H-France Review Vol. 17 (June 2017), No. 86

Thierry Dutour, *Sous l'empire du bien. "Bonnes Gens" et pacte social (XIIIe-XVe siècle)*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015. 697 pp. Notes, bibliography, and indexes. 59.00€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-8124-3536-2.

Review by Ellen Wurtzel, Oberlin College.

Thierry Dutour's *Sous l'empire du bien* is a scholarly tour de force that links together a broad francophone world and reveals, through "the vocabulary of the good," a social realm of shared interactions and expectations of what constituted communal living in the later Middle Ages. Drawing from an impressive range of nineteenth- and twentieth-century sociological, historical, and philosophical thinkers and with a sure knowledge of medieval French sources, Dutour argues that the key to building and maintaining harmony in this period was the social pact, the guarantors of which were the ever-present if understudied *bonnes gens*, who appeared in countless ordinances, chronicles, and other documents written between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. In Dutour's telling, by understanding their roles, we uncover both the principles that guided behavior and the diverse meanings, now lost to us, of medieval social and political categories. This new interpretation helps us re-characterize the French-speaking world of the later Middle Ages as participating in the ideas of republicanism, natural rights, and civic engagement that scholars have found primarily in medieval cities of the Low Countries and Italy. While the claim is a large one, Dutour convincingly demonstrates the usefulness of researching, as he puts it, "*la banalité*"--the unremarkable and unremarked assumptions that, in any period, reveal cultural meaning and serve as a font of social legitimacy. If we, indeed, have entered into a post-truth era, in which personal beliefs and emotions shape public opinion more than do facts, it is particularly instructive to reflect on a time before facts attested to reality, when a society built a shared understanding of truth on a different ideological and epistemological basis.[1]

The book--a sizable 574 pages of text and notes plus a 100-page bibliography--is tightly organized if occasionally repetitious, with a general introduction and conclusion plus five main sections, each with an introduction, conclusion, and three chapters with multiple subheadings. Part one lays out Dutour's justification for his questions, his sources and his methodology, which largely consists of a close analysis of vernacular language found in what he calls "*écrit pratique*": ordinances, notarial acts, customals, chronicles, and judicial sentences. Reasoning that the widespread adoption of these documents, which emerged in conjunction with the monumental shift from orality to writing in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, indicated new interest in communal life, Dutour concludes that through practical, everyday language and its evolution, scholars can come closest to accessing the meaning medieval people invested in shared living. This observation is not news for readers of Brian Stock, Susan Reynolds, Pierre Michaud-Quantin, or Michael Clanchy (all of whom Dutour cites), but what he argues is that this language could be found in provinces in the medieval French kingdom, as well as in London, the kingdom of Jerusalem, and areas within the Low Countries and the Empire, and thus their use in these diverse regions created a shared cultural, if not political space.[2] Broadening the geographic extent of the medieval French world allows Dutour to compare documents from very diverse environments and engage in sources concerning both cities and rural areas--a welcome enlargement of the source base

typically used for research on medieval French communities, which tend to stay within the limits of Vauban's *ceinture de fer*.

Parts two through four comprise the heart of the study. In part two, Dutour introduces the principles on which social interactions were founded and the qualities that determined acceptable engagement. Once again, he explores the obvious--people who held office, for example, were expected to be honest and loyal and esteemed by others, but why were these qualities so important in the francophone world of the later Middle Ages? Drawing on Ferdinand Tönnies' and Georg Simmel's descriptions of nineteenth-century urban residents and examining texts such as house sales recorded "par just pris et loial vente" (p. 138), Dutour argues that the language of trust found in these documents enabled people to establish relations beyond their immediate network and thus to overcome the anonymity derived from imagining oneself in a larger society.[3] New social categories, such as the *bonnes gens*, emerged in conjunction with rules of behavior that even strangers might recognize and acknowledge in each other. As attested by the *Miroir de Souabe*, a fourteenth-century French translation of Germanic laws (*Der Schwabenspiegel*), "nulle vile et citeiz ne chastiaul ne se poent soffrir de bones ianz," (p. 181), social value was not necessarily synonymous with social superiority. True social value appeared with the moral characteristic of the good, the necessary quality of the *bonnes gens*, who guaranteed not only the validity of a particular transaction or event but also, in Dutour's view, constituted the social reality in which these acts were legitimized. Thus, these documents show a more nuanced understanding of inequality than a focus on the three orders or on differences between nobles, *bourgeois* and other *notables* might do.

