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Pre-Modern Citizenship

An Ancient Concept for the Modern World?

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Abstract

This article discusses the challenges and opportunities of turning to the pre-modern world to address contemporary problems. To do so it compares Maarten Prak's approach to practical citizenship in *Citizens without Nations* with Jürgen Habermas's infamous evocation of the 'bourgeois public sphere'. While different in important respects – not least in terms of the kind of historical citizenship they recover and the methods by which they do it – Prak and Habermas nevertheless share an important similarity. This is that both are quite *idealistic*, in an aspirational sense, about how their pre-modern forms of citizenship can benefit and improve the modern world. This sense of idealism can be contrasted with Max Weber's preference for excavating *ideal types* that described, for better or worse, the *normative* values and behaviours of particular cultures in the past. This response then outlines the normative practices of Prak's citizenship and asks whether they are really commensurate with modern life.

In *Citizens without Nations* Maarten Prak outlines for modern readers a template for 'citizenship' that is not synonymous with or dependent upon the nation-state. Drawing on Charles Tilly, Prak denotes citizenship as the ongoing transactions and ties 'entailing mutual obligations between categorically defined persons and agents of government'.¹ The kind of transactions, obligations, categories and agents in which he is interested are found in what he styles the 'practices' of 'pre-modern' cities and towns: i.e. the 'citizenship arrangements' of urban communities in the eight centuries before the French Revolution and its aftermath.² Part I of the book accordingly looks to pre-modern European

1 M. Prak, *Citizens without nations. Urban citizenship in Europe and the World c. 1000–1789* (Cambridge 2018) 8.

2 Prak, *Citizens without nations*, 22.

urbanism to identify and reconstruct these arrangements, focusing on the legal traditions and institutions that underpinned ‘formal citizenship’ as well as broader practices of urban governance, economy, welfare, and military defence. Part II then tells four stories of pre-modern European citizenship in broadly chronological order – the rise and fall of the Italian city states, the federalised urbanism of the Dutch republic, the synergy between cities and the state in eighteenth-century England, and the corresponding lack of complementarity between citizens and states in continental Europe. These stories are informed by what Prak takes to be the key determinant on the wider efficacy of urban citizenship: namely its relationship – or not – with the coordinating and distributive power of political states. Part III uses this European prism to initiate comparisons with China, the Middle East, and the Americas. Although the conclusions are tentative, Prak feels able to argue that it is possible to discern equivalent practices of citizenship beyond Europe before the nineteenth century. This is *contra* Max Weber, who took western urban citizenship to be a source of European exceptionalism.

By any standards, then, this is an ambitious and important book: at once a work of global comparison that also aims to make the past a ‘source of social and political inspiration’ for the present.³ Its main claims are threefold. First, that pre-modernists need to recognise the importance of ‘citizenship arrangements’ within urban environments, where they offered high levels of individual and collective agency and levels of participation to shape the public life of communities. Second, that this citizenship, when effectively linked to state power, was a key determinant and driver in the external fortunes of the three most commercially successful polities of the pre-modern era: the Italian city states, the Dutch republic, and the English and later British empire. Third, that the value and power of pre-modern citizenship needs to be relearned for the twenty-first century. Not only was it ‘not as bad as it was portrayed by the [French] revolutionaries who sought to overthrow it’; it could also serve as ‘a source of political and social inspiration’ for agendas to integrate or ‘nest’ – as he puts it – local participatory practices within national polities through systemic and meaningful devolution.⁴

As Prak notes, *Citizens without Nations* revisits Max Weber’s 1922 account of European corporatism in the light of 100 years of empirical

3 *Ibid.*, 306.

4 *Ibid.*

research: there is the same commitment to macro socio-historical comparison and the focus on urban institutions is broadly similar.⁵ But the similarities are not, perhaps, as clear-cut as they seem. On the one hand, whereas Weber conceptualised historical ‘ideal types’ to convey what he understood to be the ‘essence’ of a social phenomenon or process, Prak prefers to draw on empirical ‘data’ to reconstruct ‘practices’ and trends. Although the ‘data’ is not necessarily available or, indeed, always reliable, Prak is nevertheless very conscious of himself as a historian contributing to sociological debates rather than a social theorist drawing on history. On the other hand, ‘ideal types’ for Weber were not ideal in an evaluative or aspirational sense; rather, for better or (more often) for worse, they were culturally and socially *normative* for historical actors whose attitudes and behaviour were informed by the structures, values, and practices so described in place and time. Prak, in contrast, seems tempted to present the ‘citizenship arrangements’ of pre-modern cities in a more evaluative and *idealistic* manner – both as a dynamic and enabling feature of past societies and as a potential solution to what he takes to be the democratic and participatory deficits of modern life.

