

1 FORMAL CITIZENSHIP

On 26 October 1311, Gerino di ser Tano, a native of Casole, a village about twelve miles to the west of Siena in Tuscany, appeared before five Sieneſe officials to make a formal declaration and a payment.¹ Some hours before, the Nine Governors and Defenders of the Commune and People of Siena – effectively the local government and colloquially known as the Nine – had approved Gerino’s petition for citizenship of their community. A document had been drawn up to that effect by their notary and presumably it was this document, handed to Gerino, that prompted him to appear before the treasurer and four *Provedori* representing the *Biccherna*, the financial council. Gerino paid them the citizenship dues of 100 *soldi* or five pounds. In compliance with a recently introduced ruling he also pledged to build, within a year, a house in Siena worth at least 100 pounds. Five years previously, in an attempt to prevent alien merchants from circumventing the local export duties by acquiring citizenship of the town, the Nine had ruled that henceforth citizens would be required to live in Siena: citizens must be residents. To underwrite his pledge, Gerino was accompanied by two guarantors, Ser Nello di Giovanni, a notary, and Cino di messer Tinaccio, probably also a notary. A second official document was duly produced. Two days later, the city council took the necessary vote to make Gerino a citizen. Of course this too was recorded in an official document. Later that same day the *podestà*, Ranieri di Sasso Gabrielle from Gubbio, who was Siena’s formal, albeit temporary head of government, officially granted Gerino the city’s citizenship. Immediately

Gerino returned to the treasurer and four *Provvedori*, whom he had met two days before, to register his properties in the tax register.

A year later, on 21 October 1312, Gerino again visited the Palazzo Pubblico, Siena's town hall, to meet with the treasurer and four *Provvedori*, together with his two guarantors. This time it was to declare that he had kept his promise and built a house in the district of San Pietro in Castelvecchio. Its exact location was recorded. Five days later he returned once more and this time handed the *Biccherna* officials a document which stated that he had met all the requirements for citizenship status, and that he submitted his house to the community as security against any debts he might incur in the future and that could otherwise be held against the community as a whole. The next day a document was produced, demonstrating that one month earlier Gerino had acquired the plot on which his house was built. Two other *Biccherna* officials came in to declare that they had inspected the property, and valued it at more than 100 pounds. Yet another document was produced, stating that this declaration had been accepted.

Italian archives of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries abound with documents relating to the acquisition of citizen status. Most of those documents required citizens to own local real estate and pay taxes; in return citizens were entitled to a fair trial, could join a guild and could participate in public offices.² Apart from the fact that a lot of individuals were clearly making a living from writing up official papers in early fourteenth-century Siena and similar towns, Gerino's story also demonstrates that he and many others valued formal citizenship. What was it that they valued, and to what extent did the acquisition of formal citizenship set Gerino and his fellow citizens apart from the other inhabitants in a town like Siena? These are two of the questions this chapter has to answer. In a nutshell, I argue two things. The first is that, at the end of the day, formal citizenship had its greatest impact in two areas: access to the guilds and access to high office. This was relevant, of course, for those aspiring to join a guild or hoping to be elected to high office, but many people either did not have these ambitions or did not expect to achieve them for reasons other than the obstacles they faced to the acquisition of formal citizenship. My second point is that formal citizenship nonetheless turned out to be more accessible than is often assumed on the basis of a narrow set of infamous examples, like Berne or Venice. At the same time, as we shall see, there was much more to citizenship than legal status. In the next

chapters I discuss citizenship practices that were available to citizens and non-citizens alike. The final section of this chapter also explores how citizenship became the core element of urban ‘imagined communities’, in Benedict Anderson’s now classic phrase.³ That imagination could take many forms, but one of the default patterns throughout our period was what I call ‘urban republicanism’. Urban republicanism did not care too much about the formal aspects of citizenship; it could easily cover those who were not formal citizens but still participated in citizenship practices.

Citizens’ Rights and Duties

Going back to Siena for a moment, it is worth noting that the community that Gerino di ser Tano had joined was a less-than-straightforward sociopolitical sector of society. In Siena citizenship came in a variety of shapes, none entirely clear-cut. First of all, those who, like Gerino, had applied for citizenship needed a two-thirds majority of the city council to approve their applications. Most of these citizens, incidentally, came from non-citizen families already living in Siena, while others had inherited the status from their parents. If their families had been long-established citizens, they would be called *cives antique, veri et naturales* – ancient, genuine and natural citizens. The language made clear that these were elevated, at least in status, above the more recent *cives assidui*. In practice, however, little divided the two categories. A third type of citizen comprised those who resided outside the town’s perimeter, the *cives silvestres*, or out-burghers. Finally, Siena had a group of households without citizen status, the *habitatores assidui*, or permanent residents. On paper they were the lowliest sort, but in reality there was not much of a difference between them and the citizens, except that they could not participate in politics and administration. These mere inhabitants were mainly distinguished from the citizens because they were usually workers, whereas the citizens tended to be middle-class artisans and shopkeepers, or upper-class merchants and lawyers. Among the out-burghers no such distinction existed, because often whole villages had been granted citizenship at the same time; it was a way for Siena to buy the loyalty of the *contado*, the hinterland under the control of the city.⁴ So when we talk about citizens, we have to be aware that they came in different sorts. On paper it all looked very neat; in practice the distinctions could be quite messy.

