

Bruno Blondé, Sam Geens, Hilde Greefs, Wouter Ryckbosch, Tim Soens, and Peter Stabel (eds.), *Inequality and the City in the Low Countries (1200-2020)*. Studies in European Urban History 50 (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2020, 414 pp., ISBN 9782503588681).

Reading *Inequality and the City* provides an extensive foray through the premodern and modern Low Countries, with the volume covering a time frame from 1200 to 2020. The theme connecting all twenty-two contributions, including the introduction, is the relation between social inequality and urbanisation, a subject that is identified by the editors – urban historians at the University of Antwerp (Centre for Urban History) and Vrije Universiteit Brussel (HOST Research Group) – as ‘one of the most pressing global challenges at the start of the 21st century’. As such, the introduction provides the reader with thorough observations of the ever-present challenge of the rapid rise and expansion of urban growth, demography and social tensions, to be found in the past (west-European cities in the pre-industrial area) and in urban crises during current times (here, the editors bring to mind the 2018 *gillet jaunes* manifestations in France and the 2019 October protests in Chile). To further our insight into the interconnectedness between inequality and urbanisation, the volume presents in-depth analyses of diverse social, economic, political and cultural elements of urban life that historically impacted the development of inequality. This is done through the lens of a historically densely urbanised region: the Low Countries.

In particular, the editors turn the reader’s attention to what they call the ‘Low Countries Paradox’. Throughout its history, the Low Countries seemingly displayed low levels of income inequality and a strong middle class, but, at the same time, specific social groups continuously struggled with poverty and a lack of upward social mobility. Indeed, the contributions showcase that the strong position of the middle class was not necessarily irreconcilable with growing inequality. The exclusive position of a strong middle class with political leverage and social security betrays the essence of the ‘Low Countries Paradox’, as those who were not able to secure access to this group – the rural population, urban newcomers, as well as unskilled and low-skilled workers – were disproportionately impacted by inequality. Thus, despite the prominent placement of ‘the city’ in the book’s title, the works include welcome additions of research on rural regions and their relation to cities to the discussion of urban inequality.

With this perceived paradox as a starting point, the contributions scrutinise institutional development and economic organisation, social and political status, and cultural behaviour. This is done by compiling the analyses

within five themes, namely urbanisation developments, politics, crises, cultural and consumer dynamics, and, finally, methodological, theoretical and contemporary perspectives, that allow for grouping together contributions which span different periods and disciplines. Thus, comparison is easily facilitated between periods and specific context, such as the impact of growing urbanisation on the connection between city and countryside in sixteenth century Flemish cloth production (Jim van der Meulen) as well as the urban-rural link of early twentieth century railways in Belgium (Ingrid Schepers, Janet Polasky, Ann Verhetsel and Greet De Block).

The combined contributions pay attention to both short and long episodes in the history of the Low Countries. For example, by tracing the long-term development of urban institutions throughout history, various chapters provide insight into the access of different social groups to law in order to handle their conflicts, as well as their influence on politics and cultural developments in the city. Maarten F. Van Dijck discusses how interpersonal violence became increasingly associated with lower social groups in Mechelen between 1350 and 1700; Griet Vermeesch focuses on access to and exclusion from civil litigation by different social groups in the cities of the Low Countries throughout the eighteenth century; and Margo De Koster and Antoon Vrints examine policing and socio-geographical focus during nineteenth-century Antwerp. On a smaller but no less detailed scale, other contributions offer the reader well-executed studies into individual cities. Bruno Blondé, Jord Hanus and Wouter Ryckbosch show the impact of regressive fiscalism on 's Hertogenbosch and its inhabitants in the context of Habsburg *beden* (subsidies paid by provinces to finance war efforts of their Burgundian and Habsburg rulers); Inneke Baatsen analyses the social effects of Bruges' changing dining cultures in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; Wout Saelens turns our attention to new energy technology and material culture in eighteenth-century Ghent. Finally, contained events such as the Ghent Revolt of 1379-1385 against the Counts of Flanders and its impact on wealth inequality (Sam Geens), and Antwerp's short-lived but fiscally, institutionally and socially impactful Calvinist Republic of 1577-1585 (Guido Marnef) are explored with insightful results for the general theme of the relationship between urbanisation and social inequality.

The decision of the editors to let their authors focus on specific phenomena, case studies and micro-histories adds to the strength of the volume. By avoiding sweeping statements on the general theme of urban inequality, the authors present detailed insights that underline the importance of historical context and the wealth of information that the different social, economic, political, legal, institutional and cultural urban factors that impacted social inequality can offer current studies of inequality. Another strength of *Inequality and the City* is the careful nuance that is both underlined in the editors' introduction as well as presented in the research of its contributors. Traditional narratives are tested, reinforced

and challenged by the authors. For example, Hilde Greefs and Anne Winter effectively highlight how local context impacted the relationship between cities and migrant (comparing major cities, new urban centres and suburban municipalities) and, thus, complicating the dominant perception of migration being associated with marginalisation and inequality.

The interdisciplinary research and diverse case studies succeed in proving that by engaging with different forms of urbanisation and using in-depth contextualisation of developments within and in relation to cities, the complexity of social inequality becomes clear and provides the urban history field with new opportunities to continue the academic debate. The wide scope also benefits the overall readability of the volume, since the chapters never become repetitive despite often featuring historically prominent cities such as Bruges and Antwerp. Instead, the chapters complement each other with the different perspectives on Low Countries' urban and rural developments. However, where the interconnectivity of the volume slightly falters is its final methodological and theoretical part. While most chapters succeed in securing their place within the general theme of the volume, and the preceding and upcoming research of fellow contributors, the final part feels more disconnected. In particular, the calls for more ambitious research with diverse data and sources offer few references to the work already presented in the book. As a result, the lack of more distinct reflections on what has already been achieved in this extensive volume is a missed opportunity to underline how the book and its many contributions can, by their own merit, convince current scholars of the importance of new nuanced studies of inequality. Indeed, the volume can stand more firmly in its achievements, of which, as this review shows, there are many. As a self-declared modest stepping stone for academic debate on the connectivity between social inequality and urbanisation, *Inequality and the City* more than delivers on its promise.

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