Street Politics

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This chapter discusses different types of political manifestations that took place in the street and the different actors that engaged in street politics. It reflects on questions of ritual, protest and ritual protest. Obviously, none of the actions discussed here were restricted to open urban spaces: they were influenced by – and in turn had an impact on – what happened inside homes, shops and workplaces, inside churches, civic buildings and palaces.

Early modern cities had distinctive social structures that encouraged specific political dynamics. These densely populated cities were home to a broad range of inhabitants from different social, religious and cultural backgrounds, who were active in different occupations. Whereas village communities almost always fell under the authority of a powerful overlord, cities often had specific privileges: many of the political rituals taking place in city streets all over Europe revolved around a ruler extending privileges and rights to urban authorities. In exchange for their loyalty, urban leaders could receive significant autonomy. Moreover, although the degree of formal political participation differed greatly from city to city, a relatively large group of urban inhabitants was recognised as a political stakeholder.

Usually, one specific set of inhabitants – often known as citizens, bourgeoys, or burger – could participate in formal urban politics, which also included the right to bear arms and serve in the civic militia. Inevitably, though, most urban inhabitants had no such rights: women, servants, beggars and migrants were all excluded from formal politics. Traditionally, political history focused on ‘high politics’, the elite and their institutions. Yet politics in the early modern period were never just a simplified binary, between those officially in power – from kings, queens, princes, religious rulers, to the prosperous patricians and regents, who formed urban councils – and the disenfranchised, the majority. With the rise of social history, starting roughly from the 1950s, scholars increasingly investigated political actions – riots, revolts, rebellions – by those without formal power. Influenced by anthropology, moreover, cultural historians then scrutinised rituals, popular beliefs, language and – under the impact of the spatial turn – also increasingly the use of space. As a result, our understanding of what is political and what is politics has broadened and has been redefined.
The presence of ‘ordinary people’ as onlookers was indispensable to give official street politics, such as executions, processions and rituals, their legitimacy, thereby validating the authority of those in charge. What is more, ordinary men and women used urban spaces to exchange news and gossip, talk politics, share grievances, coalesce into crowds and start riots and rebellions. Historians now consider this broad range of so-called popular politics an integral part of European political history: although officially excluded from formal, ‘high’ politics, ordinary people were actors in major political developments during the pre-revolutionary era.

Before discussing street politics used by those in power and by the officially powerless, let me make two preliminary remarks. This chapter takes us through the streets and squares of diverse cities such as Naples and Delft, Madrid and Istanbul over a period of roughly three hundred years. First, we need to keep in mind that internal urban political structures were diverse and that the relative position of cities within larger political realms could differ greatly. This in turn shaped the form and impact of street politics. For example, within the German Holy Roman Empire, the city of Frankfurt did not reside under a regional ruler or local noble family. Instead, as an imperial free city, it was immediately subordinate to the emperor, causing the local urban militia to have great power throughout the early modern period. The militia repeatedly staged revolts in the name of the civic community in the early seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By contrast, Münster, a city in that same Holy Roman Empire, was under the local bishop's strict control: here the civic militia lost its influence and played no role in urban politics.³

Second, political situations were never static: the early modern period saw significant changes over time, for instance due to confessional strife and the rise of the territorial state. Inevitably, then, the form and impact of street politics were also subject to change. Under the influence of political and religious transformation, at times specific forms of street politics could spread from city to city, crossing political borders. The sixteenth-century waves of iconoclastic violence, discussed elsewhere in this volume, are a case in point.

This chapter does not offer a chronological overview but reflects on the broader transformations taking place during this long period and their impact on street politics. It starts with a discussion of official street politics and rituals; the second part of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of political contestation in city streets and other open spaces. Yet a point the chapter wants to make is that a distinction between a culture of the elite and a culture for ordinary people, separated by clearly definable boundaries, is problematic: it is impossible to identify certain practices as exclusively popular. Elite and learned men and women read cheap broadsheets and chapbooks; oral culture – poetry, songs, ballads – was widely shared.⁴ And arguably all different expressions of politics in the streets helped create a common political culture.
Spectacular displays of power

Manifestations of power and politics took place everywhere in the early modern city: in everyday life, streets, squares and canals were used for trade and commerce, the exchange of information, mobility, policing and public punishments – all actions that, one could argue, formed expressions of everyday politics in the street. Before focusing on spectacular festivals and rituals, let us first explore such everyday political expressions.

