



**Mary Lindemann.** *The Merchant Republics: Amsterdam, Antwerp, and Hamburg, 1648-1790.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 374 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-07443-9.

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**Published on** H-Urban (October, 2015)

**Commissioned by** Alexander Vari (Marywood University)

## The Virtues of Merchant Republics

Most histories of the great commercial cities of Northern Europe during the early modern period either examine the golden age of a single city or present a sort of rise and fall narrative as commercial primacy passed from place to place. There is nothing inherently wrong with this kind of treatment, but it tends to favor economic success stories. Much less commonly do histories of the commercial cities include the treatments of self-perceptions that townspeople held about their city, and only rarely do they cover the subject once a city's commercial prominence had decreased.

In this book, Mary Lindemann has chosen to examine three cities—Antwerp, Amsterdam, and Hamburg—that she refers to as merchant republics by focusing on how their inhabitants identified with and promoted their cities as “communities of commerce.”<sup>[1]</sup> To be clear, this book is not a traditional economic history, though, as Lindemann rightly points out, one would be hard pressed to write a history of major commercial cities without addressing a variety of topics related to business practice and finance. But that is not the point of this book. Lindemann is most interested in understanding the merchant republic “as a historical concept” (p. 16), and to do that she explores the interplay between commercial and political life within the three towns.

Defining what constituted a merchant republic is not at all easy. Although they shared some similarities, the three cities Lindemann studies experienced different

forms of republicanism. By republic, Lindemann means a polity governed and administered by its duty-bound citizens. The key in presenting the three cities as *merchant republics* lay not only in the degree of self-governance each city enjoyed but also in the degree to which each city's citizenry identified with its commercial roots even if commerce was no longer the principal economic activity—as in the case of Antwerp in the seventeenth century. Because she sets her comparison of the three cities in the period from the middle of the seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century, a period during which the commercial importance of the cities was in flux, Lindemann is provided with an opportunity to test the persistence of this commercially infused political identification over time.

Lindemann begins by introducing Amsterdam, Antwerp, and Hamburg during the period under study. In this “topographical” presentation, she outlines the general contexts that unified the cities' early modern histories. She also points out areas of divergence. Although each city could be characterized as a republic and as such they shared certain political traits, there existed significant differences in their political cultures. What connected them was that their merchant orientations interacted with their political ideals in a way that had a profound effect on their identities.

It is this interaction between the mercantile and the political that is the crux of Lindemann's argument.

Many scholars have viewed connecting republican ideals with commercial success as a bit of a contradiction. In most European cities, it is held, the early modern vision of the republic was at odds with the merchant drive for wealth. Lindemann shows that, at least in Amsterdam, Antwerp, and Hamburg, merchants were actually held up as ideal citizens. She points out that "ambivalence about commerce and the acquisition of wealth ... did not characterize cities where citizens took commercialism for granted" (p. 82). The ideal merchant, the paragon of society in the commercial city, was also the ideal republican. But not all inhabitants of any of the three cities, much less all the citizens, were merchants. While Lindemann suggests that the merchant elite, and those with closely related occupations, identified their city as a merchant republic because of the importance of commerce—even to the point of viewing commerce as virtuous—readers might wonder how far down the social ladder this identification went. The extent to which a scholar can say that a city's population identified the city with a mercantile ideal is, of course, a question of sources. Nevertheless, by drawing on voluminous literature, Lindemann makes a convincing argument in favor of the efficacy of applying the term "merchant republic" to the three cities during the long eighteenth century.

After arguing that in the three cities commerce was viewed as virtuous, and the merchant-as-republican as the archetype, Lindemann turns her attention to areas of discord and conflict. In the merchant republic, failing to live up to the republican ideal through, for example, corruption in office risked discord and even violence with the city. Imposters and con artists disrupted and threatened the harmony within the merchant community. Foolish merchants, as opposed to virtuous mer-

chants, might bankrupt commercial establishments, but even more worrisome for the community of commerce, they might bankrupt the entire notion of virtuous commerce. What is more, these negative activities also risked destroying the republican virtues that the cities held so dear. Lindemann discusses all of these topics both to bolster her argument and to show that contemporaries viewed these damaging actions as indicative of "declining mercantile virtues" (p. 309).

Lindemann's well-written and carefully researched book makes a convincing argument. The republicanism that emerged in Amsterdam, Antwerp, and Hamburg over the course of the long eighteenth century (and probably even earlier) was deeply intertwined with the commercial orientation of the cities. The ruling elites in these cities identified with the virtuous merchants who had brought commercial fame to their cities, whether or not they were merchants themselves. The three cities held up a kind of shared identity as merchant republics. In this respect, these merchant republics were a class apart. The argument begs for a similar comparison with other early modern "republics," or perhaps more accurately, other implementations of the republican ideal. I make this comment to point out an area for further research on the topic, not as a criticism of Lindemann's excellent work. I recommend this book to those interested in the intersection and interplay of the political and economic spheres in early modern cities.

#### Note

[1]. Here Lindemann refers to the work of An Kint, "The Community of Commerce: Social Relations in Sixteenth-Century Antwerp" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1996).

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**Citation:** Donald Harreld. Review of Lindemann, Mary, *The Merchant Republics: Amsterdam, Antwerp, and Hamburg, 1648-1790*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. October, 2015.

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