INTRODUCTION

A Way of Living

Historians — like many other people — have often tried to imagine what it might have been like to visit a European city in the early modern era. Many a description of some city in the sixteenth or seventeenth century begins with a colourful evocation of what the community must have seemed like to the traveller arriving from afar. Approaching the city by land — perhaps in a wagon or on horseback, but more likely trudging along on foot — the traveller would first have seen, far in the distance, the highest church spire of the city. Gradually more and more steeples, towers and rooftops would have become visible, along with the city’s stout walls and towered gates. Having passed a cluster of outbuildings on the city’s edge, the traveller would now have had to get through the nearest gate complex, answering the watchman’s queries or passing an inspection of goods. Once inside the city itself, the traveller would have jostled along some crowded street, first through an outer zone of smaller houses and walled gardens, past increasingly substantial dwellings and through a market square or two, to reach eventually the town centre with its grand merchant homes, public buildings and lofty churches.

This is not, however, how the average town-dweller of early modern times generally experienced his or her own community. For the inhabitant of any city normally approaches the city from within, stepping across the threshold of his or her home right into the bustling street. Let us try to imagine, then, how somebody in one European city of the sixteenth century might have experienced her own immediate environment. Let us walk, for a few moments, with Margareta Toll through her neighbourhood in the German town of Munich one day in the late sixteenth century.

The communal records of Munich for Thursday, 1 April 1574,
note that a linen-weaver named Georg Toll and his wife Margareta purchased a corner house on the Sendlinger Gasse, a major street in the southern part of town leading towards one of the city gates. Since Georg and Margareta Toll owned no other houses in Munich in 1574, one may safely assume that they occupied this newly purchased house as their own dwelling and place of work. Suppose that Margareta Toll now stepped out into the Sendlinger Gasse to look over her new neighbourhood – what would she have seen? Stretching southward from her new home was a long row of attached houses, most of them two- or three-storey buildings with extensive attic space under their high sloping roofs. The house right next door was owned by Peter Schnabel, occupation unrecorded, who came from the village of Bogenhausen just outside Munich. The next house belonged, as of 1570, to the flour-dealer Ulrich Planckh and his second wife Barbara. Next door was a house owned by Martin Khirein, a weaver of heavy woollens. Then came a house owned by the baker Wolfgang Hagen, an immigrant from the village of Eching north of Munich. The next house – a higher, narrower building than most on the street – had just been purchased by a stonemason and his wife. The house after that had belonged to a flour-dealer as of 1572; by 1575 it had been purchased at an auction by a wealthy member of the Munich council. The adjacent house also underwent a change in ownership between about 1572 and 1575, from a linen-weaver to a turner. The next house was owned by a linen-weaver, the one after that by a wool-weaver. Then came a large building, formerly two houses which had been remodelled into one by their current owners, a family of beer-brewers. The next four houses were owned by fine-cloth weavers. The last house, at the end of the row, belonged to members of a family named Weiss; when Hans Weiss died in 1574 his widow bought out the children’s share of the house before she remarried.

By now Margareta would have been at the corner of the Henkersgasse – Hangman’s Lane. Looking down to her left, Margareta would have spotted the small city-owned house in which the city executioner lived. Contact with the executioner or his family was always to be avoided in a German city of early modern times, since even casual relations with such ‘dishonoured’ folk could bring disgrace to your own family or even your whole guild. So unless she had pressing business that would require her to walk down Hangman’s Lane,

Margareta would more likely have stayed in the bustling environs of the Sendlinger Gate, turned right towards the small St Peter’s churchyard – or headed back up her own street to return home.

We could of course accompany Margareta Toll on more walks through the city of Munich. We could go up the Sendlinger Gasse in the other direction, towards the city centre, arriving soon at Munich’s great marketplace and continuing towards the palace of the Bavarian dukes at the north end of the city. Or we could turn left from the marketplace to inspect Munich’s greatest church, the Liebfrauenkirche, and enter the zone of high-walled cloisters along the city’s western edge. But even a short walk down one street has already taught us something about the social fabric of an early modern city. We see that such a street would be inhabited by people from a mixture of occupations, though there might be some clustering of particular crafts – in this case weaving. We note that both men and women could own and purchase houses. And we note that property frequently changed hands, often by purchase either within families or between non-relatives.

