Urban Transformation?

Some Constants and Continuities in the Crisis-Challenged City

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Transformation and crisis – surely such concepts are indispensable for any attempt to understand the long epoch of European history that stretched from 1400 to 1660. Differ as we may about the details, nobody can doubt that the political, economic and religious organization of European civilization changed in fundamental ways during this period. Nor could anyone overlook the episodes of political, religious and social disruption which can be described as instances of 'crisis'. But what part did cities and towns play in all this? Cities, after all, are central to any attempt to understand European civilization. But did they too experience crisis? And to what extent did they partake of the transformation of Europe between 1400 and 1660?

To some, of course, the answer has always been obvious: 'The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns... Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West...'[1] We can listen with admiration, perhaps even with envy, to the confident assertions of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels about the role that towns played in the broad pattern of transformation they ascribed to what we now call the Early Modern era. But we cannot necessarily share their confidence – or their conclusions. A century and a half of research since their day has immeasurably increased our knowledge of the history of European towns without leading to any consensus about how towns fitted into the broader transformation of European society.[2] Urban hist-

1. Marx and Engels 1971, p. 40.
2. For general overviews, see Friedrichs 1995; Cowan 1998; Knittler 2000. For a survey of recent work on early modern German cities, see also Friedrichs 1997. There is no formal distinction in the English language between the meaning of 'city' and 'town' and in this essay the terms are used interchangeably.

orians are naturally inclined to place cities at the center of any narrative of long-term social change. But this may be misleading. Cities changed between 1400 and 1660, as cities always do. But there were elements of urban life which remained remarkably and significantly constant. Precisely because of their economic and political strength, cities have a potential to resist change as well as to partake of it. As historians we find it only natural to speak of 'urban transformation'. But perhaps we must put a question mark after that phrase.

The transformation of Early Modern Europe

We can hardly consider the experience of cities, however, without first summarizing briefly the overall character of the period 1400 to 1660. Fortunately the centuries immediately before and after the year 1500 are coming back into fashion as a definable epoch of European history. It is true that for the last generation or so the Early Modern era, conventionally understood to begin around the year 1500, has tended to replace the old epoch of 'Renaissance and Reformation' in the periodization of European history. But of late there has been some revival of interest in seeing the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries together as a distinct era or, even more convincingly, as part of a longer unified period.[3] And with good reason. The beginning and end of any such epoch is always somewhat arbitrary, but certainly we can agree that a number of major transformations took place squarely within the period from 1400 to 1660.

First, there was the transition from an essentially feudal order of political organization to the emergence of centralized states whose rulers adhered almost always in theory and often in practice to absolutist norms. By 1660 the absolutist model of political organization was familiar in concept and even operative in fact in much of Western, Central and Northern Europe.

Second, there was the religious fragmentation of Europe. After a century of latent tensions and then a century and a half of open conflict, by 1660 the religious division of Europe was essentially stabilized and the mutually reinforcing patterns of authority and

3. See for example Schilling 1995(b), esp. pp. 51-54, and Brady et al., eds. 1994-95, vol. 1, pp. xiii-xxiv.

identity summarized by the concept of 'confessionalization' were firmly established.

Third, there was the explosive growth of European contact with other regions and continents. It was after all, only in the fifteenth century that European expansion began, yet by the mid-seventeenth century the spatial organization of Europe's domination of the Americas was firmly entrenched and the initial patterns of economic and political contact with Asia were also clearly in place.

Fourth, and most importantly, there was the transformation of the European economic system. This transformation is far more difficult to describe and almost impossible to pinpoint in time. A phrase like the 'spread of capitalism' can only be regarded as a shorthand description for a cluster of economic changes whose importance nobody doubts but whose characteristics everyone finds hard to summarize. Nor can any claim be made that the years 1400 to 1660 represent a definable phase in this process. But there is no doubt that the process was a crucial one – and that it accelerated during this era.

These are universal patterns of European history. Of course there were regional variations. Though one must not overlook the spectacular eastward expansion of Russia, it is still true that in Northern Europe the economic and political significance of contact with the non-European world was somewhat retarded in comparison to the Atlantic countries. By contrast, the experience of religious transformation was more rapid and less contested in the north than it was in most of Western and Central Europe. And the process of state formation in Northern Europe, with the obvious exception of Poland, largely followed the European pattern. For Denmark in particular the year 1660 represents an undisputed landmark in the development of absolutism.

