

6.7. Social movements and popular political participation in rural societies. Part I: 14th to 19th century

Panel organiser: Guzzi-Heeb, Sandro, University of Lausanne, Switzerland; Brassart, Laurent, University of Lille, France

Since the 1950s, great attention has been paid in Europe to the history of social conflicts, as crucial keys for understanding mechanisms of popular politics and culture. The problem of earlier studies was that violent conflicts were often seen as the main expression of popular politics, underestimating the complexity of the backgrounds of such spectacular outbreaks. Moreover, actors were mostly vaguely described as “crowds” or “mobs”, thus simplifying the articulation of different political interests in local life. Recent historiography has provided impulses to approach these crucial items. Still, several problems have to be resolved: on the one hand the question about the actors in popular movements, on the other hand the problem of the forms, places and instruments of popular political articulation, not only in special situations like revolts or elections, but in everyday life and in the long term. The aim of our panel is precisely to go in depth into some of these aspects, unravelling mechanism of popular participation in pre-modern states. To understand the logics of state-building and social conflicts, we need to take into account the involvement of working-class men and women in the political traditions, for example in communal councils and assemblies or parochial institutions. In fact, we observe that in many European regions working-class people largely participated in local politics, mainly in communal institutions, or in the religious life of their parish. Communities and district institutions were in this sense crucial elements of regional “States” – although frictions with larger territorial institutions can often be observed – as parishes are constitutive elements of the “Church”. When communities revolted against “the State”, it often meant a conflict within the State, rather than between “popular” and “elite” groups. In this sense we prefer speaking of “popular political participation” rather than of “popular politics”, since the interaction of popular and non-popular elements in local traditions is crucial to understand the articulation of political interests and the dynamics of protest movements. From a theoretical point of view, a better understanding of popular involvement at local level of early modern States appears to be an important key to interpret social movements and political evolutions. Our panel’s aim is to go deeper into this topic with contributions from different European countries.

Chair: Guzzi-Heeb, Sandro, University of Lausanne, Switzerland

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6.7.1. A Failed Political Movement? The 1381 Peasants’ Revolt in Rural Cambridgeshire

Xu, Mingjie, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, UK

The 1381 Peasants’ Revolt of England was primarily a political event. Like other pre-modern popular risings, it involved a large number of rebels fighting against the ruling class and represented the attempt of the mass to participate in politics by the means of violence. This paper attempts to reflect on the nature of the medieval popular uprising based on a local study on the revolt in rural Cambridgeshire. This paper considers particularly how rebels organized themselves. The sources reveal that many of the attacks were operated in bands. Whereas bands are shown to have been an efficient means of mounting attacks on targets in a number of cases, the power of most of the bands operating in Cambridgeshire was far more limited due much to their small size and the organization of the rebels appears more fragmented than being supposed previously. The targets of rebels’ attacks are also investigated in much detail. Although the rioters directed attacks overwhelmingly against members of the landed classes, only a limited number of landlords suffered violence. A clear pattern is that among the victims those gentry members performing social functions such as Justices of Peace, MPs and tax-collectors were easily exposed to trouble, whereas ecclesiastical landlords were left almost untouched. This fact shows the political nature of the revolt that local people were more concerned about the repressing policies of the government such as taxation and labour legislation than the general ‘suppression’ of the landed class.

6.7.2. Political Participation in Early Modern Rural Switzerland and Germany

Würgler, Andreas, University of Berne, Switzerland

This paper discusses the various forms how rural societies participated in early modern political decision-making and state-building. Forms of participation might have been events as social revolts and symbolic actions, practices as humble petitioning, or institutional procedures on different levels like communal and representative assemblies or legal proceedings. Attempts to participate in politics happened to be violent and symbolic, verbal and written, political and juridical. This paper aims to synthesize the results from recent

research in fields like rural revolts, petitioning, communalism, representative institutions and state-building “from below” and to discuss the impact of popular participation on Swiss and also German rural societies.

