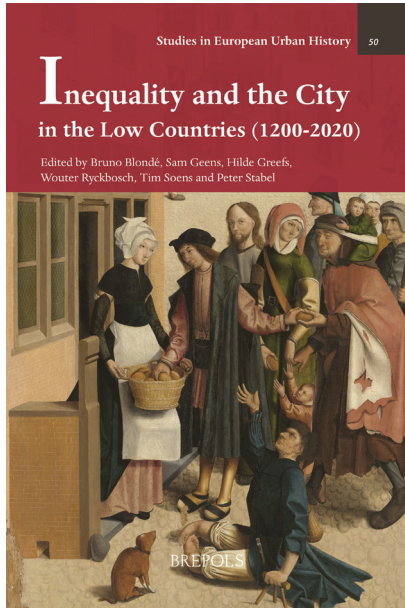


Review

Bruno Blondé, Sam Geens, Hilde Greefs, Wouter Ryckbosch, Tim Soens, and Peter Stabel (eds.), *Inequality and the City in the Low Countries (1200-2020)*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2020, 409 pp. ISBN 9782503588681.



This edited volume is the fruit of the labour of thirty-two scholars who took up the challenge of applying their research to the overarching theme of urban inequality. The result is a book of twenty-two chapters with a wide range of approaches that seek out links between urbanization, urban society, and social inequality in an impressive range of 820 years of history, in which the early modern period is well-represented. Such a gigantic project is by necessity far from comprehensive, as the editors themselves note in their introductory chapter. They explain that this project resists the ‘lure of an overarching argument’ but rather aims for a ‘nuanced historical understanding.’ (36) It provides both in-depth case studies that contextualize social inequality for the specific city or cities, and more zoomed-out discussions of urban centres or town-country relations in general.

The overarching theme is what the editors call ‘The Low Countries’ Paradox’. This paradox consists of the fact that urbanization usually fosters inequalities, while in the older historiography the Low Countries have been described as a more egalitarian place where a ‘rise of the middle class’ took place. The editors point out the ‘potential that resides in connecting this old – but rich – social and cultural historiography of the Low Countries with the new empirical studies on income and wealth distribution’ (22). One result is that the rise of the middle class is not at odds with growing inequality, as the middle classes themselves also have exclusionary tendencies. While some chapters relate directly to it, the paradox forms a broad point of departure rather than a strict research question that is explored in each chapter.

In that sense, this edited volume represents a core strength of urban history: its ability to tackle historical topics over long periods of time, and from very different social, economic, cultural, and political perspectives. Chapters on topics as varied as sixteenth-century cloth

production and twenty-first-century parking lot politics share a section, as the volume brings together a wide range of historical knowledge that would in other contexts have remained separate. Following the introduction, the volume is divided into four empirical sections and one theoretical section that form a goldmine of various urban histories with a wide range of topics. The section 'The Urbanisation of Inequality' contains the aforementioned work on cloth production and parking lots, but also has chapters on nineteenth-century migration, demography, and mobility, twentieth-century commuting, and eighteenth-century urban-rural manure relations. The section on the 'Politics of Inequality' contains chapters on medieval and early modern urban policies, from taxation to law courts. In the section 'Shocks, Crises and Inequality,' chapters explore revolt and war, but also housing speculation. The section 'Cultural and Consumer Dynamics of Inequality' has a wide range of topics ranging from the material culture of energy and dining cultures to violence, policing, and craft guilds. Finally, 'Methodological, Theoretical and Contemporary Perspectives' has two chapters that move into a more conceptual area, as well as a contemporary comparison of education systems.

Urban history's inclusivity in terms of topics and timeframes can of course also be a major challenge, as very different debates exist in the subfields that are discussed. This book shows how a broad urban history is flourishing in the Low Countries, partially through its ability to absorb and historicize debates in geography, (fiscal) economics, criminology, transport studies, and urban planning, among others. The challenge remains to instigate and maintain conversations between such disciplines. The theme of inequality, however, offers some streamlining throughout this book. Although social inequality remains defined rather loosely, interesting directions for future research are proposed, such as the call for a more realistic welfare index (371), or the editors' observation that topics such as health conditions, gender relations, and consumption inequalities are still under-explored. The work of this volume is not to wrap up the debate, as the editors write that it 'offers few definite answers', but rather to raise doubts and questions (36).

As such, this volume should be seen and used not as the definite handbook of historical urban inequality, but rather as offering a rich snapshot of the field of urban history in the Low Countries. It offers something different to each researcher and student of Low Countries history. I would propose that it can best be approached like one would visit a large museum: rather than trying to see every exhibition, it can often be best to explore one section in more detail. In this book, the introduction will be useful as a historiographical primer for debates on urban inequality to different researchers and students alike, but after that, they will flock to different sections and chapters. Especially now that the e-book is available in open access, it is a great starting point for (graduate) students looking for inspiration and bibliographies for thesis research, as well as for professional researchers that are looking for specific debates and data.

One concern that historians of the northern parts of the Low Countries may have is the geographic scope of the book. With chapters dedicated to cities such as Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp, and Mechelen, the Southern Netherlands are much better represented than the Dutch Republic. This focus is of course partially explained by the fact that the volume is the outcome of a project at the Antwerp Centre for Urban History and the *HOST* Research Group at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Rather than raising this as a point of critique,

I think this observation should prompt historians of the northern Low Countries to take up the challenge, and see what the questions on inequality raised in this volume can bring to their research. That would also be what the editors had in mind – namely to offer a ‘stepping stone for academic debate on the drivers of social inequality’.

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