Yet how do we know all these things about Margareta Toll’s neighbourhood? Like most men and women in early modern Europe, Margareta left no records in her own hand to tell us of herself or her neighbours. But there is plenty of evidence. The physical description of the Sendlinger Gasse comes partly from a remarkable primary source – a painstakingly detailed wooden scale model of the entire city of Munich prepared by an artisan named Jacob Sandtner in 1572. The information about specific houses was established by a team of local historians, who worked for decades to reconstruct from property records in the city archives the ownership history of every house in the inner-city zone of Munich.²

Such an undertaking normally requires teamwork. But sometimes one historian, studying a particular locality in a limited time period, can singlehandedly reconstruct an entire urban neighbourhood. This has been done, for example, for the Boroughside district of Southwark just south of London Bridge during the early seventeenth century. From Jeremy Boulton’s study of this London suburb, we know something about almost every house in the Boroughside district in 1622.³ Walking south from London Bridge along the High Street, to our right we would have seen a long row of butcher shops,

1. Häuserbuch der Stadt München, 4: 392; the following passage is based on 4: 28, 393–419.

2. Erdmannsdorfer, Bürgerhaus in München, 43–6 and plates 2–6, 13–14, 18–20, 70, 93; Häuserbuch, passim.

broken only occasionally by other food shops or the home of a tailor or shoemaker. There were practical reasons for clustering all the slaughtering activity so close together, as this would help to confine the unavoidable noise and stench to one area. To our left, however, we would have seen a greater variety of shops: beginning at the Hospital Gate corner, for example, we would have passed a saddler, a grocer, a barber-surgeon, an ironmonger, another grocer, a vintner, two more grocers, another ironmonger, a linen-draper and a turner before reaching a house occupied by two gentlemen too wealthy to practise a specific trade. Almost all these households on the High Street were headed by men, and most of them were relatively well-to-do – or at least rich enough to contribute to the weekly poor-rate to assist their humbler neighbours. If, however, we turned from the broad High Street into one of the narrow alleyways leading off it, we would find a different picture. In little Horsehead Alley, for example, there were over sixty households; most of them were headed by tailors, shoemakers and other male artisans, but over a dozen were headed by widows or single women. Of these sixty households, only nine could afford to contribute to the poor-rate, while over twice as many received charity instead.

Even this brief excursion through the Boroughside suggests some distinct features of urban life. As in most European cities of the early modern era, rich and poor lived in close proximity – but the rich were more likely to be found on a major thoroughfare, especially one bustling with commercial activity, while the poor were more heavily concentrated in smaller back streets. Most households were headed by men; those headed by women were more likely to be impoverished. A variety of trades were practised in the neighbourhood, although – in striking contrast to the Sendlinger Gasse in Munich – there were hardly any weavers in the Boroughside.

Historical research has made it possible to reconstruct what we might see if we could walk through these streets, and many others like them, in early modern Europe. In a few cases, we have an actual record of somebody’s movements through the streets of an early modern town – above all, perhaps, in the uniquely detailed diary kept by Samuel Pepys, an English naval administrator of the late seventeenth century. Pepys’s diary, covering the years 1660 to 1669, was published in the nineteenth century and for generations readers have followed the author as he moved through London by coach, by boat or on foot in his inexhaustible pursuit of business and pleasure. 4


Private letters, travel accounts, diaries – and there are many, though few are as detailed as Pepys’s – are invaluable sources of information about the nature of urban life in early modern Europe, but they answer only the questions their own authors considered important at the time. We know much, for example, about Pepys’s own house in Seething Lane on Tower Hill – but we know almost nothing about his neighbours. For all his curiosity, Samuel Pepys did not produce an occupational profile of his neighbourhood, or record how many men and women on his street lived in comfort or distress. To find out about things like this, modern social historians have moved beyond the evidence produced by individual observers, valuable as it often is, to undertake the systematic assessment of municipal records, church records and similar documents which make possible an ever fuller picture of early modern urban life.