This was also true because citizenship arrangements differed from town to town, and from country to country. In German towns, citizens were at one and the same time members of a juridical and privileged community and a sworn association. Swearing the citizens' oath entailed membership in the community.⁵ In eighteenth-century Augsburg, and in other towns in southern Germany, the citizens' oath was annually confirmed on the *Schwörtag*, the day of oaths.⁶ The citizen swearing the oath in sixteenth-century Cologne confirmed that he was not subject to any other lord, that he did not bring along any debts or other issues that would burden the community; he promised fealty to the city and its council and to uphold the local constitution, and finally to maintain proper relations with the other citizens and inhabitants of the city.⁷

The creation of sworn communities was the result of a long process of urban emancipation that started in Italy and subsequently emerged in other parts of Europe. The Roman Empire had been subdivided into administrative districts called 'civitates'. In later centuries the term had narrowed down to the bishops' sees, a process still captured in the distinction made in English between a city, i.e. the capital of a diocese, and a town. Later still, during the Viking era, walled places also became known as towns. It was among the inhabitants of such places that *coniuratio*s were instituted, for the sake of mutual support and protection. In some places, for example, York, these *coniuratio*s took the form of a guild, usually a merchant guild.⁸ Guilds and urban communities thus became closely related, and in many, probably most, medieval and early modern towns, membership in guilds required citizenship. In some places, all inhabitants were even required to join a guild and thus become citizens.⁹

The community, rather than its individual members, had received various rules and regulations that allowed it to take care of its business. An important element was always the establishment of a local court of justice, regulating conflicts between citizens.¹⁰ Because the judges were themselves citizens, citizenship entailed the right to peer justice. At the same time, the city itself had acquired legal status and permission to create its own regulations and organisations. These organisations are the topic of subsequent chapters, so we need not deal with them in great detail here. Suffice it to say, that for many of them, formal citizen status was a prerequisite for membership. This was most consistently true for merchant and craft guilds, but in the Middle Ages this

equally applied to militia guilds, and even to many welfare institutions. As time progressed militias were reformed and thrown open to non-citizens. Similarly, as more general welfare institutions were founded, these were opened to all inhabitants.

Another early privilege all urban communities obtained was the right to rule themselves. That right was always conditional on the approval of the sovereign. Only a handful of European towns were city-states (Venice, Florence and several others in Italy; perhaps Berne in the Swiss Confederacy); the others were ultimately dependent on the goodwill of the crown. That goodwill was certainly not automatically forthcoming.¹¹

As formal members of their community, citizens were entitled to participate in local governance. Members of the town council and other high offices were everywhere required to have formal citizen status. Active citizenship, on the other hand, was much more varied. Some towns held elections for the council; in others there was a division between a self-recruiting smaller council that took care of everyday business and a larger council elected by the citizens.¹²

Participation in elections, or even in the administration of the city and its institutions, was perhaps the most important but by no means the only privilege of those holding formal citizenship status.¹³ As we see in greater detail in Chapter 3, in most places only citizens had the right to open a shop or workplace, at least if their trade was incorporated. In many German towns, but also sometimes in other regions, the ownership of real estate was restricted to citizens.¹⁴ Urban privileges relieved citizens of various toll duties, although it is not quite clear how significant this was. In Lyon, for example, citizens were exempted from the *taille* on their rural properties, and had the exclusive right to open a wine tavern, or *cabaret bourgeois*.¹⁵ In other French towns, citizens could import their wine without being taxed.¹⁶ Finally, citizens might enjoy social privileges. Amsterdam, for example, had a separate orphanage for citizens' children and another for non-citizens'. Standards of education and provisioning were so much higher in the former that local authorities assumed that these benefits attracted people to apply for citizen status who would otherwise not do so.¹⁷ At the same time, taking up citizen status required one to live locally, pay taxes, assume the burden of office when called upon and assist in the military defence of the town – in other words: support the community.¹⁸ In English towns, the freeman's oath explicitly linked these three

elements: the payment of taxes, the participation in local administration and government and the subjection of one's person and property to the local courts.¹⁹

The rights and duties of citizens thus covered many areas of public life, and could vary across time and space. Not in all of them was the formal distinction between citizens and inhabitants as clear-cut as legal documents suggested.²⁰ Female citizens in practice did not enjoy the full range of rights and thus were closer to the mere inhabitants; their citizenship has been characterised as 'passive', or 'latent'.²¹ On the other hand, those mere inhabitants paid taxes just as much as citizens did, and they served equally in civic militias. In three major European countries, however, much of this distinction did not even apply in legal terms.

In Spain very little distinction was made between town and countryside. On one hand, farmers – and their animals – lived in towns, while on the other hand, even the smallest settlements had urban privileges and their inhabitants were citizens, or *vecinos*.²² 'He who lives in a settled house in these kingdoms must be considered a citizen', it was said during a discussion in Seville in the 1770s.²³ Local residence did not automatically make one a citizen, however. Immigrants had to marry a citizen, or otherwise purchase citizenship. And even the locals had to petition the council to validate their citizenship. These procedures required the production of various documents proving a legal marriage to a citizen, or indeed proof of one's citizen ancestry. Over the course of the eighteenth century the paperwork increased as urban authorities, in an effort to make citizenship more exclusive, began demanding more documentary evidence. Spanish citizens were expected to pay taxes and to participate in the local meetings called *concejo abierto*, or open council. Women and children were also welcome to these meetings, an extraordinary feature of Spanish law. Women were otherwise limited in the exercise of their citizenship and could not even apply for it unless they were widows.