In short, we can generally agree on the key transformations of European society between 1400 and 1660. The role of major crises in this process is far less clear. It has become customary among historians to talk about the 'late medieval crisis', but this concept pertains largely to the economic depression and demographic catastrophe of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, and must thus been seen primarily as antecedent to the era we are considering.[4] There is no shortage of developments in the fifteenth and

4. A major recent treatment of the 'late medieval crisis' discusses responses to the

sixteenth centuries which have been described retrospectively as crises – including the destabilization of Italian politics and society after 1494, the religious upheavals of the Reformation, the inflationary trend of the sixteenth century, and so on. But only one cluster of developments falling within our period has received sustained and systematic analysis involving some formal discussion of the nature of crisis itself. This, of course, is the 'general crisis of the seventeenth century'.[5] If, as it has been persuasively argued, 'a crisis must be shortlived' and is '*always* followed by resolution', then one can accept the identification of this crisis as a cluster of political, religious and cultural conflicts during the early and middle decades of the seventeenth century, all of which were characterized by some element of tension over the 'location of authority' and all of which came to some kind of resolution by about 1660.[6] In this sense, too, the sixth decade of the seventeenth century can be seen as bringing to a close a clearly-defined epoch of European history.

The role of the cities

If we can agree that these processes of transformation are fundamental to European history during this era, we can proceed to ask the next question: to what extent did cities partake of these changes? Did cities contribute to these transformations and were cities, in turn, transformed by them?

Let us start with the last-mentioned process, the broad cluster of economic changes inadequately but unavoidably described as the growth or spread of capitalism. There was a time when cities were regarded as central to this process. Indeed, Fernand Braudel could serenely declare that 'Capitalism and towns were basically the same thing in the West'.[7] But the dominant view today seems to be exactly the opposite. Economic growth and the 'transition to

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crisis in great detail but sees no need for defining the crisis itself beyond alluding to the late Middle Ages as a 'period of economic stagnation or depression': Epstein 1991, esp. p. 5.

5. For a recent overview, see Parker and Smith, eds. 1997, esp. the revised introduction, pp. 1-31.
6. Rabb 1975, pp. 29-34.
7. Braudel 1973, p. 400.

capitalism' in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are seen largely in terms of agriculture and rural manufacture – so much so that, as the most recent 'revisionist' approach points out, 'Cities ... have usually played surprisingly minor roles in these narratives of structural socio-economic change'.[8] Paul Hohenberg and Lynn Lees present themselves as boldly challenging existing assumptions when they criticise research which has 'focused on rural protoindustrial activity as the key to eventual industrial development'.[9] Obviously there is no consensus on the matter, but those who place cities at the heart of this process are swimming against the tide.

What about the role of cities in European expansion? Certainly the whole process is unimaginable without reference to a handful of key port cities from which expeditions were organized and into which the products and revenues of overseas exploitation initially flowed – Seville, Amsterdam, London, Hamburg and others. But the impetus for expansion was as much monarchical, ecclesiastical and aristocratic as it was urban, and the impact on cities was also highly selective. Throughout this period the volume of intra-European trade continued to dwarf the volume of overseas trade. Even in a city like Hamburg, in the late seventeenth century, imported goods which arrived directly or indirectly from the Americas were vastly exceeded in value and amount by goods produced in Europe itself.[10]

The religious transformation of Europe was also unimaginable without its urban component. In an oft-quoted phrase, the German Reformation has been described as an 'urban event'.[11] This was certainly true, and not just in Germany – but primarily in the early phases of the Protestant Reformation. In Switzerland, in England, in the Netherlands, in Denmark and elsewhere the role of urban enthusiasts was crucial in establishing a foothold for Protestantism and forcing regimes to confront the pressures for religious change. But in one polity after another the initiative soon passed from the cities, and except for the central European free cities the eventual religious settlement almost always resulted more from

8. Howell and Boone 1996, p. 323.
9. Hohenberg and Lees 1985, p. 112.
10. Newman 1985, pp. 58-63.
11. Dickens 1974, p. 182.