Political information, decrees and laws were delivered by voice, often supported by the sound of trumpets or bells. Heralds and town criers played a crucial role in spreading political information through the urban soundscape, and so also define the city’s political territory. In late medieval and early sixteenth-century Florence, the banditore (town crier) was obliged to repeat proclamations a minimum of 40 times during his circuit of the city. On horseback and dressed in an official livery, he would stop at key sites, such as the gates and central squares, in front of churches and public buildings, and on crossroads and bridges, and announce a new or renewed law. These could range from issues of taxation to all sorts of public order proclamations, forbidding the wearing of masks and veils in public or calling on witnesses to denounce thieves and vandals.5

Proclamations by voice were part of a broader urban political dialogue: the announced laws were spread further through rumours and gossip and proclamations frequently asked the public for information or their help in (re)establishing public order. For instance, urban dwellers could be asked to come forward as witnesses, participate in finding the culprits of a crime, or in tracing those who did not belong. Going back to Florence: in January 1503, the town crier spread the news that two young girls called Bianca and Tommassa, ‘Turkish slaves’ in his words, had escaped their Christian master. He gave a physical description of the two girls and called for information on their whereabouts.6

Sentencing and punishment by the authorities were a public – and therefore political – spectacle in the early modern city. Early modern punishments hinged on popular participation. Doing penance, corporal punishments, such as removing a body part or whipping, or a period in the stocks, were public spectacles with a double message. Public punishment damaged the offender’s reputation and branded him or her, sometimes literally, as an unrespectable member of the urban community, but it also served as a deterrent to others.7 Moreover, just as the public communication of laws, punishment practices helped create a broader popular understanding of urban politics. Those convicted of the most serious crimes were publicly executed, usually on one of the central squares, often after having been dragged through the streets, perhaps from the location of the crime to the place of execution.

Historians have been struck by the theatricality of capital punishments. Initially, executions would take place at the site of the crime, cleansing the location by shedding blood, but increasingly they took place in a permanent site.8 For example, Tyburn, at the junction of what is now Oxford Street and Park Lane,
was London’s main execution site until 1783. On the day of the execution, the condemned was transported from Newgate prison to Tyburn in an open cart, a ride of some three miles. Spectators would throng the streets along the way and even more people would come to watch the execution itself. There were, of course, varieties across Europe: in Seville, execution processions were also an elaborate affair, sometimes consisting of 200 participants, with Jesuit priests playing an important role in convincing the condemned to repent. In contrast, in seventeenth-century Amsterdam, where Reformed Protestants dominated the city council, processions formed no part of the execution process, which took place on the Dam, the central square in front of the city hall.

The criminal legal process and attitudes to crime changed over time, with punishment becoming less public. Although the number of whippings increased in eighteenth-century London, they progressively took place inside correctional institutions, reflecting cultural, economic and also spatial changes: it became less convenient for Londoners to gather and watch these displays, while especially the public whipping of women became less socially accepted.9

Perhaps the built environment itself forms the most physical expression of political aims of the authorities – whether religious, dynastic or civic. Governing elites tried to make city centres express an idealised version of what society should look like, through imposing public buildings, well-organised streets and perfect squares. Inevitably, though, older street patterns and temporary constructions, such as shacks and hovels, served as a reminder that the ordered ideal was always under threat. The most extreme example of this tendency to mould urban space to an ideal is the new towns constructed from scratch during the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, built according to highly geometrical plans. The small new town of Palmanova in Northern Italy is a prime example, shaped as it is as a nine-pointed star. The main motive behind building these cities was military, but the clear street patterns also allowed for greater social control over the inhabitants.10

Urban planning, architecture and ephemeral rituals could be combined to communicate messages of secular and religious power. For example, Turin, located in the north-east of Italy and ruled by the dukes of Savoy, was one of the most deliberately planned cities in early modern Europe. Constructed as their new capital, Turin’s uniform plan and pervasive military architecture expressed the Savoy family’s political ambitions. Between the 1560s and 1680s, they had architects design uniform façades, wide streets, central churches and large piazzas. These carefully designed spaces became a public stage for festivities and ceremonies that communicated crucial dynastic moments, such as triumphal entries, marriages and funerals. Since the intertwinement of political power and the church formed a characteristic of the early modern period, these events usually saw the participation of high-ranking clerics and/or religious confraternities, with processions starting or ending at important churches.11

These types of interactions, between the built environment and ephemeral manifestations of secular and religious power, have fascinated scholars interested in politics, art, theatre and ideas for decades. In 1984, Roy Strong, in
his *Art and Power: Renaissance Festivals, 1450–1650*, stated that festivals, such as triumphal entries and tournaments, were ‘a central instrument of government’ for Renaissance and early modern rulers. An advocate for the interdisciplinary study of festivals, Strong traced the evolution of such public displays of power from fifteenth-century festivities inspired by classical antiquity and civic humanism to those expressing absolutist power in the later seventeenth century, thus showing how these events changed with the developments of European culture and politics. From the 1980s, festival studies developed into an interdisciplinary field, combining musicology, art history, theatre studies and architectural history and mostly focused on court culture.