In many French towns, little distinction was made between citizens and other inhabitants. There were no formal procedures for obtaining citizen status; in most French towns this occurred automatically following residence for a variable number of years.²⁴ In Paris, which did have a procedure for acquiring citizenship, one became *bourgeois du roi*, rather than a citizen of the city. Only from the sixteenth century onwards do the sources also speak of *bourgeois de Paris*, a status that was primarily attractive because it provided

exemption from certain national taxes.²⁵ French citizenship discourse was oriented towards the state. It had its roots in Roman law, but was also inspired by the ideas developed in Renaissance city-states. One of the arguments deployed by sixteenth-century French jurists who wrote about this topic was that France was really ‘one great city’, a fiction which allowed them to apply to a national framework ideas about citizenship that were developed in an urban context.²⁶

In one way or another, all early modern European states were struggling with this problem: if citizenship as a formal status was a local institution, what did this imply for loyalties to the state and its sovereign? In most countries the relationship between local citizens and the sovereign was mediated by the local authorities, who represented the urban citizen community in national institutions. In France two distinct terms were used: *citoyen* denoted the person’s relationship with the sovereign, i.e. the king, whereas *bourgeois* defined his relationship with the local community. The status of *citoyen* was, however, only formalised for foreigners. Like the *bourgeois de Paris*, this institution was primarily tax-driven. The property of foreigners who passed away on French soil would automatically fall to the crown. One could avoid this eventuality by acquiring citizenship, becoming a *citoyen*. On average some fifty individuals a year, overwhelmingly clergymen and merchants residing in France, took out this form of insurance against the possible confiscation of their goods and capital.²⁷ In a country of twenty million, the *citoyen* was a marginal figure.

In Muscovy, the government insisted on a direct relationship with its citizens and, for instance, organised open assemblies in Moscow where ordinary people were invited to discuss national policies. The authorities likewise encouraged the submission of petitions, and many individuals as well as collectives used that opportunity. In the Russian context, however, there was no idea of freedom in the sense of protection against the power of the state.²⁸ Nor were there any of the intermediate institutions that embodied those freedoms elsewhere in Europe – even in France.

Citizenship, understood as a legal category, thus meant a variety of things in different parts of Europe. It also changed with time; in some regions (e.g. France) formal citizenship rights became more circumscribed by the state; in other regions (e.g. the Dutch Republic) new possibilities emerged for citizenship. Stated more bluntly: there was no single European model of citizenship. In its most common form,

citizenship was a formal status in an urban, i.e. local, context, which provided citizens with a range of rights and duties that spanned the juridical, political, economic and social realms. These local citizens were tied into the wider national community through the relationships between local and national authorities. Local authorities brokered between their own citizens and the state. This model applied in most countries, but France and Russia were major exceptions. In those countries, formal urban citizenship was weakly developed, and national citizenship rights were poorly articulated. Nevertheless, the existence of citizenship as membership in a specific community inevitably created a boundary between insiders and outsiders. So how did one transform from one into the other? And what did it mean for those left in the cold?

Modes of Access

On a European scale there were two main routes into citizenship: birth ('patrimony') and purchase. It is relatively easy to establish the scale of the second route, because records were kept. We therefore also have a better idea of the procedures followed by those who purchased their citizen status. The so-called born citizens seem to have often taken their status for granted. In Frankfurt, for example, the authorities urged citizens' sons to report to the city hall and have their status ratified, but the surviving registers suggest that such summonses were less than completely successful.²⁹ In Amsterdam people born into citizenship do crop up in the registers, but in such small numbers that they must have constituted a mere fraction of the actual number of people in a position to claim citizen status.³⁰ Does this mean that such status held little significance? Not necessarily; there could be other explanations for this lack of official registration. One, no doubt, would have been cost-effectiveness on both sides: for many it would be unduly time-consuming to go and register, while the local administration would have found it a laborious task keeping a record of so many names. There were alternative ways of establishing one's citizen status. If the need arose, neighbours and family friends would testify that the individual's parents were citizens, and such testimony was, it seems, accepted as legal proof.³¹ In some towns, for example in the Duchy of Brabant, it made no difference whether one's parents were citizens: being born locally sufficed to qualify for citizenship.³² This may also have been true in Venice.³³

For immigrants, however, this was not an option; they would have to access citizenship in different ways. One possibility was to marry somebody who already qualified as a citizen. Citizenship was usually passed on through marriage. If there was no opportunity to woo a local lass or lad, the only alternative was to purchase citizenship, an option that is further discussed in the next section. In England, though not in other countries, apprenticeship offered immigrants a cheap route into citizenship; those who completed their apprenticeship in a particular English town qualified almost automatically for local citizenship.³⁴

A third possible route into citizenship – in specific cases, at least – was by gift of the local community as a token of respect or gratitude. In the Dutch Republic, for instance, ministers of the official Reformed Church would be granted citizenship in towns where they were asked to take up a position.³⁵ Perhaps more interesting, urban authorities might bestow free citizenship on refugees or other immigrants whom they wanted to attract to their town or city. Huguenots were given free citizenship in this way in many European towns.³⁶ In 1745 the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce proposed to give free citizenship to every entrepreneur willing to settle locally.³⁷ Despite such examples, however, it was unusual to be given citizen status for free, and in terms of numbers citizenship thus acquired remained a marginal phenomenon.³⁸

In Frankfurt in 1834 women led a quarter of all citizen households.³⁹ This was remarkable, not least because in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries a mere 5 per cent of newly registered citizens in Frankfurt had been female. This had been the normal pattern; only in a handful of towns was more than 10 per cent of newly registered citizens female.⁴⁰ It has been claimed that women in the German lands were increasingly marginalised as citizens during the early modern period,⁴¹ but the very low numbers of the late Middle Ages suggest that they had never been substantially represented. In the Dutch towns of the Overijssel region the percentage of registered female citizens likewise varied, but rarely rose above 5 per cent, either in the Middle Ages or subsequently.⁴² In Amsterdam 203 out of 6,642 registered citizens in 1636–51 were females, i.e. 3 per cent.⁴³ These Dutch numbers, however, refer to immigrants rather than natives; among locally born citizens, who inherited their status from their parents, the percentage must have been around fifty.