In this respect at least, Prak’s treatment of citizenship is perhaps more reminiscent of Jürgen Habermas’s influential account of ‘the public sphere’ than Weber’s discussion of western corporatism.⁶ Habermas discerned a quality of autonomous and rational public debate in the new coffeehouses and salons of eighteenth-century Europe that, he claimed, at once rivalled the discourse of ancient Greece, eclipsed the ‘publicness’ of medieval monarchies and was subsequently dissipated by the pressures of post-Enlightenment modernity; but which nevertheless offer a sliver of hope for contemporary and indeed future discourse about public affairs.⁷ For Habermas, the kind of ‘citizenship arrangements’ admired by Prak were a feature of Europe’s *ancien regimes* that this new and emergent public sphere superseded and ultimately destroyed.⁸ Rather than rooted in the *civic* and corporate structures of

5 M. Weber, *Economy and society. An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*, (eds. G. Roth and C. Wittich) (Berkeley 1968).

6 J. Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere. Inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (Cambridge 1992).

7 For digestible outlines of the argument see J.B. Thompson, *Ideology and modern culture. Critical social theory in the era of mass communication* (Cambridge 1990) 109–121; C. Calhoun, ‘Habermas and the public sphere’, in: Idem (ed.), *Habermas and the public sphere* (Cambridge (MA) 1992) 1–29.

8 G. Eley, ‘Nations, publics, and political cultures. Placing Habermas in the nineteenth century’, in: Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas*, 290–294.



Illustration 1 Interior of a London coffeehouse, c. 1690-1700 (source: *The British Museum*, 1931, 0613,1).

the traditional urban community, Habermas's public actors were private and bourgeois men freely engaging in *urbane* association that was independent of erstwhile institutions, roles and obligations. Although he never engages with Habermas or the story of 'structural transformation' told by him, Prak not only argues for the durability of those traditional roles but also demonstrates their recurring significance in allowing relatively ordinary people to speak and act publicly on matters integral to their personal and collective good. He also shows, like Habermas, how a particular mode of urban politics sat in dynamic tension with the power of the state: potentially complementary and supportive as well as critical and antagonistic. No matter their different methodologies, that is, Prak and Habermas both turn to pre-modern cities to find 'arrangements' or 'structures' of citizenship that might enrich, or even rescue, politics today. In doing so, each focuses on contrasting aspects of pre-modern urbanism: on the one hand, the traditional corporatism as reconstructed by Prak; on the other hand, the emergent urbanity invoked by Habermas. And in both instances, their account of citizenship runs the risk of idealism in the aspirational rather than the normative sense.

The aim of this short response is not to arbitrate between which of these evocations of pre-modern citizenship – and urbanism – is more historically redolent or especially relevant to the modern condition. This is in part because there was, and perhaps is, room for both: at least insofar as early modern England is concerned, it seems clear that civic and urbane publics were concurrent and increasingly important dynamics of urban, national and imperial politics throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Indeed, one of the great achievements of Prak's account is that corporate citizenship now has a meta-narrative to sit alongside the much more familiar story of print, coffeehouses, opinion, and civil society intimated by Habermas. But a more pressing question is the problem of idealism that dogged the early reception of Habermas's insights, certainly among English-speaking historians, and which could potentially dissipate the force of Prak's albeit more historically rooted analysis.