monarchical and aristocratic decisions or victories than from urban initiatives. Of course cities were themselves affected by the religious conflicts. Obvious differences emerged between Protestant cities with their secularized institutions and drastically reduced numbers of clergy and Catholic cities in which vast clerical establishments and lay confraternities continued to function. But of late historians have put more emphasis on the transformation experienced by Protestant and Catholic communities alike through the instrument of social discipline which secular and religious authorities of all confessions imposed with increasing vigor on the populations under their control.[12]

Cities and princes

The most difficult problem, however, is to assess the relationship of cities to the process of state-building between 1400 and 1660. The emergence of the centralized state is one of the undisputed hallmarks of this epoch, but it is far from clear whether cities themselves were transformed by this process. Most discussions of the subject begin with a few basic assumptions. Though virtually all European cities at the beginning of the fifteenth century were subject to some form of overlordship, by and large they are assumed to have enjoyed something which modern historians refer to as urban autonomy: they could regulate their internal affairs with a minimum of interference by rulers or other powerful members of the feudal order. Princely demands were unavoidable, but the exact terms under which these demands would be met were normally subject to negotiation. Rulers resented this, however, and throughout this era they were determined to heighten their own financial and political power by diminishing or destroying the independence and autonomy of the cities which owed them allegiance. The cities in turn struggled to preserve their autonomy from increasing princely control.

The fundamental issue between rulers and cities was generally fiscal. Whether in the form of taxes, loans or gifts, rulers were eager to maximize the wealth they extracted from cities. But there were other issues as well. Rulers might try to place their own officials

12. Cf. Jütte 1986; Hsia 1989, esp. pp. 122-42.

into the cities to act as their spokesmen and diminish the opportunity for magistrates or other inhabitants to appeal directly to the overlord. Rulers might intervene in a city's political processes to insure that more compliant individuals occupied positions of municipal authority. They might try to place garrisons in the city. And if they perceived cities as openly defying their wishes, they might use military force to impose their will. There were numerous cases in which rulers conquered cities, voided their traditional customs and installed their own officials. The most spectacular instance was no doubt that of Ghent in 1540, where after two years during which the city had defied his fiscal and other demands Charles V occupied the city, revoked its traditional constitution and erected a new fortress for his troops.[13] Such situations were by no means rare. They were particularly common in times of military conflict or civil war, but hardly confined to such periods. Between 1660 and 1671, for example, four north German towns which had enjoyed extensive rights of self-government – Münster, Erfurt, Magdeburg and Braunschweig – were militarily subjugated by their territorial overlords and placed under much more direct control.

Normally, of course, rulers attempted to diminish urban autonomy by less dramatic and less expensive means than military conquest. A more gradualist strategy for pursuing their goals was to integrate not only the structures of urban administration but even members of the urban elites into the systems of state government. The more often urban magistrates or members of their families received state appointments and salaries and the more frequently they were called upon to enforce policies devised at the center, the less they would perceive their interests and those of the cities over which they presided as being in conflict with those of the ruler. In the words of one celebrated case study, cities experienced a transition 'von der autonomen zur beauftragten Selbstverwaltung' – a suggestive phrase which can only inadequately be translated as a change from 'autonomous to delegated self-administration'.[14]

Certainly princely attempts to diminish urban autonomy were widespread in this period. But just how successful were these attempts? Some historians regard the 'decline of independence on

13. For an overview of these events, see Decavele and van Peteghem 1989, pp. 107-15.
14. Wiese-Schorn 1976.

the part of towns in the period 1400-1600' as a universal trend of the era.[15] Others, not surprisingly, detect a far more complex pattern. Wim Blockmans has emphasised the capacity of certain cities to preserve their autonomy through effective bargaining with princes, though in the long run the relentless demands of monarchical states did tend to suffocate municipal autonomy.[16] Hohenberg and Lees suggest that while in most regions of Europe 'cities were turned into agents of centralization by princes', one group of communities – the 'free cities' of Germany, Switzerland and northern Italy – proved 'strong enough to block for centuries the attempt of princes to master them'.[17] It is certainly true that as late as the eighteenth century there were cities throughout central Europe which themselves ruled over territorial *contadi* in a quasi-absolutist fashion.