Starting from the 1970s and 1980s, cultural historians – influenced by anthropologists, like Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz – also focused on festivals and rituals but took a much broader interest in urban societies. To be sure, historians had examined rituals before, yet now they tried to reconstruct and ‘read’ festivals and processions, attempting to decipher the carefully choreographed sounds, routes and decorations: which political and religious messages did these spectacles communicate? How did the authorities use an ‘iconography of power’, a visual but also aural, spatial and performative language that attempted to create and sustain political and social consent? Geertz, in his *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (1980), posited that the rulers of the island were politically weak and mostly focused on expressing their position through elaborate public rituals and ceremonies. In this ‘theatre state’, he stated, ‘power served pomp, not pomp power’. His work, which focused on the interpretation of meanings instead of the social functions of ritual, was extremely influential among cultural historians of medieval and early modern Europe.

Two books from the 1980s stand out for their incorporation of anthropological ideas: Richard Trexler’s historical anthropology of public ritual in Florence in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and Edward Muir’s book on civic ritual in Venice. Trexler examined different types of urban ritual behaviour, from greetings and formally concluded friendships to processions and elaborate community festivals. All these ritual acts consolidated relationships, among the Florentines themselves, between Florentines and foreigners, and between Florentines and their God and saints. Ritual, rather than political or religious ideas, to Trexler, shaped urban identity. For instance, in Florence, neighbourhood loyalties were particularly strong, resulting in fierce neighbourhood rivalries, which formed a potential source of civic division. The citywide cult of St John the Baptist, Florence’s patron saint, developed as a unifying counterweight: the rituals related to this cult focused on the city’s central baptistery – and were thus not linked to a specific neighbourhood. Every Christian Florentine was baptised here and processions started and ended at the baptistery, thus symbolically uniting the city.

Taking Florence as typical for other European cities, Trexler argued that urban public life was a political process and thus never static. In his analysis of civic feasts, such as carnivals, and the festival of Saint John, Florence’s
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patron saint, Trexler highlights this political process at work: as Florentine politics changed, with the rise of the Medici family, so too did the urban festivals. In a mark of public recognition, the Medici allowed new ritual groups, such as confraternities and young men, to participate, transforming Florentine public ritual.

Whereas Trexler had examined changes in ritual behaviour and Florentine politics, Muir, in his book on civic ritual in the Republic of Venice, argued that processions, political rituals and religious ceremonies strengthened Venetian political and social stability. Muir traced the origins and development of different public ceremonies and the ways in which the urban topography was used, with processions winding their way through the city’s narrow streets and waterways. Specific rituals followed the same routes, thus imbuing these streets and canals with symbolic meaning. Piazza San Marco, the political and religious heart of the city, was usually the starting point or finish line for these public events; as such, the symbolic meaning of the Piazza was also heightened. Venetian government was partly done by ritual, Muir states, with late medieval and early modern ceremonies and processions drawing on the memories and myths of the city’s origins in late antiquity. He makes this point especially in the part of the book dedicated to deciphering the symbolic meanings of the rituals and ceremonies connected to the public life of the doge, the Venetian elected head of state, although there are indications that Venetian ritual at times was conflictual.

In later work on early modern ritual in Europe, Muir further expanded his ideas of the importance of rituals. Processions often celebrated an ideal of *communitas*, the notion of the urban society as not just one political, but also one religious body: this idea of unity was expressed by using the same routes, thus creating a processional urban infrastructure. Religion and politics were inextricably linked in this period, with the notion that royal power and local authority stemmed from God. In all of Europe, and beyond, rulers and city officials adapted religious rites to the needs of government as they sought to exemplify harmony or mask tensions. The procession depicted in Figure 5.1, for instance, represents the symbolic integration into the Christian community of French men who had been freed from captivity in Algiers and Tunis. Moreover, in even the most spectacular processions, often members of different standing participated, turning the procession itself into a mirror-image of an ideal society. Obviously, the clergy was involved, as were members of the elite and often the civic militia. However, participation was much broader than just the upper echelons of urban society: members of the craft guilds and religious confraternities could participate or even dominate processions. For example, in Italian cities, funeral processions of members of religious confraternities would wind their way through the city, consisting of the deceased’s family members and neighbours, but also the rest of the confraternity as his or her spiritual family. The participation of representatives of different segments of urban society in processions was yet another way in which urban hierarchy and order could be symbolised. Many more inhabitants were involved in the
preparations for public spectacles, by creating the decorations or cleaning up the ritual parcours. And no public display made sense without a large crowd of onlookers, despite sometimes being erased from depictions of rituals, as is the case in Figure 5.2. Here, though, it is important to point out that reactions to religious statues and processions could differ, between men and women or Christians and non-Christians.21

