

Clé Lesger, *Power and Urban Space in Pre-Modern Holland: Arenas of Appropriation in the Netherlands, 1500-1850* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024, 312 pp., ISBN 9781350412378).

In the politically turbulent times of today, the famous Dutch *poldermodel* (a societal model based on consensus and harmony) has frequently been deemed a relic of the past. Regardless of its current relevance, it is a thing of the past in another sense: the *poldermodel* has long dominated the historiography of the early modern Dutch Republic, particularly that of Holland. In his new book, Clé Lesger adopts a different perspective. Starting from the view that the consensus model obscures the conflicts, divergent interests, and power relations that also shaped urban life, he instead looks at the urban communities of Holland through a conflictual lens.

The aim of the book is ‘to understand how the power relations between social classes in pre-modern Holland were expressed in the physical and discursive appropriation of urban space, and how this appropriation in turn affected the continuity of these power relations’ (2). The result is an impressively wide-ranging study that traces how urban space was appropriated through material, social, and cultural means. In doing so, Lesger moves beyond viewing the city as a mere stage for history; instead, he treats space as an active force in shaping social interaction, placing his work alongside recent spatial studies by scholars such as Danielle van den Heuvel, Bob Pierik, and Hannah Serneels.

The book opens with a chapter discussing attitudes towards social hierarchy in early modern cities in Holland. The most influential and enduring view is that of a society which consisted of three classes: elite, middle class and working class. The relation between the elite and the middle class was characterised by compromise and occasional cooperation: the middle class paid high taxes, but in return got a relatively elaborate welfare system. Guilds and militia formed another, not uncontested, relationship with the ruling elites. The poor, in turn, were also essential to the urban economy, but at the same time considered a threat, due to their proneness to revolt and tendency to cause unrest.

According to Lesger, these views of the social order also shaped and were in turn reinforced by residential patterns, which are the subject of the next two chapters. Firstly, using the land registry (*kadaster*) of 1832, Lesger analyses the residential differentiation within cities based on rental values in Amsterdam, The Hague, Delft, Leiden, Alkmaar, and Enkhuizen. What makes Holland’s cities stand out in a European context is that they showed no clear segregation between rich and poor neighbourhoods. Rather, the poor

lived just around the corner from the rich. Lesger uses the concept of 'block formation' to describe how open plots of land gradually turned into solid city blocks as houses were joined together and backyards were filled with more buildings. This physical density created a clear hierarchy of streets that made social inequality a visible and permanent part of the city layout: the elites lived along the main roads and canals, the middle classes in the smaller side streets, and the poor in the back alleys and inner courtyards. Nevertheless, cities in Holland also had their relatively homogeneous poor neighbourhoods, to be found at the fringes of the city. It is no coincidence that this was also the place where polluting industries such as tanneries were located.

Building on this analysis, Lesger uses a variety of tax registries to reconstruct rental values in the longer run, starting in the fourteenth century. Given the scarcity of consistent serial data over such a long period, this is a notable achievement. A more elaborate exposition of the methodology and sources has been included in the book's extensive appendix. The most crucial finding here is that patterns of residence show remarkable continuity throughout the ages. Even catastrophic events, such as large city fires, did not significantly alter the layout of cities. The only aspect that evolved over time was the growing tendency of elites to cluster together and form more homogeneous neighbourhoods. However, they never managed to do that quite as much as existing theory presupposes: to different degrees, all the studied cities were still highly differentiated in the early nineteenth century.

Apart from the permanent appropriation of urban space, which was in a very literal sense 'set in stone', Lesger goes on in the fourth chapter to examine how the elite, the middle class, and the working class each in their own ways used violence to appropriate urban space in a more ephemeral way. He highlights the power of the elites to execute public punishment, the middle class to form militias, and the poor to riot and protest, with their strength lying in their numbers. The unstable nature of relations between the classes produced a continual need to display power in public space, each group using the means available to them.

Building on the theoretical work on power and society by, among others, Pierre Bourdieu and John Allen, Lesger demonstrates that the urban environment was never a passive background. Whether in enduring residential patterns or in fleeting displays of power and violence, the urban environment played an active role in forming and sustaining power relations. The physical terrain shaped the way in which housing inequalities took shape in the very early beginnings of Holland's cities, and the street plans shaped the way in which different social groups could manifest forms of violence.

The final chapter turns to the discursive appropriation of space through what Lesger calls 'smothering': the tendency to push less desirable elements of society to the background in textual and visual representations. Descriptions, maps, and cityscapes routinely overlook working-class people and the areas where they lived, thus reinforcing existing power relations.

At times, this analysis risks to be self-evident. It is to be expected that descriptions of cities tended to focus on their most important or beautiful parts and that the countless back alleys received less attention, but perhaps it is especially this self-evidence that drives the point home even more.

Taken together, this book tells a story of striking stability and continuity. Enduring residential patterns, displays of violence, and elite portrayals of the city made the deep inequalities of urban society appear natural and immutable. As Lesger shows, even violent episodes that strained relations between social classes were never intended to alter the status quo; rather, they served to reaffirm it, reminding everyone of their place within the established order.

This long-term continuity raises the question of whether the 'consensual' and 'conflictual' models of society are truly as oppositional as Lesger suggests in his introduction. The book's findings instead indicate that conflict was integral to the negotiation of consensus: the tangled underside of the consensual fabric that, nevertheless, endured for centuries. This interpretation aligns Lesger's work with a well-established international historiography, most notably the work of English scholars such as Michael Braddick and John Walter. However, Lesger rarely engages explicitly with these wider debates. While he briefly references international literature on specific themes such as corporal punishment, a sustained conversation with the broader 'spatial turn' and its decades of insights into the relationship between space, power, and inequality is largely absent. By remaining so firmly centred on Holland, the study misses an opportunity to position its rich empirical findings within a broader European comparative framework.

Nevertheless, the book remains an ambitious work that successfully bridges multiple historical disciplines across several centuries. Its meticulous analysis of how power is physically anchored in the urban landscape makes it essential reading for anyone interested in the history of housing, inequality, or the social production of pre-modern urban space.

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