The charges levelled at Habermas are familiar enough. His study not only identified what he took to be the key aspects of 'bourgeois' public discourse – such as tact, disinterestedness, rationality, and an overwhelming commitment to the public good – but also elevated that discourse as a standard against which communication in the era of mass media should be measured.⁹ But in using the past in this way Habermas inevitably raised historical hackles.¹⁰ He was accused of mistaking philosophies of ratiocination from the period for the way people (men) behaved and talked in practice. He seemed oblivious to the inevitable social 'messiness' of public interaction and debate either in print or in person: the partisanship, violence, feuds, cliques, self-interest, and so on, that criss-crossed the coffeehouses and pamphlets of eighteenth-century Europe. Historians worried that he endorsed the structural inequalities and exclusions – particularly of class and gender – that had made such (improbable) discourse possible and pointed to the variety of public spaces and voices obfuscated by the Habermasian model. As with all important studies, these criticisms have stimulated much deeper, historicised, and variegated research into public discourse and association in the pre-modern world: in the English-speaking world as elsewhere, we are learning much more about these issues

9 Thompson, *Ideology and modern culture*, 109.

10 For an overview of English historiography see: P. Withington, 'Public discourse, corporate citizenship, and state formation in early modern England', *The American Historical Review* 112:4 (2007) 1021-1024.

since Habermas than before him.¹¹ But the same criticisms inevitably raise questions about the historical integrity of Habermas's contemporary philosophical interventions.

Prak, in contrast, recognises the problem of extracting what he regards to be estimable and reusable practices from their much murkier and messier historical contexts. Early on in *Citizens without Nations*, for example, he acknowledges that some readers may balk at what they 'consider an overly optimistic picture of premodern urban societies' and asks whether he is 'oblivious to the fact that these premodern towns and cities were pools of vice and violence, that they were regularly ravaged by plague and other diseases, that women and children, not to mention labourers and slaves were exploited there and that they were often ruled by greedy and corrupt elites?' His answer is that while he is 'aware of all these things', between antiquity and into the nineteenth century most communities, urban and rural, faced comparable conditions and behaviours. Moreover, just as the undoubted 'downsides of urban life' did not prevent huge numbers of people migrating to European cities before 1800, so they should not deflect from how 'citizenship arrangements could make an important contribution to the promotion of welfare in societies of this period more generally'.¹²

But what kind of 'citizenship arrangements' is it, exactly, that Prak is recommending we recover from the pre-modern world and integrate into our modern polities? Or to put that in Weberian terms as outlined here: what is the 'ideal type' – the normative culture, as opposed to aspirational ideal – he is excavating and reconstructing? And is it really as likely to be as empowering or effective as he suggests, either in the pre-modern or modern worlds?

The arrangements he delineates were appropriated and adapted by Europeans from the Greco-Roman world. At root is the creation of legally recognised 'bodies', or communities, that inhabitants of a particular place join and belong to in return for the privileges, customs, and re-

¹¹ The literature is vast but see, for example, B. Cowan, *The social life of coffee. The emergence of the British coffeehouse* (New Haven 2005); K. Davison, 'Occasional politeness and gentleman's laughter in eighteenth-century England', *The Historical Journal* 57:4 (2014) 921-945; P. Lake and S. Pincus (eds.), *The politics of the public sphere in early modern England* (Manchester 2012); J. Peacey, *Print and public politics in the English Revolution* (Cambridge 2013).

¹² Prak, *Citizens without nations*, 22.

sources held or claimed by the community. These communities have a broad population of male members and their household dependents (wives, children, apprentices, journeymen, servants) known variously as citizens, freemen, burgesses, burghers, and so on. They have institutional structures – usually in the form of councils, assemblies, and committees – by which the community of freemen and their dependents is governed and represented, and through which it connects to political institutions beyond the community's boundaries (whether with other cities or national organizations, like parliaments). They often have a legal identity and are recognised as 'artificial persons' who can (for example) sue and be sued in courts of law and chronicle the founding myths and histories of the community. They have material and institutional resources – such as public buildings, common lands, and the monopoly of trade, manufacture, and retail within the community's jurisdictions – as well as a developed sense of 'common weal' or 'well-being' (moral and natural as well as material). And they also have authority over urban inhabitants who are unable or unwilling formally to join the community as freemen. In England, for example, it became usual for the political institutions of the civic community also to serve as the locus of magisterial and monarchical power, so serving as a palimpsest of authority within the community's urban jurisdictions.¹³