Even where, as in France, the trend towards loss of urban autonomy seems hard to dispute, the chronology of this development is far from obvious. Earlier historians dated the beginnings of this trend to the reign of King Louis XI in the late fifteenth century, but an influential analysis by Bernard Chevalier suggests that after Louis' death the process was temporarily interrupted. From 1480 to 1550, Chevalier argues, the Crown scrupulously respected the cities' autonomy, and only during the Wars of Religion with their heightened fiscal demands was pressure on the cities resumed.[18]

Some cities actually reversed the trend towards a reduction of urban autonomy. Geneva, for example, liberated itself fully from its dependency on the dukes of Savoy to become one of the most independent city-states in Europe. In 1595 the predominantly Calvinist city of Emden successfully rebelled against its Lutheran overlord, the count of east Frisia, and successfully engineered its conversion from a territorial city under the ruler's control into an 'urban republic with a semi-autonomous status'.[19] (When, a hundred and fifty years later, Emden finally lost its autonomy again, it was to an entirely different ruler, the Prussian king.) Hamburg's autonomous status, far from being diminished, was steadily rein-

15. Rowan 1994-95, p. 222.
16. Blockmans 1994.
17. Hohenberg and Lees 1985, pp. 169-70.
18. Chevalier 1988.
19. Schilling 1995(a), p. 125.

forced during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Clear as the overall tendency was, there was certainly no universal and unilinear trend from urban autonomy to urban subjugation during the period from 1400 to 1660.

The political system of the cities

Of course relations with outside powers represented only one dimension of the urban political situation. The distribution or redistribution of power within the community was equally important. Here, too, historians tend to identify a set of general trends characteristic of our period, all of which are assumed to have reinforced each other: the increasing concentration of power in the hands of a small oligarchical elite, the elimination of craft guilds and their members from meaningful participation in urban governance, and the consequent diminution of political involvement by ordinary citizens and their reduction from participants in the political system to mere 'subjects' of the municipal authorities.

This is not to say, however, that citizens accepted these trends passively. Indeed, much of what is known about these developments emerges from the recurrent episodes of civic conflict which they generated.[20] Over and over citizens organized themselves to demand the right to participate more fully in municipal government or to hold the magistrates more fully accountable for their actions. Often these protest movements turned violent.

In 1613-14 a group of citizens in the French port town of La Rochelle launched a movement to protest against what they perceived as misrule and nepotism among members of the municipal council. They demanded new methods for selecting council members and insisted that the council open its records and correspondence to public inspection. When, predictably enough, the council members refused to comply, the citizen leaders and members of the civic militia seized control of the city and forced the council members to accede to their demands. Shortly thereafter, to forestall a rumored counter-coup by the council, the civic rebels proceeded to arrest over fifty councilmen and their supporters and

20. For a general discussion of early modern civic conflicts, see Friedrichs 2000, esp. pp. 35-64.

imprisoned them for months while the municipal constitution was revised to the citizens' satisfaction.[21]

What is remarkable about this episode is not so much what took place in La Rochelle as the fact that comparable events were occurring in other cities in other parts of Europe at exactly the same time. Precisely in 1614, for example, a two-year uprising in Frankfurt am Main reached its climax when burgher leaders forcibly banished patrician members of the city council – along with the city's Jews, whom they were alleged to have favored.[22] In the same year prolonged agitation in Braunschweig brought about the resignation of the city council and its replacement by a new one. Upheavals were also taking place in Wetzlar, Worms and Stralsund. The following year conflicts broke out in Berlin, the year after that in Stettin.[23] Some of these uprisings, as in Frankfurt, resulted in the restoration of the old government and punishment of the citizen leaders; others, as in La Rochelle and Braunschweig, resulted in longer-lasting changes to the municipal constitution. But no matter how they ended, year in and year out civic uprisings were a recurrent feature of urban life all over Europe.

A recent survey by Marc Boone and Maarten Prak of urban unrest in the Low Countries from the twelfth century to the French Revolution posits a distinction between a 'Great Tradition' of revolts which pitted municipal elites against centralizing princes and a 'Little Tradition' of uprisings by citizens against the elites themselves.[24] Up to a point this distinction may be applicable to urban revolts elsewhere in Europe. But one must always bear in mind, as Boone and Prak themselves note, that 'the two Traditions cannot be seen as completely separate'.[25] Often the very issue at stake in a revolt against the local elite was the behavior of the elite towards the prince or other power structures of the broader political system. Sometimes magistrates were accused of being too accommodating to fiscal or other demands made by the ruler. But in other cases the citizens accused the magistrates of endangering the city's peace or welfare by a futile resistance to princely demands. Nor, of course,