Recently, scholars have started to combine cultural history with memory studies when studying processions and other forms of public ritual. Religious commemorations of important political and social developments were a common practice throughout urban Europe. Public religious processions were a way of keeping local collective memory alive, as Judith Pollmann has recently underlined. For instance in Dijon, after a siege by Swiss troops in 1513 had ended through the intervention of the Virgin Mary, an annual procession in her honour continued to commemorate the event for at least the next 117 years.22 Similarly, the authorities in late medieval and early modern Dubrovnik organised processions on days of saints to collectively remember traumatic experiences, such as earthquakes and suppressed political conspiracies.23
Few early modern public ceremonies have been studied more intensively than the *possesso* (literally, ‘taking possession’), the ritual procession that celebrated the installation of a new pope as bishop of Rome. The *possesso* is a complex ritual, with historians trying to decipher the political and religious messages that each new pope – as a religious ruler but also increasingly as a territorial prince – sought to transmit. Each *possesso* procession followed the so-called Via Papalis, roughly what is now Corso Vittorio Emanuele II: from Piazza San Pietro, it would go to Castel Sant’Angelo, crossing the Tiber to then wind its way to the Lateran, the Cathedral of Rome. Antique arches and temporary ones decorated the route, and the streets were adapted so that they could contain the procession. The local nobility had houses along the processional route since it was the city’s most prestigious street: as papal power increased during the sixteenth century, the Via Papalis became the theatre of power struggles between the local elite and the pope. The *possesso* is thus a good example of how both the officially regulated hierarchical order of the
procession and its route incorporated the potential for conflict. For instance, in 1555, Pope Paul IV started on his possessio, accompanied by the entire papal court, soldiers and Roman inhabitants in a strict order, when a fight over precedence broke out among different groups of soldiers. Some 20 men got wounded and the bloodshed would have been greater if a cardinal had not succeeded in calming everyone down. 

It was not just the pope who expressed his power through ceremonial processions. Rulers everywhere adopted and adapted similar ceremonies, based on the older tradition of ‘joyous entries’ of medieval rulers, by which they entered towns at the start of their reign. The ruler would enter the city gates, proceeding through decorated streets to the city’s central squares. Temporary architecture, such as triumphal arches, celebrated values connected to the ideal ruler, such as ‘justice’, ‘peace’ and ‘abundance’. Such entries served to emphasize that the ruler extended his or her protection to the receiving city, yet a crucial element was the moment when the ruler swore to uphold local privileges, an important instrument shaping the relation between ruler and urban authorities. A ruler pledging to uphold customs and privileges at the start of his or her reign created a shared political culture with his or her subjects, a two-way process giving them a political language to draw on when resisting that very ruler’s actions.

From the perspective of the authorities, obviously, the public celebrations of dynastic marriages, royal entries, funerals and coronations all served to broadcast royal or civic power. Yet although the objective was to communicate the stability of their rule, in a period when individual cities lost much of their political power and centralizing monarchies increasingly became the norm, rulers sometimes travelled frenetically from one part of their realm to another, using both their presence in the urban space and various religious ceremonies to underline the legitimacy of their political power. Between 1564 and 1566, regent and queen-mother Catherine de’ Medici (1519–89) with her son and young king, Charles IX (1550–74) embarked on an exhausting and unprecedented tour that lasted 27 months and included visits to more than a hundred towns. In this early phase of the French Wars of Religion (1562–98), religious strife and a dynastic power struggle formed the background to Catherine’s attempt to consolidate her son’s power. The ceremonial entries allowed the king to depict himself as the ideal monarch, while for the cities – responsible for most of the costs – it was an opportunity to have the king’s complete attention. During the tour, balancing the ceremonial presence of the experienced and powerful regent and the teenage king proved difficult: Catherine was reluctant to be the focal point, but some cities chose to disregard this wish, aware that it was she who held actual political power.

Emperor Charles V (1500–58) similarly used public ceremonies to project his sovereignty. To unite his widespread and disparate realm, which in Europe included Spain, the Netherlands, the Holy Roman Empire as well as Naples, Sicily and Sardinia, he was constantly on the move, crisscrossing his lands. That public rituals could have many layers of meaning becomes clear when
we look at the entries Charles had staged in 1536, in a series of Italian towns, including Palermo, Naples, Rome, Siena and Florence. The immediate occasion was his capture of the North African city of Tunis, but the emperor also wanted to show his power over the Italian states, as part of his ongoing rivalry with France, and underline his claim to imperial sovereignty. Tunis’s classical foundation as Carthage gave Charles the opportunity to present his campaign as a Roman triumph, and himself as Caesar. Because it was an Islamic city, moreover, he could also portray himself as a successful crusader, with parades of Muslim prisoners included in the processions. In Rome, his procession came at a significant cost to the urban landscape: 200 houses and four churches were demolished in preparation, with observers noting that the city had changed shape. Many Romans, however, had not forgotten how Charles’s troops had plundered their city only nine years earlier. Subversive anonymous graffiti appeared on walls, making fun of his entry by portraying the emperor ‘riding into Rome seated on a shrimp’.  

These elaborate political ceremonies reached not just local crowds, but also larger, international audiences through descriptions in printed festival books, pamphlets, prints and by word of mouth. The same imperial claims as those of Charles V were part of the Ottoman Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent’s (1494–1566) ceremonial presence.