The normative culture of these communities – these citizenship arrangements – are accordingly dictated by a number of overlapping 'practices' (as Prak describes them). First is the practice of *societas* or company; the willingness and/or ability of (male) householders to form or join different kinds of association within the community in order to go about their political, economic, spiritual, and social lives; and to speak and behave within these associations in the appropriate manner. Second is selection and election to and in these associations: the procedures by which citizens join particular companies, guilds, chantries, confraternities, vestries, assemblies, councils, committees, and so on; and then achieve particular positions, roles, and power within them. Third is the practice of voluntary public officeholding, both for citizens involved in the common councils, courts, and public assemblies through which the community is governed and represented and the generality of freemen required to take on public roles as constable, watchmen, churchwardens, guild officers, overseers of the poor, jury-

13 P. Withington, *The politics of Commonwealth. Citizens and freemen in early modern England* (Cambridge 2005).

men, and so on. These sets of practices are in turn informed by three (for want of a better word) cultural imperatives. First, the recognition that the rights and privileges of citizens are not innate. Rather they come with public roles, responsibilities and obligations and are specific to the particular communities in which they are claimed. Second, that citizenship is not simply a political identity, but also intersects with a person's economic, social, and even spiritual life. Not only does citizenship inflect on what people can do economically and socially. It also informs how they behave in different aspects of their lives. Third, that pre-modern citizenship is deeply connected to place. Although broadly comparable, practices of citizenship vary in their specifics from one city to the next; and each set of practices is embedded in the customs and environments of particular places.

Prak's book shows that these arrangements really were a significant source of public agency for quite ordinary people, and that when coupled with the co-ordinating power of states they contributed to commercial and imperial expansion. But, like any form of government, there are problems with this amalgamation of practices that were evident even before the critical gaze of French revolutionaries. Communities exclude in order to include: the rights, privileges, and resources located in them are, by definition, inaccessible to the excluded. Just as selection and election procedures were often designed to encourage oligarchies and cliques, so the onerousness of significant office-holding meant that those who needed to work for a living were politically disadvantaged. Pre-modern citizenship was deeply patriarchal and probably became more so over time. And what happens when ideologues seize control of civic institutions or, indeed, civic and national governors become antagonistic rather than collaborative?

Of course, in order to 'nest' pre-modern citizenship contemporaneously in the way envisaged by Prak, many of these issues can be addressed: civic office-holding can be remunerated rather than voluntary; election practices democratised rather than left to the contingencies of custom; patriarchy dismantled and the relationship between civic, national, and supra-national powers formalised – politics and logistics notwithstanding. But the problem of looking for modern solutions in the normative cultures of the pre-modern world remains: namely, even if these and other adaptations are made, is a culture of citizenship that prioritises collectivism, participation, duty, and particularism practically and

temperamentally commensurate with our modern habits and expectations of individualism, privacy, leisure, mobility, and universalism?

These are important questions that Prak encourages us to ask – the beginning of a conversation, perhaps, rather than an end. As a contribution to the dialogue I'd like to conclude by turning to early modern London and Daniel Defoe's famous account of the 1665 'great plague'.¹⁴ I do so because the current situation with COVID-19 is reminiscent, at least in certain respects, of the fear and devastation routinely caused by 'visitations' of the Second Plague Pandemic: there is (as yet) no vaccine for the virus or clear understanding of how it spreads, with the onus on governments rather than medics to prevent and deal with the spread of infection. Defoe accordingly wrote his brilliant *A Journal of the Plague Year* in 1722 in order to try to increase public and governmental awareness of the renewed threat of plague, which had most recently devastated Marseilles.¹⁵ Discussing the course and nature of the pandemic, the responses to it, and the pandemic's terrible impact and consequences, *A Journal* can be understood as a contribution to London's 'Habermasian' public sphere by a writer who was born into London's citizen community and retained close connections with its practical citizenship all his life.¹⁶

In terms of responding to the plague, a number of points jump out from the *Journal*. Most obviously, it was the citizens who took on the role of urban governance. The royal 'court removed early' from London, along with the city's lawyers and urbane gentry: they subsequently 'concerned themselves so little, and that little they did was of so little import, that I do not see it of much moment to mention any part of it here'.¹⁷ Instead it was the Lord Mayor, the merchant and haberdasher John Lawrence ('a very sober and religious gentleman'), who led the citizenry in coordinating the governmental response.¹⁸ This included redistributing money and provisions to poor inhabitants unable to flee to the country; ensuring the nursing of the infected and the collection and burial of bodies; consulting with the medical professions to publish authorised medical advice; publishing bylaws and maintaining order and

¹⁴ D. Defoe, *A journal of the plague year, etc.* (London 1722)

¹⁵ For the same reason he also published *Due preparations for the plague as well for soul as body* (London 1722).