Immigrants and Obstacles

Demographic historians have claimed that premodern towns were subject to an ‘urban graveyard’ effect.⁴⁴ As a result of overcrowding and poor hygiene, urban populations tended to decrease rather than increase. According to this thesis, immigration was necessary just to maintain a stable population. Obviously, urban growth would have required very substantial numbers of immigrants. Critics of this view have insisted that the effect did not necessarily occur in all premodern towns. Nevertheless, it is now generally accepted that immigration was already a regular feature of urban life in the sixteenth century and probably earlier.⁴⁵ Communities would have had to deal with the problem of how to accommodate and integrate these newcomers one way or another, and formal citizenship was part of that process. Middle-sized German towns in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries routinely registered 1–1.3 per cent of their population stock as new citizens every year. This suggests that immigrants comprised between one fifth and one third of the population – depending on life-span and the hidden number of non-citizens.⁴⁶

Formal citizenship was not an option for everyone wishing to settle as a newcomer in an urban community.⁴⁷ And while some people found themselves excluded, others simply did not bother: if one did not aspire to office, or did not have the means to open one’s own business, possession of formal citizenship offered no immediate advantage. Indeed, immigrants faced a range of obstacles. These were invariably financial – but never merely that. One of the most common – albeit very often implicit – requirements was religious conformity. Non-Christians would find it impossible in most premodern towns to obtain citizenship. Even in Amsterdam, with its reputation for tolerance, the earliest Jews were only allowed to apply for citizenship under the pretence that they were indeed Christians.⁴⁸ In 1632 Jews were allowed to become full citizens as Jews, without the need for dissimulation. Restrictive conditions did, however, still apply: Jewish citizens could not pass on their citizenship to their children, and they were not permitted to join the guilds, which for others was perhaps the single most important reason to become a citizen in the first place.⁴⁹ At least Amsterdam did not discriminate among Christians. In nearby Utrecht, Catholic applicants for citizenship were only considered if they were born within the province of Utrecht. It was later added that exceptions could be made ‘for

important, particular reasons', i.e. if the candidate was useful to the city. In 1724 Dutch Catholics were declared eligible for citizenship in Utrecht if they could produce a letter of support from a Reformed (!) consistory. Several other Dutch towns introduced similar legislation in the course of the seventeenth century.⁵⁰

In medieval Germany, dozens of towns had a special citizen status for Jews, sometimes remarkably similar to the rights of Christians, at other times a severely restricted version.⁵¹ In the early modern period, some German towns welcomed Portuguese (Sephardic) Jews, but refused to admit Ashkenazi Jews from Central Europe. Frankfurt, however, did the exact opposite in 1609, when a group of Portuguese Jews from Venice was refused residence.⁵² In the early seventeenth century, Frankfurt had possibly the largest Jewish community in Germany, but during the so-called Fettmilch Uprising in 1614 the ghetto was plundered and its inhabitants expelled. They were subsequently allowed to return under special imperial protection. In 1694 the Frankfurt ghetto was home to some 260 families.⁵³ In Spain, only Catholics could become citizens; Jews and Muslims had their own legal framework and were excluded from participating in local affairs.⁵⁴ In France, Protestants were likewise excluded from citizenship; they were 'subjects of the king without being citizens', according to a treatise on the marriage of Protestants from 1775. Louis XIV himself had claimed in 1715 that there were no longer any Protestants left in France. Possibly with this fiction in mind, it had been ordered in 1724 that all civil acts, such as the registration of births, marriages and deaths, had to be passed before a parish priest. Only in 1787 did Protestants gain the right to register before either a parish priest or a royal judge. Jews were not included in the legislation of 1787.⁵⁵

The financial obstacles, however, applied everywhere. In German towns it usually took thirty to forty days of unskilled labour to pay for one's citizenship dues. A similar amount was required in most Dutch towns, but in Amsterdam it was in the order of sixty days.⁵⁶ Amsterdam's citizenship dues had been quite modest in the early seventeenth century, but they were raised several times before 1650, when they reached fifty guilders. Much of that money went to welfare institutions that had problems coping with the increased demand for support. There is little evidence of any attempt to stem the tide of immigrants, however; it rather appears that Amsterdam was trying to profit from the demand for local citizenship.⁵⁷ In some towns in the southern

Netherlands, and even more so in England, purchasing citizenship could be a very expensive process, requiring half a year or more of unskilled wages.⁵⁸ Obviously this might have affected immigrant numbers.

Numbers

Formal citizenship arrangements had features of both inclusion and exclusion: inclusion, because they allowed aliens to join the urban community formally, and enjoy its privileges; exclusion, because various sorts of obstacles were usually put in the way of those wanting citizenship. What one wants to know is what effect all of this had on the numbers of people actually acquiring formal citizen status in European towns. Numerical data alone will never resolve the question of which side of the equation was the more dominant factor, but if the percentage of citizens in urban populations could be established, that knowledge would in itself help us to get a sense of the balance between the two. Fortunately, those, like Gerino di ser Tano, aspiring to become citizens had to be registered. As a result of this registration, historians have at their disposal detailed lists of the names, as well as in many cases places of origin, of the new citizens in a great many European towns, often going back well into the Middle Ages. For the historian of citizenship, however, the registers – which at first sight might appear to be a treasure trove – create two formidable problems. The first one is to establish who were actually registered; the second is to transform the ‘flow’ figures into ‘stocks’ that allow us to get a sense of the percentage of the urban population included in formal citizenship arrangements.⁵⁹