Between 1521 and 1528, the Ottoman sultan increasingly extended palace ceremonial to shows of power outside, in the streets of Istanbul. These ceremonies often centred on the ancient Hippodrome, a large open space with strong imperial connotations because of its connections to the former Byzantine Empire, in many ways the successor to the Roman Empire. In May 1524, for example, Suleyman ordered elaborate festivities that connected the sultan’s palace with the Hippodrome. Parades of artful paper animals, mock fights,
wrestling matches, races and archery contests provided popular entertainment. A lavish banquet for his courtiers inside the palace was combined with roasted camels and cows for the crowds in the Hippodrome.31 The sultan consciously communicated his claim to imperial sovereignty, in the use of symbols, in a challenge to both Charles V and the pope.32 Rivalry between rulers, then, did not just take place on the battlefield, but also on the street, in the form of parades. More research could be done on such transnational exchanges of ceremonial language.

Many public rituals tried to present an ideal of permanence or at least mask societal tensions. They produced a ‘fiction of unchangeability’, in the words of Edward Muir, but were in fact highly malleable.33 Historians continue to debate the precise impact of the Reformation and state formation on public ritual during the early modern period. New public celebrations developed: in Lutheran cities, such as German Regensburg, 31 October 1517 – the day that Martin Luther affixed his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, which became a major new feast on the calendar.34 In England, the coronation of Elizabeth I on 15 January 1559 drew heavily on older monarchical traditions. Like those of her Catholic predecessors, the ritual consisted of a royal entry that took the queen in a state procession from the Tower of London through the city to Westminster, where she was crowned. But the celebrations also had strong Protestant elements and afterwards, that day became a celebration of the triumph of Protestantism over Catholicism in England.35

In the Dutch Republic, a new state that developed out of the Habsburg Netherlands at the end of the sixteenth century, the funeral processions of the stadholders presented a ceremonial conundrum. In the Middle Ages, stadholders were appointed by feudal lords as replacements in their absence. In the independent Dutch Republic, stadholders no longer represented an overlord but were appointed by the States General, the committee of representatives of the Dutch provinces. The funeral processions for the stadholders of the province of Holland took place in Delft. The organisers partly drew on an older Habsburg tradition, which had foregrounded dynastic legacy, yet now they had to navigate the new republican political reality. Moreover, the processions, at least partly, had to maintain confessional neutrality in order to transcend Dutch religious divisions.36 Despite their careful planning, however, the organisers had only limited control over the interpretations of contemporaries: as the 600 participants in Stadholder Maurice of Orange’s funeral cortège wound their way through Delft in a carefully choreographed and confessionally neutral represented in Figure 5.4 Protestant minister stubbornly chose to interpret it as a Reformed ritual.37

How onlookers interpreted displays of power is one of the most elusive questions. Influenced by new developments in the history of emotions and the senses, historians try to establish what spectators thought, felt, saw, heard or smelled when they watched rituals and processions. Obviously, most of the descriptions, paintings, printed festival books and financial records have been produced by the authorities themselves or with their explicit approval. Finding
alternative sources that shed light on the experience of members of the public is a challenge. Sometimes, though, we are offered tantalising glimpses. In Ulm, a deaf shoemaker named Sebastian Fischer kept a diary, which includes a description of a series of ceremonial entries by Charles V in the 1540s. Ulm had been a so-called free imperial city, governed for a long time by a council consisting of representatives of the guilds. In 1531, the council had voted to introduce the Reformation, after which Charles replaced them with a council dominated by patricians. Being deaf, Fischer was especially receptive to the visual imagery of the ceremonies. Describing the emperor’s entries, Fischer, as a craftsman and Lutheran, reflected on Ulm’s loss of civic power and seems to show an increasingly critical stance towards rituals in general, perhaps influenced by his own Protestant convictions.

It is important to realize just how frequent and repetitive these performances of power, both secular and religious, were in early modern cities. In eighteenth-century Paris, right before the outbreak of the Revolution, for instance the ceremonial calendar included 52 Sunday masses, 32 annual religious festivals and innumerable royal processions, bringing together crowds of onlookers.
These festivities drew on, and in turn helped create a collective political culture, which cannot be separated into ‘high’, for the elite, and ‘low’, for the ordinary people, cultures. While aimed at projecting political stability, festivals, processions and rituals at times masked much tenser situations and simmering dissatisfaction. In fact, in pre-Revolutionary Paris, the French royal court constantly worried about how Parisians would respond: would they applaud, hiss and boo, or worse?