Part three explores the roles *bonnes gens*, and their close synonyms, *prudhommes*, played in civil society. If language created a shared linguistic space, *bonnes gens* were its ideal inhabitants. Dutour notes that *bonnes gens* appeared in sources at the same time as customals were first created, in both the Latin East and the Occident, and thus their presence in them, as witnesses or valuators, served to legitimize the validity of both the written texts and the legal system itself. Their word was their bond--an unquestioned truth. Other texts, such as Joinville's biography of St. Louis, fleshed out their moral as well as social characters--not only good Christians, they were also honest, hard-working, orderly in behavior and upholders of the communal peace. Étienne Marcel's words in a letter to the regent in 1358 encapsulate the relationship between their moral character and the social good: "les bonnes gens de Paris ne se tiennent pas pour villains mais sont prudes hommes et loiaulx" (p. 308). As men possessing moral characters, they had the necessary qualities to have positions of power, in society and government. Dutour is careful not to equate *bonnes gens* solely with urban dignitaries, however--they were also artisans, farmers, and notaries as seen in Jean Bouthillier's *Somme rurale* and cartularies of convents, as well as in royal ordinances.

In part four, Dutour turns to the crucial role played by *bonnes gens* in defining the political as well as social realm. In chapters on the constitution of the political community, participation in public life, and the construction of political identities, Dutour painstakingly creates a picture of associations that were understood to exist solely for the common good of all its members. Dutour defines *commun* as synonymous with public, a concept that becomes lived experience through delineating public spaces. He builds on the spatial analysis of municipal power described by Elizabeth Crouzet-Pavan, Katia Weidenfeld and others but focuses on the actions that public utility demanded--debate, deliberation, and counsel--that were necessary to ensure the survival of the community.[4] Even the act of hearing ordinances read out (in northern France, at the *bretesque*) was understood to be a necessary civic performance with expectations of certain behavior, such as listening but not shouting out. In effect, Dutour argues that these rules of civic action created a public sphere *avant la lettre* in which social status obliged men to participate in upholding the good of the whole and rituals such as oath-swearing confirmed their shared values.

In part five, Dutour returns to his own significant work on social distinctions in Dijon and elsewhere in France as well chroniclers and writers such as Jean Froissart, Nicolas Oresme, Christine de Pizan and

Philippe de Mezières, to contextualize the *bonnes gens*, as well as trace their eventual obsolescence.[5] He makes the case that *bonnes gens* and *prudhommes* were essential social categories but not singular ones; they fit into a larger world of diverse roles, including *gens notables* or *gens d'honneur* whose social value relied on similar expectations of behavior and moral qualities such as faith, honor and loyalty. These were values expected of kings and princes, as well as the good people of the realm, the having of which divided tyrants from just princes, but also united rulers with their people. Scandals and crimes, such as fraud, theft, seigniorial wars, and other abuses of power may have shaken the social order, but the imagined harm these acts did to *bonnes gens* provided a way to re-establish the just order of things. Their existence, in affirming the truth of the good, also provided a way to criticize the powerful and legitimize reforms. Duke of Burgundy John the Fearless and his brothers, in a letter to King Charles VI in 1405, pointedly noted that the kingdom was badly governed and that "vostre people...va presque tout à destruction et sont les bonnes gens d'ycelui travailléz et dommagiéz" (p. 494). Divine authority had also to cohere with the well being of the people.

Like any reigning ideology, the *bonnes gens* remained vital only as long as trust in the system they upheld remained strong. Their existence was challenged by the changing expressions of political power, heavy taxation and warfare, and new social structures in the French kingdom arising during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, although Dutour does not point to any one precipitating crisis that marked their decline. Montaigne seems to be one of the last to comprehend the medieval meaning of *prudhommes*, which soon dropped out of fashion. *Bonnes gens* did not disappear but underwent a marked shift in the seventeenth century. Newly disdained by elites, they became known primarily as jovial country folk--good, simple people of the earth but removed from either political power or their more robust medieval past. It is this early modern vision that modern historians have inherited and perpetuated.

Throughout *Sous l'empire du bien*, but particularly in the conclusion, Dutour takes aim at previous historiography--its periodization, its spatial limits, and its conceptual assumptions--that has often "othered" medieval France as a studied contrast to the modern age that followed, particularly in terms of political organization. The monarchical state emergent in the sixteenth century has weighed so heavily on the later Middles Ages that it has obscured the actual sense of community and individual natural rights that these practical writings reveal. Dutour, by placing political life in the French-speaking world much more in conversation with contemporary Netherlandish and Italian models, demonstrates that ideas of civic engagement were more widespread and existed earlier than J. G. A. Pocock or Quentin Skinner have allowed.[6] In this way, Dutour's vision complements recent work on the common good and provides a valuable context in which to place debates on the transformations of community discussed by a number of scholars of the Reformation and French civil wars.[7]