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21. Robbins 1995 and 1997, pp. 253-307.
22. For an overview, see Friedrichs 1986, pp. 190-94.
23. For brief summaries of most of these episodes, see Friedrichs 1982, pp. 44-46.
24. Boone and Prak 1995.
25. Boone and Prak 1995, p. 114.

was only one prince or one state necessarily involved. In the Holy Roman Empire, for example, it was sometimes unclear whether the Emperor or some regional prince had a stronger claim to authority over a city. This ambiguity might be skilfully exploited by the parties to an urban conflict: the magistrates might hope for support from the Emperor while the citizens might seek help from a regional lord – or vice-versa. Many urban conflicts, moreover, hardly fell into the category of uprisings by citizens against the municipal elite. Often conflicts could more accurately be described as factional struggles among sections of the elite. And beginning in the sixteenth century, of course, cities began to experience major confessional conflicts – initially pitting Protestants against Catholics but then also and with increasing frequency, especially in Northwestern Europe, pitting different factions of Protestants against each other.[26] In short, a simple division of urban conflicts into the Great and Little Tradition categories can hardly do justice to the facts.

But one point made by Boone and Prak in their discussion of the Netherlands is indeed applicable to Europe as a whole: the long line of continuity in the tradition of urban uprisings. For it is clear that when it comes to such uprisings, the period from 1400 to 1660 does not represent a coherent epoch. The uprisings began long before 1400 and they continued long after 1660. In Central Europe, for example, though they tended to get less violent, urban conflicts continued right into the eighteenth century.

Bitter as they often were, these uprisings rarely involved any demand for radical changes in the way urban society should be organized. To be sure, there were some cases – such as the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster or, to some extent, the Ormée of Bordeaux – in which rebel leaders put forward notions of fundamental social change. But most urban uprisings actually reflected the essential conservatism of urban society. Leaders or spokesmen of the citizens' movements were often profoundly historical in their thinking, only too ready to debate the significance of long-ago charters or to cite constitutional precedents from their city's past. The most common protests were directed against real or perceived innovations or against instances of secretive, self-serving or corrupt behavior by particular members of the municipal elite. Urban rebels might imprison, remove or banish existing magistrates, but

26. For a noteworthy treatment of one such conflict, see Kaplan 1995.

this did not mean they would try to institute a fundamentally new way for cities to be governed. The most typical political demands, in fact, were for broader access to council membership or for the establishment of a citizens' commission to inspect the council minutes or financial records. They accepted the way in which cities were governed. They wanted participation, consultation, accountability – which, all told, were far from radical aspirations.

For in fact throughout this era neither princely challenges to urban autonomy nor citizens' challenges to urban authority really attempted to undermine the way in which cities were organized or administered. The essential foundations of European urban life were almost never questioned or challenged. They were never overturned – or even transformed.

The foundations of urban life

But what exactly were these foundations of urban life? Familiar as they are to historians, it may be useful to briefly list the most important of them. First, the entire system of urban governance derived its legitimacy from charters granted by one or more higher authorities. Second, the inhabitants of every city were divided between citizens or freemen who had clearly defined economic and residential rights and non-citizens who had almost no rights at all. Third, cities were governed on a collective basis by a group of adult males who belonged to the ruling council or councils by virtue of some recognized system of election, selection or co-optation. Fourth, even those citizens – or, more precisely, those adult male citizens – who did not participate in governance felt they were entitled to some voice in the way the city was run. Fifth, taxes were locally controlled, so that even when cities had to transfer revenue to external authorities the fiscal burdens were allocated by the municipal authorities. Sixth, the economic activity and personal identity of most citizens and their families were profoundly structured by membership in guilds. And finally, despite tensions between municipal and ecclesiastical institutions, the indispensable role of the Church and the clergy in civic affairs was always acknowledged and accepted.

These foundations of urban life in preindustrial Europe are so well known that we tend to take their existence for granted. But we

should not. These characteristics were, after all, by no means common to all traditional societies. Rather, they embodied the specifically European outcome of a long process of experimentation and negotiation that extended throughout the High Middle Ages and became stabilized only toward the end of that period. In the Scandinavian countries, to take but one example, guilds only slowly came to be structured in accordance with the European norm; by the late fourteenth century, however, the German model of the guild system was firmly entrenched.[27] By 1400, all of the fundamental characteristics of urban life summarized here were securely in place – and once they were, they remained remarkably stable for almost four centuries.