Given the fact that various modes of access allowed aspiring citizens to join the community, any registration had to deal with that variety. As far as we can tell, urban authorities recorded meticulously those who joined from outside and who, like Gerino, had to pay for their citizenship status. The problems began with those acquiring citizenship under private arrangements, i.e. inheriting it from their citizen parents, or men marrying a daughter from a citizen family. Data from Amsterdam suggest that the registration of these citizens was an erratic affair.⁶⁰ In many other towns, the addition of places of origin equally demonstrates that citizenship registers normally dealt with immigrants, and only rarely with locals acquiring citizen status.⁶¹ This makes it more difficult to gauge what part of the citizen community had local roots.

The second problem has to do with the administrative procedure providing our sources of information. New citizens were registered when their applications had been accepted. As a result, we know who joined the community and when – the inflow. What we do not know is when citizens left again, or passed away – the outflow. Clearly, the authorities were not interested in this, and for census purposes (mostly created with taxation in mind), the citizenship status of the population was not seen as a relevant factor. Only rarely do the sources produce a stock of citizens, such as we have for Nuremberg in 1622 when, out of a total of 10,069 registered households, the households of citizens numbered 8,939, i.e. 89 per cent.⁶² In other places, we may have population numbers, or the number of households, at specific moments in time, i.e. stock numbers, but for new citizens we may have only the in-flows. A methodology, developed by Chris Minns, has recently enabled us for the first time to transform those flows into stocks of new citizens, which can be divided by the urban population to obtain percentages of citizens and thus give us some sense of the quantitative dimension of formal citizenship. It is important to keep in mind that, given several assumptions required to transform flows into stocks, this methodology does not produce exact numbers, and the percentages quoted here are therefore indications of the approximate size of the citizen share in populations. However, even these indications can give us some clues as to the quantitative impact of formal citizenship. We can calculate these percentages in two ways: by individuals or by households. As the citizen registers only list the heads of households and provide no clues about how many dependants were included in the registration – spouses and newly born children would become citizens automatically (passive citizenship) – I use household rather than individual rates.

Our data are confined to north-west Europe and cover towns and cities in England, the Low Countries and the Holy Roman Empire. In the majority of the ten English towns, nine in the Low Countries and sixteen in the Holy Roman Empire, the majority of households were headed by someone with citizen status. The rates could be as high as 75 per cent or more in places like Antwerp and Ghent throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, or in Frankfurt during the seventeenth century and Cologne during the eighteenth, and still more than two-thirds in, for example, Bristol (1700–49) and York (1650–99). Some towns registered low figures: Canterbury in the sixteenth

century, Berlin in the eighteenth. Classifying these rates in a more systematic way reveals that out of eighty-five half-century observations, forty-three showed rates of 60 per cent and over, twenty-seven fell between 40 and 59 per cent and fifteen fell below the 40 per cent threshold.⁶³ In other words, in half the observations a clear majority of households were headed by formal citizens, whereas in only a sixth of our observations did citizens constitute a minority of households. These estimates are corroborated by dispersed figures for various German towns: the vast majority of Wetzlar's 2,500 inhabitants were citizens at the end of the seventeenth century; in Augsburg 87 per cent of households were headed by a citizen in 1730, in Hamburg about 60 per cent in 1759, but perhaps just under half in Cologne in 1704.⁶⁴ All of this seems to suggest that formal citizenship was accessible to many urban households, but also that this was not the case for all households, nor true for all towns.

It is not clear what gave rise to the distinctions.⁶⁵ There was no 'national' pattern, as in each of the four countries investigated here we find both high and low values. There were no dramatic shifts between centuries. It is true that most of the low rates stem from the eighteenth century, but for those towns where we have observations for both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we see no clear downward trend in the percentages of citizen households. The distribution between high and low rates in the second half of the sixteenth century is close to the average. Neither was it the case that large towns made citizenship more accessible than smaller towns: the rates in Amsterdam – around 50 per cent – were much lower than those obtained in middle-sized Utrecht and 's-Hertogenbosch. Similarly, the small town of Nördlingen, site of a famous battle during the Thirty Years' War and only slowly recovering from the combined shocks of warfare and plague, had a much higher percentage of immigrants in its citizen stock than Berlin, capital of the expanding Brandenburg state and itself a city that was rapidly growing.⁶⁶ London was very expensive for those wanting to purchase citizenship, but grew nonetheless at a very fast rate during the early modern period. The percentage of citizens declined in London, but this had more to do with the growth of the suburbs, where no formal citizenship was available, than with a decline in the popularity of the institution as such. In the City of London at least three quarters of heads of households were citizens in the early nineteenth century.⁶⁷

Urban Republicanism

Formal citizenship created a legal and political community. At the same time it created an ‘imagined community’, i.e. an ideological construct that shaped citizens’ actions and discourse. That community was not necessarily restricted to those with formal citizenship, but the discourse would have failed without the core elements of formal citizenship. Although citizenship featured as such in this discourse, it was also implicit in all matters of guild membership, which was central to many of the claims arising from the citizens’ community, as we can see in the two petitions that were submitted in 1378 by the collective guilds of Louvain to their town council and to the Duke of Brabant, their sovereign.⁶⁸ Although the texts were written in Dutch, rather than the French employed in most official documents, the wording clearly displayed the contribution of an author with legal training. In all probability, the petitioners hoped that their proposals might be converted directly into law.

