

## Book reviews

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**Luke Giraudet**, *Public Opinion and Political Contest in Late Medieval Paris: The Parisian Bourgeois and His Community, 1400–1450*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2022. 328pp. 8 b/w images. €104.00 hbk.  
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During the twentieth century, social theorists like Jürgen Habermas and Norbert Elias contrasted a modern rationalized sphere of public action with the hierarchy-bound emotional Middle Ages. The resulting medieval stereotype placed unidirectional political communication by a limited elite of kings and clerics against largely irrational popular action by the ‘masses’. A limited and indirect reading of written reports by medieval contemporaries, surviving as narrative sources, functioned as the base for these sociological claims. One of these was the journal of an anonymous fifteenth-century Parisian known today as the *Journal d’un bourgeois de Paris*.

Luke Giraudet takes this exact same journal as his starting point to explore the public sphere of fifteenth-century Paris and challenge the long-standing stereotypical reading of political communication in the Middle Ages. While the medieval text itself has been extensively studied and edited by earlier generations of scholars, it has often been considered in isolation from its Parisian context, as the disinterested account of an external onlooker. Giraudet, on the other hand, recontextualizes the text and its author as active parts of a specific Parisian opinion community, situated in the politically charged atmosphere of the early fifteenth-century *Halles* district (chapter 1).

By doing so, Giraudet presents us with a more interactive interpretation of the *Journal*. His *bourgeois* did not just observe what people thought and did, but took an active part in shaping opinions and political messages through his text. As such, the book challenges some of the broader stereotypes of late medieval political action and communication that have plagued scholarship on the period. Here, we find no top down communication of political ideas and opinions and no irrational popular masses, but a strategic back and forth between Parisians and their authorities, between the *bourgeois* and his audience and between a written account and the word on the street.

To achieve this broad recontextualization of the *Journal*, Giraudet links the text to a variety of aspects of medieval communication as encountered in the medieval *Halles*. These include both official forms, like sentences and sermons (chapter 2), and officious ones, like rumour and revolt (chapter 3). Furthermore, they encapsulate the


communicative role of urban space (chapter 4) as well as processions and ceremonies (chapter 5). By coupling the internal evidence in the text of the *Journal* to an in-depth reading of recent French and English historiography on these diverse topics, Giraudet fleshes out not only the medieval text and its author, but presents a much broader image of how people talked politics in late medieval Paris.

Providing the *Journal* with such a broad theoretical foundation in late medieval processes of political communication has evident advantages. For one, it effectively counters criticism on the use of information-rich but strongly biased single-authored sources like the *Journal*. While Giraudet acknowledges the prominence of the authorial voice in the text, he also makes it abundantly clear how this voice was shaped by the *bourgeois*' contemporary informants and potential audiences, each adding their political concerns, discourses and expectations to the mix. Rather than constituting an elite propaganda copying machine, Giraudet convincingly argues, the *Journal* evidences how 'propaganda was consistently questioned, debated, accepted, rejected and even unrecognized' (p. 95).

The book also clearly shows how any real understanding of a late medieval public sphere can never be limited to textual evidence alone. The complex codification in the *Journal* of a heterogeneous and symbolic space like the Saints-Innocents parish church (p. 64) or of a publicly staged event like the execution of the Parisian *prévôt* Pierre des Essarts (p. 107) goes far beyond simple descriptions of what is there or what has come to pass. Instead, the text is caught up in broader processes of meaning-making and political negotiation that far surpass one format. The broad recontextualization of the *Journal* that Giraudet undertakes is therefore not just desirable, but essential.

The same richness of topics which underlines the *Journal's* broad socio-political foundation, however, also makes for very dense reading. Here, the reader would have wished for more clarity on the overall argumentative structure of the book to guide them through this wide-ranging matter. Regularly, the book leaves its reader with few handholds to grasp the relevance of a specific statement or topic, nor its exact relation to the broader argument that it should support. For instance, chapter 1 contains several important arguments about the *Journal's* relation to urban space and orality without giving a clear sense of how these might serve as stepping stones for a further treatment of these topics in later chapters. Similarly, at the beginning of chapter 4, what starts off as an introductory paragraph on urban spaces as 'realms of contest', quickly heads into various directions, including the common good, public-private divisions, gendered space, female publicity, site-specific communication forms, streets and, finally, defensive structures, which, while highly relevant in their own right, leave the reader unsure as to the central premise of the chapter. In all such cases, some form of argumentative road map, either as part of the general introduction or of individual chapters, would have greatly helped the reader find their way.

Notwithstanding such criticism, Giraudet's book offers an important contribution to our understanding of late medieval political communication, moving away from long-standing stereotypical imaginings of a rigid, hierarchy-bound medieval public sphere. What is more, he does so by convincingly recontextualizing a text that has in the past served exactly such medieval stereotypes, thus taking the problem out by the root.

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