde* as well. In the next phase, several case-studies demonstrated that princes and subjects negotiated on a frequent basis and not only during times of dissent. Practices like petitioning created a continuous dialogue between the rulers and the ruled. In addition, subjects were often successful in these negotiations: in late medieval France and the fifteenth-century Low Countries, almost half of princely legislation resulted from earlier petitions composed by subjects. In the cities, the involvement of commoners in political affairs often was even more institutionalized. In many Western European towns, commoners gained rights of political participation, either through rebellion or diplomacy. Research showed that the requests of these 'commoners' could also initiate ordinances composed by urban governments. However, as several scholars argue, this does not imply that violent confrontations between rulers and ruled were not important. Violent confrontations were both parallel and connected to the wider polity in which they were situated. The use of violence was only an intensification and acceleration of political processes already happening in late medieval towns.

Historians often use the term 'popular politics' to refer to the political actions of urban residents, whether violent or not. Yet this umbrella term for all kinds of political activity taking place in different social, political and institutional contexts blurs the distinction between the structural and the incidental. Furthermore, historians' traditional focus on collective action, revolt and the accompanying violence has hindered their understanding of commoners' intentions as they tried to influence urban politics. Therefore, this workshop will focus on the alternative ideas commoners held on the government of society ('contentious thought') to ascertain their contributions to governmental practices. We invite speakers to think about (one of) the following questions. First, it would be useful to specify the identity of the actors. Who were these commoners who took part in political bottom-up processes and interactions with the urban government? What was their background, and why did the authorities consider them influential enough to be partners in negotiations? Secondly, the degree of their political involvement needs to be discussed. Although there are many isolated cases demonstrating that bottom-up initiatives took place, were the letters, petitions and complaints of urban commoners recurring phenomena or rather exceptional? In any case, we need to determine which events motivated these petitions, in other words: what circumstances triggered commoners to petition urban governors? Thirdly, the commoners' agenda should be reconsidered. What did they want to

change, and why? How did this relate to the policies carried out by the council? Did commoners demand far-reaching changes or mere subtle adaptations to regular urban policies? While demands obviously served the petitioners' interests, did some of their requests also perhaps aim at changing urban society as a whole? Was there a specific 'political program' desired by commoners throughout Europe? Lastly, we want to study the political ideas that inspired these people to take up the pen (and later the sword) against the urban authorities. With these questions, the workshop will juxtapose scholarship on the concrete goals of commoners with studies on the mental world behind the commoners' contention. Since scholars increasingly remark on the similarities in the desires and demands of commoners from different parts of Europe, this workshop has the potential to retrace the common ideas circulating in Europe and inspiring these people. In short, the studies presented at this workshop can help us determine the extent to which there was a distinct European pattern of political participation by commoners.

## PROGRAM

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### Thursday 16 March

9u Coffee

9h15 Introduction by **Jelle Haemers** (KU Leuven)

SESSION 1: *Institutional bargaining* (chair: Graeme Small, Durham University)

9h30 **Sofia Gustafsson** (Linköpings Universitet)

*Ruling with the consent of the burgher community. Possible reasons for the creation of extended councils in late medieval towns in Northern Europe*

10h00 **François Otchakovsky-Laurens** (Aix-Marseille Université)

*'L'Universitas Massilie, une assemblée de toute la ville ?' Jeux de pouvoir et tensions sociales à Marseille au XIVe siècle*

10h30 Discussion

11h Coffee Break

SESSION 2: *Petitions and political communication* (chair: Jan Dumolyn, Universiteit Gent)

11h30 **Alma Poloni** (Università di Pisa)

*Petitions and the dialogue of power in Italian cities in the fourteenth century*

12h **Jesús Ángel Solórzano Telechea** (Universidad de Cantabria)

*Commoners' petitions and political rights from the Mediterranean to Atlantic Spain (14th-15th centuries)*

12h30 Discussion

13h Lunch

SESSION 3: *Craft guilds in urban politics* (chair: Marc Boone, Universiteit Gent)

14h **Ben Eersels** (KU Leuven)

*Decreed with the consent of all crafts: the influence of craft guilds on urban policies in late medieval Brabant and Liège*

14h30 **Dominique Adrian** (Université de Lorraine)

*Les métiers, leurs dirigeants, leur membres face au conseil dans les villes d'Empire (XIVe-XVe siècle)*

15h **Sabine von Heusinger** (Universität zu Köln)

*Giving Artisans a Voice: The Political Participation of Guilds in German Towns*

15h30 Discussion

16h Coffee break

SESSION 4: *Parties, Conflicts and Compromises* (chair: Jelle Haemers, KU Leuven)

16h30 **Christoph Mauntel** (Universität Heidelberg)

*'À bonne fin' – The Struggle for the Common Good in Paris, 1355-1358*

17h **Eliza Hartrich** (University of Sheffield)

*Whose Record? Social Dynamics of Power in English and Irish Municipal Texts, 1300-1500*

17h30 Discussion

18u30 Drinks & Diner

## Friday 17 March

SESSION 5: *Commoners and the 'Communitas'. Discourses, ideas and collective actions*  
(chair: Jelle Haemers, KU Leuven/ Elodie Lecuppre-Desjardin, Université de Lille 3, *tbc*)

- 9h30 **Pablo Gonzalez Martin** (University of Oxford)  
*'In the presence of the commonalty'. Direct participation of the commons in decision making. Tournai, York, and Burgos in the late middle ages*
- 10h **Claire Judde Delarivière** (Université de Toulouse 2)  
*'Signoria, giustizia, bene comune'. How did ordinary people talk about politics in Renaissance Venice?*

10h30 Coffee Break

- 11h **Beatriz Majo Tomé** (Universidad de Valladolid)  
*Discourse and collective actions of popular groups in Castilian towns before the revolt of the Comuneros*

11h30 Discussion

12h Conclusions

12h30 Lunch

13h30 City walk in Leuven (optional)

## VENUE

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*Collegium Veteranorum*  
Room 02.10, Romerozaal  
Sint-Michielsstraat 2-4, 3000 Leuven

## ENROLLMENT

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Participation is free, but those who wish to have lunch are asked to pay a fee of 20 euros on arrival. Please register by e-mail. For registration and more information:  
[ben.eersels@kuleuven.be](mailto:ben.eersels@kuleuven.be).

