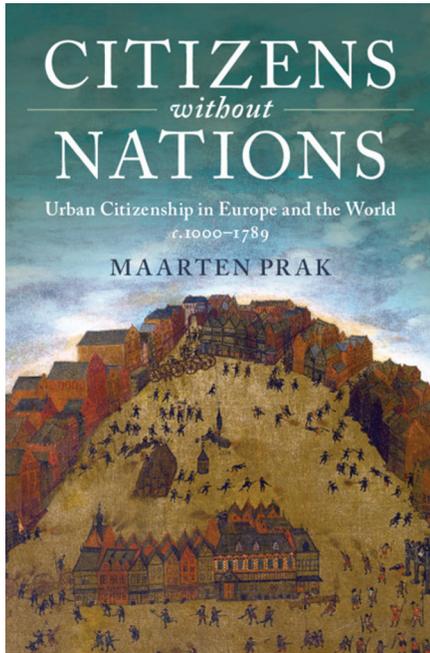


## Review

Maarten Prak, *Citizens without Nations. Urban Citizenship in Europe and the World, c. 1000-1789*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 442 pp. ISBN 9781107504158.



This is a brilliant and provocative book, in which Maarten Prak opens a whole new window on the European city in the pre-modern era, and aims to put its political development in a comparative, global context. Clearly structured, and written with verve and analytical force, the study fuses wide-ranging generalisation with detailed research in a masterly way. Central to his approach is that Prak employs a broad definition of citizenship, extending beyond the cohort of formal privileged burghers to include a large group of those whom officialdom nowadays usually defines as ‘permanent residents’, settled inhabitants, together participating in a range of civic practices. For Prak, citizenship was largely created in an environment of collective action evolving in autonomous cities. He thus argues that ‘between 1000 and 1800 urban citizens all over Europe could tap into a similar set of institutions to shape their lives’ (14).

The book is divided into three parts. In the first, Prak starts with an examination of the number and rights of formal burghers and the variation between cities and states (in many French towns there were no formal procedures for obtaining burgher privileges). Burgher rights were often closely linked to membership of the guilds. Apart from inherited citizenship, formal status was mostly obtained by marriage to a citizen’s daughter or widow or by purchasing it – formal citizenship via apprenticeship was a uniquely English phenomenon. Entry fees increased over time. Overall, Prak suggests that the majority of households in chartered cities were headed by burghers, but it could be much lower.

Burghers, and in some measure the wider group of residents, enjoyed various rights. One was participation in communal governance. Prak questions the conventional view of oligarchic predominance in European cities before the French Revolution. While recognising that 'oligarchy was the rule', he maintains that it was regularly qualified and contested by secondary city councils, by reserved civic offices for guilds, and by municipal elections. Here Prak accepts that some formal participatory institutions declined after 1500, but other organisations – such as guilds, neighbourhoods (one would have appreciated more on these), and civic militias, all involving a wide range of residents – played an important role in urban politics, in particular in contestation and resistance, well into the eighteenth century. Clubs and societies could have been added to this list. For Prak, economic citizenship was equally important. Better-off residents and burghers could shape policy and influence government through membership of merchant guilds, especially before 1500, as well as craft and service guilds. According to Prak's estimates, 20 to 25 per cent of urban households had a member directly involved in the guild system. Prak provides an excellent discussion of the mixed benefits of the guild system, which was both restrictive and integrative: it provided social welfare for members and promoted political participation, but largely excluded women and was often dominated by wealthy members.

A further chapter takes the discussion of social welfare further by exploring the role of confraternities, hospitals, workhouses, guilds, and voluntary donations (one might add mutual aid societies by the eighteenth century) in succouring the urban poor. Economic instability, endemic morbidity, and life-cycle precarity meant that the conventional deserving poor – widows, orphans, and the like – were joined at other times by large numbers of ordinary residents, for example during the catastrophic 1590s. Entitlement here was underlined by the fact that at other times, many of these 'occasional poor' were actually contributors to relief provision. But one must remember that while entitlement rights may reinforce communal identity, they also excluded many poor newcomers to town, such as starving refugees from the countryside, who were forcibly expelled, put into camps (as in Venice in the 1520s), the galleys or army, criminalised, and executed under militia law (London in the 1590s). A final chapter in this section of the book discusses how a significant part of the male residents were mobilised in civic militias and their various social, political, and military activities, despite the rise of professional state armies.