Apart from some minor points, the petitions raised four general concerns. First and foremost, the guilds demanded more transparency in the administration of their town. More specifically, they insisted that the council provide annual public account of its handling of tax receipts, a claim already voiced in an earlier petition in 1360. To be sure, the objective was not to lower taxes, but simply to know how the money had been spent. Their second point was also financial: they insisted on a public inquiry into the size and funding of the town’s public debt. This was important, because citizens could be arrested outside Louvain when creditors of the town so demanded. But transparency was also at stake in relation to this point, because there were suspicions that elite families had been manipulating the debt to their own advantage. To ensure such transparency in future, the guilds of Louvain demanded representation on the city council. They insisted that half the aldermen seats go to the ‘good folks of the guilds’. Finally, the guilds demanded more autonomy: ‘Also, that the guilds of this town can regulate themselves and meet whenever they want in the interest of the town.’ Meetings without previous permission from the town council were very unpopular with the elites, because they would almost inevitably create trouble – or even revolution. A century and a half later, when Emperor Charles V sought to curb guild influence in urban constituencies, he made sure that such meetings could only take place after they had been authorised by the

council. In Utrecht, moreover, no two guilds were allowed to meet on the same date.⁶⁹

In the mid-fifteenth century, calls for an overhaul of local government were voiced in towns across Europe. In Bruges, not so far from Louvain and at that time a linchpin of early capitalist networks, the guilds were able to restore their dominant role in government in 1477, after a previous revolution, in 1437–38, had resulted in a reduction of their powers. In 1480 the guild deans stated in the Great Council that their opinions were ‘by charge of their people [members], who had gathered for that purpose’.⁷⁰ Across the North Sea, in York, the guild ‘searchers’, as the deans were called there, were again the initiators of a series of petitions, and at times of rebellions, to support a ‘coherent and feasible political programme’, consisting of four core elements. The citizens, united in their guilds, insisted on political and financial accountability and on the defence of urban privileges, including those of the guilds themselves. But uppermost in their minds was, according to the historians who recently investigated these popular movements, their ‘unwavering commitment to the city’s autonomy’.⁷¹

In Florence ‘guild republicanism’, or ‘popular republicanism’, emerged in the final decade of the thirteenth century.⁷² The Florentine Republic, it was claimed in 1343, ‘is ruled and governed by the guilds and guildsmen of the same city’.⁷³ In 1378 the guilds stated that their explicit purpose was to enhance ‘the liberty, security, and tranquility of the twenty-one guilds and of each and every guildsman of the city of Florence’.⁷⁴ Later that same year a list of recommendations filed on behalf of the guilds requested that reforms be discussed with the Consuls of the guilds, ‘so that, if all or parts of these proposals become law, it will have been done with the agreement and consent of the guild Consuls; and then it can truly be said that it has been done with the consent of the whole city’.⁷⁵ The ideology that the guilds managed to impose on Florence’s electoral system during several brief interludes in the fourteenth century was specifically opposed to the formation of a political elite with its own programme. The latter would develop into civic, or classical republicanism. Whereas the elites aimed at virtual representation, the guilds wanted genuine popular influence, and while the elites insisted that they represented the ‘whole people’, i.e. on an individual basis, the guilds’ conception of the community was corporatist.⁷⁶

This opposition between collective and individual citizenship was echoed in the Dutch Republic at the end of the eighteenth century in

debates about political unification. Whilst in the Dutch corporatist tradition ‘the people’ had been the sum total of local communities, claims were now made in the name of one ‘indivisible’ nation, whose representatives were no longer the delegate of a single urban community with its citizen membership, but of all Dutch citizens, as individuals.⁷⁷ In a similar fashion, the civic opposition in the town of Ulm, in southern Germany, claimed in 1794 that the town’s constitution ‘is republican’. What this meant for Ulm’s citizens, and for similar protesters in other imperial cities in the same region, was an insistence on the fundamental equality between citizens and the towns’ officials, on the maintenance of ‘liberty’ as a fundamental value, and that members of the town council should refrain from pursuing their self-interest.⁷⁸ Citizenship was – and still is – at one and the same time an individual status and the membership of a collective. In the wake of the French Revolution this collective identity was transferred from the local to the national level and, in the process, the individual elements in citizenship were foregrounded.⁷⁹ In the preceding centuries these individual elements had been much less in evidence.

The consistency of these demands – found in towns great and small, and from the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries – demonstrates that they emanated from a single worldview, or ideology.⁸⁰ In terms of theoretical sophistication this view was not particularly well developed, but nonetheless it proved quite persistent. German historian Heinz Schilling has labelled this worldview ‘urban republicanism’.⁸¹ The core of urban republicanism, as Schilling defined it, was the citizens’ desire to participate in one way or another in the exercise of political power. This was an argument for collective forms of representation, usually through civic organisations, of which the guilds, parishes or neighbourhoods and civic militias were the most obvious. An underlying assumption was that those organisations had mechanisms, for instance general assemblies, in which individual citizens might raise concerns, but at the same time the individual voice was seen as less important than the collective expression of opinions by these corporate organisations. Because of the centrality of corporate organisations, ‘urban republicanism’ might also be called ‘corporatism’ or ‘communalism’.⁸²

Given the importance of representation, urban republicanism had to insist on the collective nature of urban rule. This was connected to two other elements in this ideology: assumptions about the original state of the civic community, and the balancing of interests. On various

occasions, petitioners stated that the right to representation went back to the general assemblies of citizens as they had existed in the period immediately after the foundation of the community. As a pamphlet from Leiden added in 1748: when the community grew in size, such assemblies had become impractical and the administration had been delegated to a smaller group of individuals.⁸³ That group mirrored the community in that it was composed of people who had formal citizen status, and because it should never be dominated by a single individual or family. Collective rule prevented the interests of a small minority from dominating the urban administrative agenda.⁸⁴ For the same reason, corporatist ideologues would insist on the rotation of offices: this would return officeholders to the ranks of ordinary citizens and therefore remind them that misbehaviour in office would be corrected, and possibly punished, by the next person in that same office.⁸⁵ Delegation, at the same time, did not mean that ordinary citizens had abandoned their right to be informed, for example about public finances. Ultimately, such claims were founded on the citizens' fundamental rights and personal liberties.