Even more fundamentally, the focus on the *bonnes gens* argues for a different kind of relationship between the individual and the political corporation than has appeared in nineteenth and twentieth-century scholarship. What Dutour emphasizes here is not just that the collective identity—of cities, of communities vis-à-vis their prince—is foremost, but that collective identity itself is built on an expectation of individual action by people in social categories. The category of *prudhomme* enabled people to know how to act towards an individual they might meet on the street, for example, and he towards them, but it also allowed them to imagine individuals in relation to the whole and with natural and legal rights. Thus by claiming that the identity of the community as a whole rests on a construction of social identity—not individual subjectivity—Dutour is arguing that previous debates on the existence of the individual in the Middle Ages fundamentally misread the sources by imposing an anachronistic vision of the individual on medieval writers. His reading of the importance of social categories also changes the relationship of political entities to one another. A collectivity such as a city, understood to be a group of morally upright *bonnes gens*, for example, provided a more robust counterpoint to the political power of the king than an abstract and undifferentiated corporation might have done.

In sketching out a Laslettian world we have lost, Dutour successfully finds common language and expectations of behavior across a broad spectrum of medieval French sources, but his approach has the effect, perhaps inevitable, of de-emphasizing changes over time and differentiation across region and population. Medieval communal ideas, both legal and political, have long been associated with urban groups, from guilds to the city corporation itself, and more of the sources Dutour analyzed were connected to urban environments than to rural seigneuries or far-flung outposts in the East. By emphasizing the concepts and practices that bound both rural and urban communities together, Dutour deflects questions on how these ideas were disseminated over such a vast space, and where they may have originated. While urban identity merited its own subheading in section four, it would have been valuable to discuss the role of city dwelling more directly. Another curious omission in the discussion of social identity was the importance of gender (although the existence of *prudfemmes* was noted) or attention to the extensive literature on identity construction by feminist scholars. If the social category of *bonnes gens* existed in relation to their public and political roles, almost entirely filled by men, gender roles and expectations likely influenced the development of this linguistic space and may have even produced tensions within it.

Such questions are not meant to undermine the evocative and deeply researched work Dutour has produced, rather they suggest that his careful study of social categories and compact for living together provides a solid basis from which to re-examine the constitutive elements of medieval identity and test the boundaries of the imagined community in both the francophone world and beyond. Overall, *Sous l'empire du bien* does important work of investigating the conventions of a past world and demonstrating the essential importance of building trust in a functioning society. In making explicit the assumptions shared by people living in the later Middle Ages, Dutour likewise reminds us of the importance of examining our own assumptions about the past and, one imagines, reflecting on the nature and fragility of trust in any age.

NOTES

[1] The Oxford English Dictionary recently coined "post-truth" as its 2016 word of the year. https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016 (consulted December 20, 2016).

[2] Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy. Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the 11th and 12th Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Susan Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in western Europe 900-1300*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Pierre Michaud-Quantin, *Universitas. Expression du mouvement communautaire dans le Moyen Âge latin* (Paris: Vrin, 1970); and Michael T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record. England 1066-1307*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

[3] Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community & Society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft (1887)*, trans. by Charles Loomis (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1957); Georg Simmel, "The Stranger" in Donald Levine, ed. *On Individuality and Social Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 143-150.

[4] Élisabeth Crouzet-Pavan, "'Pour le bien commun...' À propos des politiques urbaines dans l'Italie communale," in Élisabeth Crouzet-Pavan ed., *Pouvoir et édilité. Les grands chantiers dans l'Italie communale et seigneuriale* (Rome: École française de Rome, 2003), pp. 11-40; Katia Weidenfeld, "Le contentieux de la voirie parisienne à la fin du Moyen Âge," *Revue historique* 301(1999): 211-236. See also Yves Sassier, "Bien commun et utilitas communis au XIIe siècle, un nouvel essor?" *Revue française d'histoire des idées politiques* 32(2010): 245-258.

[5] Thierry Dutour, *Une société de l'honneur. Les notables et leur monde à Dijon à la fin du Moyen Âge* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1998). See also Thierry Dutour, ed. *Les Nobles et la ville dans l'espace francophone (XIIe-XVIe siècles)* (Paris: Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, 2011).

[6] J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

[7] Elodie Lecuppre-Desjardin and Anne-Laure Van Bruaene, eds. *De Bono Communi. The Discourse and Practice of the Common Good in the European City (13th-16th c.)* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2010).

Ellen Wurtzel
Oberlin College
ewurtzel@oberlin.edu

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172