

Research project B4

Towns and Cities in Early Modern Europe: Political Culture and Public Order

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Project description

Research Project B4 examines processes of political and social integration in pre-modern urban communities from the middle of the 16th to the beginning of the 19th century. In this context, politics are understood as a meaningful occurrence in which – with respect to collectives – decisions are made and communicated so that they may claim a general legitimacy. Proceeding from this definition, the project studies the specific forms of how collectively binding decisions are communicatively produced and implemented in early modern towns and cities.

Hence, the project deals in a new way with questions that have fundamentally determined historical research on urban societies since its beginnings: How as a whole can the social and political order of late medieval and early modern towns and cities be described? And how within this framework can we understand the tensions observed time and again between corporative elements on the one hand, and increasing processes of oligarchisation and the forming of social hierarchies on the other hand? Research up to this point has commonly described social order in pre-industrial towns from the standpoint of one or the other extreme. It highlights either the “proto-democratic“ heritage of the early modern town under the keywords of “communalism“ and “republicanism“, or it accentuates the – in contrast to territorial states – lower capacities of such urban communities with respect to hierarchisation and bureaucratisation.

Approaches from communication theory make it possible to historicize its objects more consistently. Research is no longer limited to the institutional and normative structures of politics. Instead, the everyday practice of decision-making processes is foregrounded and with it the “political culture“, i.e., the concrete and often tactical deployment of institutions, norms, symbols, semantics or texts in communication under the specific medial and social conditions of the early modern town. Given that, the research projects developed a model of the political and social order of pre-modern towns and cities which is outlined by the concepts of “politics as authority“ and “society of presence or face-to-face society“.

At the beginning of the early modern period, urban politics were characterised by authoritative rule. The town councils scarcely disposed of concrete means for enforcing power. As a result, their political authority was constantly at risk – and not only in situations of greater conflicts or inner-urban revolts. The power of the town council was based primarily upon the economic and social capital e.g. honor of its members. Therefore the implementation of council decisions was also ultimately dependent on acceptance by the populace, i.e., the ruled. Hence, the classical guild-based model of the medieval town retained its prominent status as a reference point for political processes of communication for a long time.

The early modern town can be characterized as a society of presence or a face-to-face society in two ways. It was a society of presence in its political order. But it was also a society of presence as a social body. In terms of the political order of early modern towns and cities, the concept of a society of presence raises the question of which institutional forms and levels of differentiation could be gained by the primary use of oral communication in politics, as well as whether these societies were capable of solving problems commensurate with the social processes of differentiation and their dynamics.

The question which follows from this is whether the dynamics of this development altered the traditional forms of political communication among attendees, and whether urban politics thus attained a new structural and communicative quality. As one social framework, the early modern town was confronted with problems of management due to processes of functional differentiation and its sheer growth in size. This leads us to expect adaptations in oral communication, and these kinds of responses can be seen in the increasing legalization of questions of status. It remains to ask whether and how everyday communication in urban societies generally changed, since at the beginning of the 19th century at the latest the city is defined as the site of anomic social modernity.

Proceeding from these thoughts and observations, the project attempts to develop an independent answer to the central questions of urban history outlined above. It resolves the tensions between corporative and authoritative elements not by taking the standpoint of one side or the other, but by describing the paradoxical stability of this relationship as a constitutive element of the political culture of early modern towns and cities. In a final phase, the research of the project will be oriented to developing a larger European perspective out of the resulting evidence and conceptual-methodological approach.