**Protest in the streets**

Historians have debated the political agency of ordinary people, focusing on their participation in revolts. In traditional, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century political history, ordinary people were not taken seriously as political actors: if ‘the masses’ acted, they did so instinctively and spontaneously, never from any clear political motive or agenda. This top-down approach changed with the rise of social history in the 1950s and 1960s, when historians influenced by Marxist scholarship sought to better understand riots and crowd actions. The earliest social histories, by Marxist historians like Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé, emphasised the need for a ‘history from below’: history should no longer be focused on the (nation-)state and its rulers, but on ordinary people. These early social histories of popular protest saw early modern revolts as precursors to the class struggles of the capitalist era, with material needs driving the actions of the crowd. In his influential article ‘The moral economy of the English crowd’ (1971), E.P. Thompson criticised this approach, because it reduced the motives of protesters to purely economic ones. Instead, he argued that pre-revolutionary crowds pursued political goals and that violent actions, and even just the threat of such actions, drew on sophisticated and broadly shared notions of what was right and fair. In this interpretation, riots were demonstrations of a common political culture, for instance based on century-old ideas of what was a ‘just price’ for goods such as wheat and bread. This shared political culture derived at least in part from the examples of ‘formal’ street politics, discussed previously, such as official proclamations, public punishments and ceremonial displays, which communicated political values to a broader audience, both in and outside cities.

The ‘moral economy’, therefore, stemmed from a combination of elite and popular values, in which the elite had an obligation to provide for the poor. These paternalist economic relations, in the eyes of Thompson, disappeared with the development of a market economy during the eighteenth century, triggering crowd actions that were more than simple food riots: they were legitimised by the traditional moral economy and based on a shared political culture. By the early 1970s, then, historians saw revolts as complex direct actions, often following specific and well-rehearsed local repertoires of contention, that is routine actions developed over time, with maximum communicative and pressurising effects, often taking place in specific urban spaces, such as central streets, main squares and government buildings.
The idea that pre-revolutionary crowd violence was not random and unchecked but rather aimed at defined targets and based on a repertoire was initially based primarily on bread riots and tax revolts. In 1973, Natalie Zemon Davis, influenced by anthropology, argued that popular religious violence and religious riots also needed to be understood as collective acts within specific political and moral traditions, which legitimised the use of, at times extremely bloody, violence. Crowds often mirrored official practices of punishment: for instance, in Paris in 1572, a Protestant printer was burned by a crowd in the Marché aux Porcèaux, the site of official executions. In those moments, members of the crowds were convinced that their actions were legitimate, an idea reinforced by the frequent participation of members of the clergy, police officials and members of the civic militia. The religious violence and cruelty in French cities during the Wars of Religion were aimed at specific targets and drew on a tradition of public punishment. Both Catholic and Protestant men and women tried to defend their faith against false doctrine through insults and shouts. But they also tried to purify their own community through violence, by smashing religious icons, seizing religious buildings or by massacring those belonging to the other faith. Zemon Davis’s work on charivari further highlighted the ritual meaning of violent acts, and their social and political goals.

As cultural history came to dominate the field in the 1980s, collective protests and revolts came to be studied almost more for their ritual character than for their political aims, in contrast to Thompson’s and Zemon Davis’s work. Historians interested in protest and contestation have tried to piece together evidence from a broad range of sources, such as arrest and court records, chronicles and observer reports, which obviously share a predominantly negative view of the protesters. In the last two decades, a renewed interest in the social history of politics sees riots, revolts and rebellions as part of a broader spectrum of popular politics. One direction of research, clearly shaped by contemporary concerns, focuses on the relation between politics and communication, showing how politics were discussed in taverns, coffeehouses, pharmacies and of course on the street. In the early modern city, political information was everywhere and formed a basis for potential contestation.

Graffiti and all sorts of libellous writings were one way in which ordinary people expressed political opinions and criticism. Buildings representing religious or secular authority were an obvious target. Sometimes specific urban locations or objects became a hotspot for the transmission of satirical opinions. The most famous example is the ‘talking statue’ Pasquino in Rome, located in the Parione district. In 1501, Cardinal Carafa draped the antique statue in a toga and decorated it with Latin epigrams for the celebration of Saint Mark’s Day, 25 April. Within a few years, Romans started to plaster the statue with satirical broadsides in Italian verse – which became known as ‘pasquinades’ – criticising the pope, high taxes and denouncing injustice.

Often these political expressions were tied to a broader, even international, conflict. During the war against Spain (1568–1648), cities in the Low Countries knew an especially lively circulation of propaganda in the form of printed...
pamphlets and manuscript texts, as well as songs. Authorities tried to censure dissenting opinions, but rumours, handwritten notes, poems and songs were much harder to control than anything rolling off the urban printing presses. For example, the city of Amsterdam remained pro-Spanish until 1578, thus becoming a primary target of the rebel forces’ propaganda machine. Handwritten copies of letters from William of Orange, leader of the rebellion, were plastered on the door of the New Church, right in the heart of the city. They called on all Amsterdammers to resist the Spanish duke of Alva. In London, political graffiti and libellous signs appeared during a particularly tense period in the 1590s and early 1600s. Officers for the Lord Mayor collected a series of libels in public places, such as the bustling Newgate Market and the stairs of the Royal Exchange. These locations were used for royal proclamations: now political rebels appropriated them to broadcast their point of view, often also mimicking the form and layout of official communications.