6.7.3. Social Conflicts and Rural State-Building: Popular Political Participation in Pre-Constitutional South-West Germany

Grüne, Niels, University of Innsbruck, Austria

Research on processes of domination in the late Ancien Régime has been significantly stimulated by the deconstruction of the absolutism model and by perspectives centred on actors and actions. With these paradigm changes, especially in discussions in the German-speaking world, the focus of classical social history on patterns of inequality and structural divergences of interest has been thrust into the background in favour of individualist and corporatist approaches. This paper, by contrast, explores the connectivity and explanatory power of analysing fields of collective tension in rural society within the framework of a communicative concept of state-building. As an example one major area of social conflict and different political interests in local life in the north of Baden (lower Neckar region) during the eighteenth century is illuminated: the management of communal resources and fees, which divided the village inhabitants along the lines of landholding categories. Particular attention is paid to the demand for order by village groups towards official agencies and to the type and acceptance of administrative interventions in the communal sphere. Generally, the failure of internal mechanisms of settlement proved to be a crucial motive in the densified communication between local society and higher authorities – through the multiplication of group petitions, commission investigations and local voting procedures, the main instruments of popular political articulation at that time.

6.7.4. Popular political actors and their communities during the French Revolution

Brassart, Laurent, University of Lille, France

Did the French Revolution change the political life of countrymen? On the one hand, a part of the historiography asserted the opposite for a long time (E. Weber), but some recent works question this affirmation (J.P. Jessenne, S. Guzzi-Heeb). On the other hand, the historians who were interested in the rural vote during the Revolution showed the importance of the community behaviour (Gueniffey, Edelstein, Crook). In spite of this last affirmation, the main objective of our communication will be to enlighten the rise of individualistic political behaviour within rural communities. We shall study the various strategies and the political tactics of some popular actors, chosen among villages of Northern France from the end of the 1780’s to 1795. How does their political consciousness appear? What is the room for maneuver of an individual actor coming from lower classes of society to influence the whole community? What is his repertoire d’action? From what we call “ego-documents” (self-writing documents) left by few popular actors and communities papers (communal councils, parochial institutions, Etat civil), we will try to study the evolutive interplay between these individualistic popular actors and their social and political environment during the French Revolution. We will focus as well on their local strategies to use the national information (news and laws) as their capacity to act. Obviously, the building of their social networks can’t be ignored to understand these “popular political participation” and the social and economical (agrarian) interest in their struggle will be highlighted.

Participants

Brassart, Laurent

Laurent Brassart is Associate Professor at the Université de Lille 3. He works about the history of the French state and countryside during the French Revolution. He has published as *Gouverner le local en Révolution. Etat, pouvoirs et mouvements collectifs en Picardie, 1790-1795*. (Paris, SER, 2013) and has edited with Jean-Pierre Jessenne and Nadine Vivier, *Clochemerle ou république villageoise? La conduite municipale des affaires villageoises en Europe, XVIII-XXe siècle* (Lille, Septentrion, 2012). He has been involved in numerous research projects which focus on rural popular politization, agricultural policies in Europa.

Guzzi-Heeb, Sandro

Sandro Guzzi-Heeb is professor (Maitre d’Enseignement et de Recherche) in Early Modern History at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland. His research fields include the history of social and political conflicts, the history of the family, of kinship and of sexuality. Recent publications: “Sex, Politics, and Social Change in the Eighteenth and the Nineteenth Centuries: Evidence from the Swiss Alps”. *Journal of Family History*, October 2011 36: 367-386.

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Würgler, Andreas

Andreas Würgler is a lecturer in Early Modern History at the University of Bern. His research includes the political and social history of revolts, the cultural history of media and comparative approaches to petitions and representative institutions. Publications: „Voices from among the ‘Silent Masses’: Humble Petitions and Social Conflicts in Early Modern Central Europe”, in: *International Review of Social History* 46 (2001), Supplement 9, p. 11-34.

Xu, Mingjie

Mingjie Xu, PhD Candidate in Medieval History, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, started studying the medieval history of England five years ago at the Wuhan University, China. In October 2010 he came to Cambridge to undertake a MPhil course in medieval history, working on the 1381 Revolt in Cambridgeshire. After finishing his master programme successfully in October 2011, he stayed in Cambridge to work for a Ph.D. in medieval history. Currently he is working on the economic and social history of late medieval England and especially on the 1381 Revolt in Cambridgeshire.