To say this, of course, is not to imply that the specific institutions of particular cities remained rigid. Quite the opposite, in fact. For within this generally stable framework, cities had a remarkable capacity for institutional adaptation. Indeed, it was precisely this capacity for adjustment that kept the overall system stable. Cities changed overlords with aplomb, readily accepting the supremacy of new dynasties or submitting to those who imposed their authority by military force. Cities constantly tinkered with their constitutions, incorporating new structures into their systems of governance. They tolerated vast numbers of immigrants and readily admitted those with adequate skills or wealth into the citizenry. And they routinely absorbed new families into the ruling elite.

This last point is sometimes overlooked, because historians are accustomed to see a steady drift towards 'oligarchy' as one of the defining characteristics of the early modern city. Of course there are some spectacular examples of cities where eligibility to join the ruling council was firmly restricted to specific families. The most famous case was Venice, where the list of patrilineal families whose male members were eligible to join the senate remained unrevised for centuries. And there were other such cities as well – cities like Nuremberg, where the list of ruling families was established by the famous dance statute of 1521. But in fact cases like these were notable chiefly for their rarity. Normally membership in the ruling council was readily accessible to qualified newcomers. By and large the urban elite was open, not closed.

27. Hoffmann 1993.

In fact the whole notion of a trend towards oligarchy during this era is misleading because in a sense by 1400 most European cities were already oligarchical – if by that we understand that positions of social and political leadership in almost every city were dominated by men who enjoyed a sufficient level of wealth. This was even true in those cities where craft guilds were guaranteed a certain number of seats on the city councils, since the individuals who occupied these seats tended to be the wealthiest members of their guilds. The hereditary principle was never in theory and only rarely in fact applied to municipal leadership. In every generation, rich men ran cities. Their sons and grandsons could legitimately hope to hold political power as well, but only if they maintained the family's economic standing. And because leadership was collective there was always room for newcomers.

Almost forty years ago one of the greatest of all Hanseatic historians, Ahasver von Brandt, disproved the prevailing assumption that Lübeck in the late fourteenth century had experienced a 'caste-like ossification' of the elite, in which a 'small, exclusive group of council families' consisting chiefly of rentiers totally dominated the city council; instead, he showed, the city's elite was made up of commercially active merchants. Yet von Brandt never doubted that a caste-like rentier patriciate must have emerged in Lübeck – he simply assumed that the process set in somewhat later.[28] But did it, really? An admirable recent study shows that throughout the seventeenth century Lübeck still had an 'open patriciate', due largely to 'the relative ease of upward social mobility' which made it possible for newly wealthy families to join the civic elite.[29]

Lübeck is typical in this regard. For in fact the more we know about sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cities the more we realize that while municipal power was normally monopolized by a small cluster of wealthy families, there was rarely any linear trend towards the development of an exclusive caste of council families. Even the rulers of Venice, after all, had to break down and admit new families to the senatorial ranks after 1646. In fact the domination of cities by a flexible oligarchy open to those who had achieved sufficient wealth was yet another of those constant characteristics that helped to define the European city of the early modern era.

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28. von Brandt 1979, esp. pp. 148, 152-53, 202-03.
29. Cowan 1986, p. 215.

Members of the urban elite who held office as members of the municipal government certainly knew how to take advantage of political power for personal gain – corruption and abuse of authority were among the most recurrent issues in urban uprisings. But magistrates often faced daunting problems in attempting to maintain stability in administering their communities. Much of their activity consisted of crisis management: fire, floods, disease, famine, food shortages, sudden changes in trading patterns or uncontrollable bursts of religious enthusiasm could all confront the magistrates with grave challenges to public order. But, as we have seen, many of the most acute crises were political. Many involved external interference: rulers and territorial magnates not only made unwelcome fiscal demands, but they intervened in municipal elections, appointed new officials, rewrote urban constitutions. Equally significant changes could emerge from internal political conflicts. Sometimes they were ruthlessly crushed, but often they were not: either the citizens themselves or external powers which had intervened to settle the dispute might force the magistrates to accept new constitutional structures or political arrangements.