The urban pervasiveness of political information and dissenting opinions was combined with a permanent undercurrent of (potential) violence. Often, young men aggressively took up urban space, at times part of those informal forms of social policing. Many of the rowdy sports and violent games organised or tolerated by the urban authorities were a way for men to blow off steam: partly a form of entertainment, watched by large crowds with people from all segments of society, partly a safety valve mechanism, as historians have hypothesised. In Venice, regular fist battles were held on specific bridges, between competing groups of fishermen and shipyard workers, often leading to severe injuries and sometimes death. In that same city, butcher boys and gondoliers would chase frightened bulls through the narrow streets and over bridges, from the abattoir to a square, where the frantic run would end in bullbaiting. Both spectacles were watched by onlookers, including members of the elite and visitors, on the streets and on balconies. Bull runs were of course popular in early modern Spain, but even in eighteenth-century London, passers-by would have to jump out of the way as hundreds of men would chase the animals, on their way to the slaughterhouse, through the crowded streets, an activity that the authorities increasingly sought to suppress. Crowds of young men found different ways to assert their masculinity in public space. In many Italian cities, young men engaged in sassaiole (staged fights with stones), which could turn into veritable battles, often with political undertones, with rocks aimed at specific statues or buildings. These practices could disrupt regular street life: early modern police reports indicate that, even in broad daylight, passers-by in the streets close to Piazza Navona and the Campo de’ Fiori ran the risk of being hit by stones.

The ever-present level of tension and aggression in the city often came to the fore during specific periods, of which Carnival is the most famous example. Carnival began after Christmas and lasted 40 days, until Lent, a period of penitence and temperance, started. It was a time during which social and political hierarchies could be turned ‘upside down’, when subversion challenged established religious, political and social order.
Carnival and carnivalesque rituals of different European cities, concluding that this festival was a recurring moment of ritualised criticism, reflecting tensions mostly hidden during the rest of the year. But the combination of tolerated critique and the ritual violence made these festivities a delicate balance for the authorities, one that could tip over into disruption.

A study of Carnival festivities in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Naples shows this balancing act in detail, with the government staging ritual pillages (cuccagne) during festivities that were supposed to express social unity. Yet these cuccagne carried the risk of greater violence. The traveling Marquis De Sade, usually not a touchstone for moral behaviour, commented in 1776 on the cruelty towards animals: ‘ducks, chickens turkeys, and pigs are barbarically crucified, fixed while still alive with two or three nails, therefore still bleeding, as they amuse the people with their convulsions’. Thousands of Neapolitans would then sack a series of festival floats and slaughter animals. Despite the authorities’ efforts to tame the transgressive elements, they were never completely in control: the danger of offensive acts and words, injuries, sexual misconduct and homicides was always present. Sometimes early modern Carnival rites turned into apparently uncontrolled massacres. Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie famously reconstructed the Mardi Gras celebration in the city of Romans in 1580, which degenerated into a massacre when the local elite took advantage of the festive disorder to attack political opponents. Transitional or ‘liminal’ moments, such as Carnival, thus offered moments for ‘acceptable’ contestation but also carried the risk of escalation.

Moments of political changeover had a similar liminal character, seeing symbolic, often quite violent crowd actions. In Rome, for instance, the period after the death of the pope, while the conclave elected a successor, was known as the sede vacante (‘the empty see’). After the election, the previously discussed possesso in theory restored symbolic order, but during the sede vacante, Rome seethed with tension and violence. Additional troops arrived, bringing more weapons and a greater potential for violence to a city, already consisting of a disproportionate number of males. On top of that, the doors of the three urban prisons would be opened. During the sede vacante, disputes between neighbours or landlords and tenants were settled, but it could also see violent reactions, often against representations of the deceased pope. In 1644, for example, many Romans were furious with Urban VIII, who had enriched his three nephews and raised taxes. When bells announced news of his death, a crowd stormed up the Capitoline Hill to destroy a statue of Urban. One contemporary chronicler commented that ‘the pope died at quarter past eleven and by noon the statue was no more’.

Since Thompson’s work, historians have continued to study grain riots taking place across the early modern world, highlighting specific patterns and traditions, and combining them increasingly to early modern environmental and climate changes. Practically every city knew grain riots in times of scarcity. The tax revolts that frequently swept through early modern cities followed similar patterns, with collective violence often aimed at the houses and even the bodies of tax collectors as can be seen in Figure 5.5. Such riots could have an impact on the authorities and their policies. For instance, the wave of protest
in Dutch cities in 1748, during which crowds of men and women plundered houses of tax collectors, caused changes in the system of tax collecting.59