¹⁶ M. Mowry, 'Introduction', in: D. Defoe, *Roxana*, (ed. M. Mowry) (Ontario 2009) 9-10.

¹⁷ Defoe, *Journal*, 19-21, 290.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

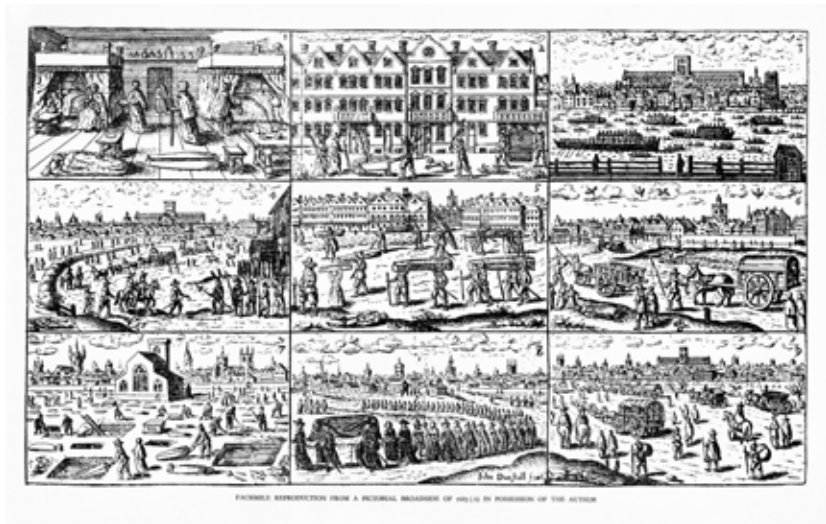


Illustration 2 Nine images of the Great Plague of London 1665 (source: Wellcome Collection).

equity; and ensuring two-way flows of communication between magistrates and the populace.¹⁹ More notoriously, it also involved appointing watchmen to incarcerate the entire members of infected households in their own homes in an attempt to limit the spread of infection.²⁰

Defoe was under no doubt that it was poorer inhabitants, citizens and non-citizens alike, who suffered most from the epidemic, with many dying unnecessarily because of the lack of pesthouses and the strategy of domestic imprisonment. He was also emphatic that a lack of preparation and foresight ‘as well public as private’ cost thousands of unnecessary lives.²¹ But he was also clear that the citizens and other ‘useful people’ who daily ‘ventured their Lives in Discharge of their Duty’ should be ‘honoured’. As well as the 36 clergymen, aldermen, physicians and surgeons who died he also remembered the more humble ‘Civil Officers, such as Constables, Headboroughs, Lord Mayor and Sheriff’s Men, as also Parish Officers, whose Business it was to take charge of the poor’ and who ‘did their Duties in general with as much courage as any, and perhaps with more.’²² He recalled ‘a great Number of them died’: in the parishes of Stepney and Whitechapel alone he knew

19 *Ibid.*, 110-113, 119, 178-179; 207-214, 242-244, 276-280.

20 *Ibid.*, 88, 180.

21 *Ibid.*, 140.

22 *Ibid.*, 273, 275.

of 46 parish officers who lost their lives – this ‘before the violent rage of the distemper in September came upon us’.²³

Prak does not discuss plague in *Citizens without nations*, but he could have done – how cities coped with it before the bio-medical advances of the nineteenth century reveals at once the importance of pre-modern citizenship to urban and national governance, the social depth of that response, and the technical and social limitations on its efficacy. In Defoe’s *Journal*, moreover, we find a citizen marshalling the experiences of practical citizenship for attention of the ‘public sphere’ in order to influence contemporary preparations and policy. Habermas helped us understand the significance of this public sphere; now Prak has done the same for practical citizenship. Even as plague revealed the fissures and inequalities that characterised urban society, so it was the practices and imperatives of citizenship – of duty, place, collectivism, and service to the common good – that enabled the city to survive. If COVID-19 has shown us anything, perhaps, it is that these practices and imperatives are more necessary than ever: that, as Prak insists, we can still learn from the pre-modern world.

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²³ *Ibid.*, 274.