Such events often appear in urban histories as dramatic turning-points in a city's history. Karl Brandi wrote long ago that once Charles V had entered Ghent and imposed a new constitution in 1540, 'Medieval Ghent was dead'.[30] But it is possible to argue that even the most colorful events of this sort were in fact all part of the normal political processes of urban life. Interventions by princes were, like outbreaks of plague, fire or flood, among the unwelcome but almost inevitable hazards of urban life. So were protests and organized uprisings. One could take reasonable precautions to try to prevent such things from happening or to diminish their impact, but one could scarcely hope that they would never take place at all. In the end urban elites almost always bowed to superior force. If the prince revoked the constitution, rewrote the election rules, or appointed new members of the municipal council, there was nothing one could do to resist it. But in the long run, it might not make too big a difference. Even the most interventionist princes never tried to change the way in which cities were ruled: cities continued to be governed in collective fashion by representatives of the most prosperous families. Certain individuals or

30. Brandi 1965, p. 430.

families – or, after the Reformation, adherents of a particular confession – might be barred from membership on the council and new ones put in their place, but the new members were generally men who were not very different in their social profile from the old ones. After the initial intervention, moreover, future elections or selections would be conducted in much the traditional way. In fact 'medieval Ghent', as Brandi called it, was not completely dead after 1540. Or at least it was revived a generation later, when Calvinist leaders restored the corporative structures which Charles had tried to eliminate.[31] Uprisings from below had less predictable consequences: sometimes they were ruthlessly crushed, especially when the magistrates were supported by the external powers. But often the citizens extracted concessions, either because the magistrates decided on their own to compromise or because they were forced to do so by external powers who saw some advantage to themselves in a reduction of the magistrates' authority.

Much is said about occasions in which princely intervention led to the smashing of guild power. In many European cities the guilds had been allocated a specific number of seats on the city councils. Sometimes when a prince was convinced that the guild representatives had been responsible for policies he found objectionable, he would intervene to change the constitution; the most famous instance was probably the abrogation of the constitutions of South German cities by Charles V between 1548 and 1552.[32] But actions like these often made little difference in the long run. In the first place, guild representatives themselves were generally drawn only from the upper crust of the guild itself, not from the rank and file of ordinary members. Eliminating guild representation thus made less of a difference to the social profile of council members than one might think. And cities which maintained a 'guild constitution' were often governed in a way that was hardly distinguishable from that of cities where guild representation had been eliminated. Cologne formally had the kind of guild-based constitution which Charles V had overturned in many other cities. But actually Cologne's council in the seventeenth century was one of the most elitist municipal governments in Europe.[33]

31. Blockmans 1988, pp. 145-46.
32. See Naujoks, ed. 1985.
33. Cf. Dreher 1986, esp. pp. 10-20.

Furthermore, whether or not guilds had formal political power, they always continued to fulfill their traditional social and economic functions. In the South German cities in which the guilds were allegedly 'eliminated' the traditional term for these organizations – *Zunft* – was temporarily banished and the craft organizations were now known as *Handwerke.* Their constitutional role had been diminished, but in other respects they continued to function much as they always had, controlling the training and admission of new masters, regulating the activities of their members and serving as pressure groups for the maintenance of the artisans' economic and social aims. Except to some extent in England, where the system began to break down in the eighteenth century, guilds continued to function without diminution as one of the fundamental constituents of the urban social order until the end of the *ancien régime.* The breaking of guild constitutions did not break the power of the guilds, any more than the Reformation diminished the role of the Church as a central component of urban order or the dismissal of individual magistrates implied any challenge to the conciliar form of urban rule. Even when the formal structures of urban authority were reshuffled, the foundations of urban life remained unchanged.

Conclusion

Crisis was an all too familiar experience in European cities of the epoch from 1400 to 1660. Above all cities confronted recurrent political crises, brought about by pressure on the urban elites either from above or from below. These crises, like all crises, had to be resolved somehow or other, and often they were resolved by constitutional changes which appear highly significant. Yet if we look beyond the specific modifications of urban constitutions to what one might call the *metaconstitutional* level of urban governance, we find instead long lines of continuity. Ways of organizing political and social life and ways of confronting and solving problems remained remarkably constant throughout the period from the early fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth century. In an age of critical transformations in Europe as a whole, the fundamental character of European urban life remained strikingly constant. Numberless

European cities confronted numberless challenges and crises between 1400 and 1660, but the foundations of urban society were not transformed.

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