Specific occupational groups could be the driving force behind protests, usually because they were already organised and shared a collective identity. Craft guilds had strong traditions of rioting during the Middle Ages, particularly in Italy and the Low Countries, which persisted in the early modern period. When specific groups had access to weapons, they could be an even more dangerous force, as was the case for butchers in late medieval Italy, but also elsewhere in Europe.60 In early modern London, young apprentices became notorious for their participation in riots.61 Paradoxically, those charged with keeping the urban peace, such as civic militia and local soldiers, were often involved in revolts. Trained, armed and able to quickly mobilise, civic militia could turn against urban authorities and disrupt the very order they were there to protect.62 Similarly, in the Ottoman Empire, the rebellions of janissaries (the sultan’s elite troops) challenged authorities and deposed unfavourable sultans, at times mobilising a broad social base in Istanbul.63
The presence of (young) men is accepted as a characteristic of riots and rebellions. Historians agree less on the role of women during crowd actions. Although women participated in all sorts of collective actions over food and taxes in the late medieval and early modern period, many scholars still regard women’s participation in food riots as an expression of their domestic role, often embedded in close neighbourhood ties. Other historians have argued that women participated more, and often at the front of protest, because they were held less accountable by the authorities: contemporaries saw women as naturally more disorderly than men. Moreover, their actions fitted a carnivalesque inversion of roles. Some groups, like Dutch fish-sellers, were seen as inherently rowdy, yet research has suggested that when they engaged in ‘disorderly’ behaviour, they in fact used their closely knit family networks and knowledge of their trade to resist their marginalised position. Other scholars have argued that the presence and at times prominence of women point to their political goals. At times, women took the lead, like during the grain riots in the English town of Maldon in 1629, when a woman named Ann Carter led the revolt, styling herself ‘captain’. The historiographic discussion and numerous examples call for further comparative research into the role of women in urban protest.

Clearly, many early modern crowd actions were political, in the sense that they were focused – at times successful – attempts to influence political decision-making. Whether they were based on a broader vision of reform, or even a revolution, is still a question. Historians continue to debate whether early modern riots, revolts and rebellions were inherently conservative, in the sense that the protesters claimed to uphold traditional rights, values and privileges, or revolutionary. Only rarely in the period before the French Revolution did crowds seek to overturn the existing political order; and if they did so, it seems to have been in part coincidental.

The famous Masaniello Revolt in Naples, depicted in Figure 5.6, was one of the few revolutionary actions, with the rebels effectively governing the city during a short period. The revolt was aimed against the misgovern-ment and fiscal pressure of Spanish Habsburg rule over Southern Italy. Led by a poor but charismatic fisherman, called Masaniello, the revolt started in May 1647 in reaction to a new tax on fruit and other foodstuffs. By the start of July, the situation had escalated: the customs office was burnt, and the rioters broke into the palace of the Spanish viceroy. A ten-day period of bloody rioting followed, during which Masaniello was elected ‘captain-general’ and effectively ruled the city. The authorities were forced into negotiations and conceded to demands of the rebels, who based their requests on privileges received more than a century earlier by Ferdinand of Aragon at the start of his reign. Even after Masaniello was assassinated, the uprising lasted nine months and sparked a wave of resistance in more than a hundred towns in Southern Italy. Whether it was intended as a complete overhaul of the political order and whether others were the political brains behind Masaniello is still subject to debate.
Before the late eighteenth-century revolutions, protesters continued to operate within the political constraints of the *ancien régime*, calling on that shared body of political knowledge, produced within political institutions and out on the street. Popular street politics, such as demonstrations and revolts,
did not simply express resistance against the state, but rather dissatisfaction with the limitations of the state and its representatives: they were part of the broader political negotiations between the authorities and different groups within urban society.71 To understand these actions, knowing their political and social context – including the way in which the authorities used street politics – is crucial.

**Conclusion**

The term ‘street politics’ is commonly associated with demonstrations and protest actions in the street, but that is too narrow a definition.72 Politics has never exclusively taken place inside palaces, council halls and government buildings; it has also happened in city streets, squares, marketplaces and alleys. Rulers of states – be they kings, queens or popes – and of cities – be they burgomasters or bishops – also took to the streets to show their power, using civic ceremonies, rituals and processions to project their authority. These spectacles were intended to underline the durability of the political status quo. Yet they could only function in the presence of a large audience and, inevitably, the presence of large crowds carried the risk of tensions and political disputes upstaging the formal message. Street politics, then, could both serve to project and to challenge authority.

**Notes**

2 See also Friedrichs, *Urban Politics*.
16 Ibid., p. 49.
34 Pollmann, Memory, p. 97.
37 Ibid., p. 300.
43 For repertoires of contention, see the work by Charles Tilly, especially his Contentious Performances (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
48 F. Deen, Publiek debat en propaganda in Amsterdam tijdens de Nederlandse Opstand: Amsterdam ‘Moorddam’ 1566–1578 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015).
50 Friedrichs, Urban Politics, p. 3.


58 Cited by Nussdorfer, ‘The vacant see’, p. 179.


60 V. Costantini, ‘On a red line across Europe: Butchers and rebellions in fourteenth-century Siena’, *Social History*, 41/1, 2016, pp. 72–92.


63 For example Hsia, ‘Civic liberties’.


