Martin Schoups, ***Meesters van de straat. Strijd om de publieke ruimte in Antwerpen, 1884-1936*** (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024, 312 pp., ISBN 9789048563937).

The history of protest has long been dominated by a narrative of long-term pacification. Already during the 1970s, scholars such as George Rudé, E. P. Thompson, and Eric Hobsbawm argued that unruly forms of popular protest based on a local 'moral economy' gradually gave way during the nineteenth century to organised protest movements on a national and transnational scale. Even if its Marxist undertones in time became more subdued, the underlying 'riots-to-demonstrations' or 'torches-to-soapboxes' paradigm remained firmly entrenched in historiography, not least by way of its reanimation in Charles Tilly's influential work, which remained based on the idea that the repertoire of contention in European politics reached a tipping point around the middle of the nineteenth century, with the dominant modes of protest shifting from parochial to cosmopolitan, from spontaneous to organised, and from violent to peaceful.

Focusing on the case of the Belgian port city of Antwerp from 1884 until 1936, Martin Schoups' dissertation takes issue with this line of scholarship in three ways. First, its narrow concepts of protest and collective action fail to take account of many informal and implicit forms of everyday street politics. Second, it is based in a fundamentally positive view of protest, ignoring its many conservative, xenophobic, and identity-based varieties. And finally, in its focus on the national space, it tends to disregard the local dynamics that remained at the heart of urban protest cultures well into the twentieth century. By contrast, Schoups proposes to understand the history of protest in terms of a variety of different actors (sometimes violently) claiming 'mastery' over the urban streets, which in their minds was never just a neutral space, but was overlaid with strong visions of community, place, and identity. Schoups' case for the persistent dominance of the 'riots-to-demonstrations' frame may be a bit overdrawn. The author himself points to at least fifteen scholarly contributions that have gone in a different direction (14, n17). Nevertheless, his subsequent analysis proves that as an analytical counterpoint, it provides a useful point of departure for a re-reading of European protest repertoires of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

To make his case, Schoups started out by building a database of collective action events in Antwerp, widely defined as any action without an everyday function, incorporating multiple people, and taking place in public. This wide net means that his study includes not only political meetings, riots,

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and demonstrations, but also strikes, parades and processions, as well as small-scale everyday interactions with the police or between different groups of citizens. Taking his methodological cue from Tilly, Schoups' analysis is based on a systematic reading of police files and newspapers for three sample years: 1884, 1900, and 1936. These are chosen because they were particularly tumultuous election years within the framework of three consecutive suffrage regimes in Belgium: a limited census suffrage under a majoritarian system in 1884, a universal male suffrage with plural voting for some groups and proportional representation in 1900, and a system of universal male suffrage on the principle of one man one vote in 1936. As such, the selection encompasses the respective apogees of the so-called 'school conflict' between conservatives and liberals, of the turn-of-the-century strike wave, and of the momentous electoral shift to extreme parties on the left and right, allowing for diachronic comparisons across the study's time frame.

In very well-written empirical chapters, Schoups traces the historical development of Antwerp's street politics through a systematic lens focusing on five particularly significant practices: political meetings and their disruption in Chapter 1, election riots in Chapter 2, violent strikes in Chapter 3, anti-police protest in Chapter 4, and the wide variety of street parades, from church processions to political demonstrations, in Chapter 5. In all, a detailed picture emerges of a city full of confrontations, invariably linked to differing and overlapping understandings of community and space. The groups involved in such actions and the respective lines of conflict were highly variable: locals colliding with outsiders, left wingers with right wingers, police constables with unruly youths. But in general, Antwerp's citizenry exhibited a remarkably 'permissive' political culture, based on a physical, territorial, and masculine understanding of democracy. This culture included a high tolerance of ritualised violence that was part and parcel of everyday public confrontations. Rather than a decisive shift to a more respectable repertoire of contention, then, different modes of interaction co-existed throughout the period.

The detailed focus on Antwerp draws out the specific character of Belgium's second city, with its dominating port and relatively weak industrial base, its strong labour movement, and its intense political conflicts between liberals, Catholic conservatives, and communist and far-right extremists. Besides insightful diachronic analyses, the reader is presented with very readable accounts of local events, such as liberals dousing conservative city council members in blue paint during election riots in 1895 (99), or the assault of a policeman at the Vlaamse Kaai by a group of swimmers with colourful nicknames such as de Platte, de Joef-Joef, Boeren Sus and Noefje in 1900 (218). At the same time, Schoups systematically links the peculiarities of the Antwerp case to scholarship on other contexts, especially Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands, allowing for interesting comparative observations. In contrast to France, for example, the culture of political

meetings in Antwerp does not seem to have shifted from the adversarial model, in which representatives of different parties engaged in debate with one another, to the 'monological' party meeting in the period between 1884 and 1900, nor was there an increase of organised, systematic obstruction of these meetings. In fact, as the Antwerp labour movement attached ever greater importance to a performance of disciplined solidarity, meetings became much less tumultuous, with the audience playing a more passive role. In the long run, this led to the paradox similar to the one observed for the British case: As the political regime as a whole became more democratic, the culture of political meetings tended in the other direction, since there was less of a need to symbolically integrate the parts of the populace without voting rights through their active participation in meetings (53, 61).

In all, the book offers many fascinating insights into the complex developments of contentious interactions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century city that can certainly not be reduced to a simple narrative of gradual pacification. If there is anything at all to criticise in this well-researched and highly readable book, it is that the author did not do more. As he admits himself, the sample of election years, exactly because of their extraordinary character, cannot be representative of interactions in the city during periods of relative quiet, which makes it more difficult to draw conclusions about long-term trends. A systematic comparison of the Antwerp case to other Belgian or comparable European cities on a similar empirical basis would be a fascinating pursuit for future research, as Schoups has convincingly proven. It is to be hoped that other scholars will be inspired to follow in his footsteps.

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