This literally popular republican ideology was not necessarily identical with the 'classical republicanism' that has become so fashionable among historians of early modern political ideas.⁸⁶ It was 'classical' because its intellectual roots were in Roman law and therefore had a habit of referencing Roman antiquity. Classical republicanism emerged in the Italian city-states of the Renaissance with Marsiglio of Padua (c.1280–1342) and Bartolus of Sassoferrato (1313–57), both writing in the first half of the fourteenth century, but found its most famous voice in Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) from Florence. These authors all shared an interest in the foundations of urban rule, even if Machiavelli's most famous work deals with the prince.⁸⁷ Their theories also gained currency beyond the Italian peninsula, in works that either proposed the Italian cities (mainly Venice) as paradigmatic or were influenced by British writings that had developed a northern variety of Italian (mainly Florentine) ideas.⁸⁸

Urban republicanism, on the other hand, did not produce a systematic political philosophy, nor an authoritative statement of its main features. Perhaps its most theoretical articulation was found in the works of Johannes Althusius (c.1553–1638), who was appointed syndic of the German town of Emden in 1604. That appointment was in itself significant. Emden had just experienced a political revolution that

started in 1595, when the town rebelled against its sovereign, and the citizen militias – with the help of troops sent by the Dutch – managed to hold out. After further armed conflict in the following years, in 1603 the citizens of Emden forced their sovereign, the Count of East-Frisia, to, in effect, accept Emden's independence.⁸⁹ When Althusius was given the job of town syndic, i.e. the most important civil servant of the community, the following year, he came with what might be considered a long testimonial: his *Politica Methodice Digesta* had been published in 1603. A new edition, twice the size of the original, would follow in 1610.

Althusius' *Politica* makes two important claims. The first is that, out of self-interest, individuals and families have no choice but to collaborate. Talents and resources have been unequally distributed across the population, and precisely this makes collective solutions to human needs inevitable. However, these solutions can be reached in a variety of ways and therefore individuals and families – Althusius portrays individuals mainly as representatives of households – can choose how they prefer to collaborate with others. Therefore, the *collegia*, or corporations, that emerge from this collective impulse are bodies 'organised by assembled persons according to their own pleasure and will'.⁹⁰ The second claim is that the creation of these *collegia* is not dependent on any sovereign authority. By implication, the state is not the final source of authority – as in Jean Bodin's more or less contemporary theory of sovereignty – but is instead a composite of lower-order corporations, such as towns and villages.⁹¹ In the town, authority 'is entrusted, with the consent of the citizens, to the senatorial collegium', in other words, the town council.⁹² Citizens, in Althusius' system, do not act politically as individuals, but always as members of a collective.⁹³ The popularity of Althusius' work is difficult to gauge, but it would seem that he was merely systematising a practice that had long before emerged in urban environments and would continue to be practised, even without his theoretical blessings.

An important implication of Althusius' version of urban republicanism was its historical character. If corporations were the result of voluntary collaborations, they had to be justified, not from general principles, but from the historically specific conditions of their emergence.⁹⁴ The validity of its general claims to equality among citizens, and to representation of the community in the political process, therefore required the support of historical precedents and documents. In 1702 the citizens of Nijmegen, a medium-sized town in the east of the

Dutch Republic, were up in arms after William III of Orange, stadholder of the Duchy of Guelders, had passed away. Their objections to local magistrates, who had been appointed by William without proper consultation with the citizen community (as laid down in the local constitution), were listed at great length in the *Justificatie van het recht, dat de magistraat neffens de gildens en de gemeensluyden der Stadt Nymegen als een vrye Rijks-stadt van-ouds heft gehad, ende als nog competeert, om hare Magistraat, ende vrye keure van dien by haar selfs te doen (etc.)*, i.e. ‘Justification of the right that the town council, as well as the guilds and common council of the town of Nijmegen, as an Imperial City, used to have and still has to freely elect its own magistrate’. Its argument was entirely historical. The seventy-one pages of the text, as well as the fifty-five pages of addenda, consisted of an enumeration of old documents, going back to the thirteenth century, that confirmed this right of the community. These documents, it was claimed, demonstrated that Nijmegen had been an autonomous community, and in effect an imperial city, for many centuries and was entitled as such to govern itself. The proper form of government in Nijmegen was, moreover, one in which elites (the town council) and the citizens (guilds and common council) collaborated. Although the parties might disagree at times about the distribution of power between them, they agreed on the fundamental principles underpinning Nijmegen’s form of government.⁹⁵

This emphasis on historical trajectories, and more specifically local historical trajectories, was simultaneously the strength and weakness of urban republicanism. On one hand it created a strong sense of local identity; becoming a citizen implied an inclusion in this powerful history of rights gathered in the documents stored in local archives. Indeed, access to those documents was a recurring demand of urban protest movements.⁹⁶ By implication, the emphasis on local history provided a sense of place: each town was unique, due to its particular historical trajectory. The other side of the coin, however, was a lack of common ground. Urban republicanism consisted of a set of general principles that implied local specificities. The upshot of this was that urban republicanism resisted the sort of generalisations necessary for a successful political theory. The point of urban republicanism was precisely that it was not generally applicable, but only validated by the specific, i.e. historically determined, trajectory of a particular town – and nowhere else. The strength of urban republicanism was therefore not its theoretical sophistication, nor its applicability in numerous

locations, but its powerful social profile: urban republicanism appealed to elites as well as ordinary citizens.