The second part of the book turns to a more detailed country-by-country analysis of the nature of communal participation in civic affairs, city relations with states, and the extent to which central governments were accessible to citizens. The first chapter investigates the prosperous North Italian city states, describing the rise of participatory governance in their golden age during the high Middle Ages and its subsequent decay under autocratic regional states in the increasingly disrupted economic world after the Renaissance. A second chapter dissects the powerful impact of citizen involvement in the highly decentralised and expansive Dutch Republic until its economic stagnation in the eighteenth century. A third chapter argues for the important role of English boroughs in national and parliamentary politics from the seventeenth century onwards, when urban and economic growth went increasingly hand in hand. For Prak, economic growth was constructed at least in part on the foundation of citizens' involvement in communal affairs, but given the Italian and Dutch trajectories the reverse relationship might be seen as equally applicable.

A final chapter examines, in summary fashion, citizenship in the Holy Roman Empire, France, Spain, and Eastern Europe, suggesting that where it functioned, it had limited impact on national politics during the early modern period.

The third section of the book considers European political developments from a global perspective. Max Weber's contrasting typology of European and Oriental cities, published posthumously in *The City* (1921), gets short shrift. Prak reminds us that while Chinese and Middle Eastern cities lacked municipal institutions, they had a plurality of other urban organisations that played an important part in communal life, providing urban services. Chinese cities for example had guilds, immigrant associations, town watches, and so on; Ottoman cities had guilds, *waqfs* (wide-ranging charitable agencies), and neighbourhoods. This chapter is followed by a comparison of citizenship arrangements in the Spanish and British colonies in the Americas. In contrast to the more open citizenship of Spanish colonial cities, Prak proposes that urban citizen rights were more constrained in British North America. To some extent this may have reflected the highly urban character of the Spanish colonies, with over a thousand new towns being established. In North America, by contrast, urbanisation remained at a low level (only around 5 per cent in 1775). Even so, already before the American Revolution the few large cities like Philadelphia, Boston, New York, and Charleston had a level of civil society that was unparalleled by any Spanish city.

This, then, is an impressive, ambitious book which must rank among the key works of European urban history. But like all ambitious books it also raises many difficult questions. One concern I have is with its conventional "Blue Banana" approach to European history, the analysis privileging the bigger cities of England, the northern Low Countries, western Germany, and northern Italy, with other regions foreshortened in the discussion, if mentioned at all (the whole of outer Northern Europe, from Ireland to the Baltics, is ignored). In such 'non-blue' regions with their numerous smaller towns, urban centres often lacked formal municipal institutions: even England had only a hundred or so municipal boroughs for its 700 towns. Yet arguably many smaller noncorporate towns had by the eighteenth century developed a range of informal agencies which enabled them to function with success: the smaller towns of England and the southern Netherlands became significant hubs of economic and cultural innovation before 1800. This would suggest that Prak's picture of European citizenship may need some qualification. In fact, with these modifications the comparison with Chinese and Middle Eastern cities would have been even stronger.

Another issue relates to the question: whose city? Prak makes a good case for regarding settled male householders as quasi citizens along with the fully enfranchised burghers. He is also effective in discussing the gendered nature of citizenship and the increasing exclusion of European women from the guilds. His analysis is less comprehensive in the context of minorities and immigrants (this is also evident in the bibliography). It is difficult to escape the view that participatory politics in pre-modern Europe often involved, or was even defined by, the segregation, exclusion, and sometimes extermination of external groups. We have already noted the harassment and criminalisation of poor subsistence migrants who flooded European cities. The exclusion of Jews, Muslims, the Irish, and gypsies could be yet more drastic. Even for respectable immigrants who tried to make a living in the city, the challenges could be daunting. In Tudor London, where apprenticeship served in theory as an entree ticket to communal integration, only a tiny proportion of

putative apprentices progressed to guild office. Hence the enormous churning of migrants to the city with many staying only a short time.

A final issue that needs to be raised concerns the question: what city? Implicitly, Prak assumes a Weberian municipal space, a European city unified within its walls and boundaries. There is barely a mention of ghettos, suburbs, or shanty towns (with no references in the index). Yet medieval towns, big and small, were often a patchwork quilt of walled, autonomous, ecclesiastical, and seigneurial franchises (Lille had over 50, for example), of court beguinages, university precincts, as well as suburbs and ethnic enclaves, their denizens often enjoying their own privileges, courts, and separate economic activities. Some autonomous jurisdictions were swept away at the Reformation, but others such as independent suburbs grew strongly, especially around big cities. All these could morph into spaces of difference, exception, and resistance – in other words, become subaltern spaces. Here again, parallels with Asian cities spring to mind.

So what can we conclude? Firstly, that this is a book which every student of European history in the pre-modern period should read. Secondly, I would argue that, while setting out to slay the dragon of Max Weber's *The City*, Maarten Prak has ended up being partly seduced by Weber's optimistic vision of European urbanisation in the pre-modern era. But why not check out the book and decide for yourself?

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