Because urban republicanism was a practical, rather than a theoretical philosophy, its discourse is found primarily in the sort of papers produced by urban institutions and citizens themselves, such as pamphlets and petitions, or urban constitutions and instructions for public officials.⁹⁷ The latter routinely referred to ethical standards perfectly compatible with the republican framework that was shaping the political ideals of broad strata of premodern urban populations in Europe. Far into the sixteenth century ‘republic’ was synonymous with ‘commonwealth’, and the preservation of the ‘bonum commune’, or common good, was a key concept in such urban documents.⁹⁸ The Nuremberg constitution of 1461, for example, insisted that local government had been entrusted to the council by the kings and emperors of the Holy Roman Empire ‘for the values [*wirden*] and honour and the common good of the city’.⁹⁹ From a survey of some twenty-five German and Dutch texts, ranging from the late fourteenth century to the early sixteenth, offering counsel to urban officeholders, it appears that keeping the common good always in mind was a central concern in this type of documents. One such work, Johann von Soest’s *Wy men wol eyn statt regyren soll* (*How to Properly Govern a Town*), from 1495, argued: ‘The officer should obey the subject; this is self-evident, and he is [in office] for the common good’.¹⁰⁰ Under their 1713 constitution, the Zürich mayors promised to rule in the interest of rich and poor alike, and the document itself stated that ‘with good laws our city will experience happy days’.¹⁰¹

Urban rebels justified their protest with arguments of ‘liberty’ and ‘justice’, precisely because they knew that the local authorities would find these difficult to refute.¹⁰² A similar type of argument was employed in relation to taxation. In 1748, during a major uprising in the towns of Holland, it was argued in an anonymous pamphlet published in Leiden that local rulers were spending the citizens’ money, ‘emanating from their properties and possessions, or from their profits and labour’. Because it was their money, the citizens should themselves take charge of how it was to be spent. However, given the size of the population – Leiden had some 40,000 inhabitants at the time – this would have been impractical. The town councillors were therefore selected from the midst of the citizens to act ‘as trustees and stewards’ of the public funds. For this reason, the citizens were entitled to annual public accounting of public expenditures.¹⁰³

Following an argument developed by Jonathan Barry, one could also say that urban citizenship followed not so much a coherent ideology, but a code of conduct, reflecting a set of values. These values encompassed three basic elements: ‘charity and mutual benefit’, ‘antiquity, honour and precedence’ and, finally, ‘freedom and independence’.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

Urban privileges created formalised urban communities. Membership of these communities was of various kinds, but two categories were ubiquitous: full citizenship and mere resident status. Residents, designated as *Beisasse*, *Einwohner*, *inwoner*, *habitant* and so on, were people who resided in the town but had few formal rights. Nevertheless, these people could hope to get a fair trial, could securely own property, could do their jobs, had access to public welfare, and so on. They were usually barred from higher – but not necessarily lower – public offices, and might not participate in policy consultations or elections. In most towns they would be excluded from joining a guild and hence from opening a shop or operating a workshop at their own expense. They were nonetheless required to pay taxes at the same rates as citizens. Citizens had greater political and economic opportunities and were sometimes treated better than mere inhabitants by the local welfare institutions. The contrast looked stark on paper, but in practice the distinctions were blurred in many areas. Although it is probably fair to say that in general most heads of households in the upper classes held formal citizenship and that the inhabitants more likely belonged to the lower classes, this social distinction was cross-cut by a great many exceptions, ranging from resident international merchants without citizen status to paupers who, simply by having been born locally, had automatically acquired formal citizen status.

Precisely because that formal citizenship was not directly connected to social status, the percentage of households headed by a citizen was usually substantial, and may generally be reckoned as between one half and two-thirds, sometimes even higher. Nonetheless, a significant proportion of urban populations, and in one in six towns even a clear majority, consisted of non-citizens. For many of them, not possessing citizenship status reinforced other mechanisms of social exclusion, such as irregular employment, low wages and a lack of opportunities to participate in public and political life. It is not so clear, however, that

those other mechanisms were the result of their exclusion from formal citizenship; it was equally possible that the chain of causality ran in the opposite direction. This also applied to women, next to the working classes the most obvious group in society to be negatively affected by formal citizenship. In most towns women were not excluded from citizenship as such, but in practice their citizenship was circumscribed in a variety of ways, excluding them from politics and also from the guilds. This had already been true in the Middle Ages, but in many towns the number of women independently registered as citizens further declined from the sixteenth century.

Perhaps just as important as its formal implications were the ideological consequences of citizenship. Citizens presented themselves as the core of the community, promoted by an urban republican ideology as the best of all worlds. Urban republicanism was a grassroots ideology with very few intellectual advocates, but it was very popular in urban civic society. It was, moreover, an ideology shared by urban elites and the middle classes who, under the umbrella of citizenship, could agree on a number of crucial features of their local societies: the importance of local autonomy, the fundamental equality between citizens, some form of political representation. All this provided a common foundation for, and coherence to, sociopolitical interactions that made urban communities formidable actors in Europe's medieval and early modern societies, often punching well above their population number's weight.