Every city is distinct, of course, and this was as true in the early modern era as it is today. Munich was different from Southwark; indeed, Southwark was different from the City of London just across the river Thames. It is important to know and understand the ways in which cities differed from each other. But it is just as important to realize that European cities of the early modern era belonged to a common urban civilization. Towns on the outer fringes of the European continent – in Russia, along the steppe frontier, in most of the Balkan peninsula – were not fully part of this particular civilization. But from Aberdeen on the North Sea to Dubrovnik on the Adriatic, from Lisbon on the Atlantic to Tallinn on the Gulf of Finland, the towns and cities of western, central and much of eastern Europe during the early modern epoch had remarkably much in common. This book will explore the social history of towns and cities across this vast area during the three hundred years from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-eighteenth century. In doing so, we will never lose sight of the many ways in which cities could differ from each other. But we shall emphasize instead what they had in common. In doing so, this book hopes to recapture something of the collective experience of the men, women and children who lived in the European city of the early modern era. Somewhere between 100 million and 200 million human beings lived part or all of their lives in European cities between 1450 and 1750. This book will try to tell their story.

To learn something about the life and death, the work and play, the hopes and fears of human beings in past generations would, perhaps, be enough for many readers. But the historian always hopes to do more – to put what has been learned about individual or collective
experiences into the framework of some larger effort to understand the dynamics of past society. This, too, is one of the objectives of this book.

A framework of explanation, however, is not something on which all historians can agree. Today in particular this is the case, for one of the central concepts around which our understanding of the European past has been based is increasingly being called into question. It is therefore important to know something about this concept and its implications.

For well over a generation the central idea around which most people constructed their understanding of European social history – and of the place of the city within it – has had to do with the theory of modernization. This is the notion that the broad currents of European social history must best be understood as a transition from a traditional, largely agrarian and ‘underdeveloped’ society to the modern industrial and ‘developed’ society with which we are familiar today. Traditional society, in this view, was static, deferential and strongly religious; powerful local elites dominated a vast, largely illiterate population engaged in unchanging and inelastic economic activity. By contrast, a modern society is seen as dynamic, mobile, heavily secular and at least potentially democratic; a fully literate population relates to political life on the national level and engages in economic activity geared to constant expansion and growth. The transition from traditional to modern society is described as an interactive process in which advances in any one sphere of life contributed to changes in every other; the transition may have been irregular and even stalled at times, but eventually enough changes took place to make the onset of modernization irreversible. These transforming changes, we have been taught, first took place in northwestern Europe and then spread gradually to the rest of Europe, to North America and eventually to other parts of the world.

The concept of modernization owes much to even earlier concepts of long-term social change. It owes something, for example, to the view of Max Weber, the great social theorist who emphasized the advent of ‘rationality’ as a key step in the evolution towards modern societies. It owes even more, however, to Marxism. Though modernization theory was created, to some extent, as an alternative to the Marxist description of social evolution, the two theories actually have much in common. The movement from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’

immobility and lack of innovation in early modern Europe — but by and large their emphasis is on rural society. The city, by contrast, is normally seen as a centre of innovation and creativity. And so it is. Yet the truly creative and transforming epochs in the history of the European city took place not during the early modern era, but before and after it. It was in fact during the last few centuries of the Middle Ages that the physical form of the European city and its institutional framework were developed. The basic relationship of the city to the state, the internal organization of urban life, the role of the guilds and the church, the very pattern of streets and buildings — all these things were firmly in place by 1450. Of course the early modern era was an age of dramatic movements in European history: the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the growth of European contact with other continents, the development of new techniques of capitalism, the theory and practice of absolutism, the revolutions in physics and astronomy. There were specific changes in cities as well, particularly in those cities closely linked to the princely and royal courts of Western and Central Europe. Many towns grew substantially in size, and some new towns were founded. But the impact of all these changes on the everyday life and routine of most city-dwellers was, as we shall see, relatively small. Despite all that had happened, the basic styles of work and worship, love and leisure, birth and death in the European city of 1750 were much the same as they had been three centuries before. It was the nineteenth century, not the early modern era, that radically transformed the European city in its appearance and, more importantly, in its social and economic life.

From this point of view it might be suggested that the very term ‘early modern’ is not entirely apt for the period covered by this book. Some historians even prefer to write of the ‘post-medieval’ city. In fact there are good reasons to stick to standard usage in referring to the period from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-eighteenth century as the early modern era. But this does not bind us to a ceaseless search for the onset of the ‘modern’ in every aspect of urban life. One of the wisest students of European village life has recently warned historians to avoid reducing the history of any one community to ‘an instance of a stage in the process of modernization’. For when this is done, David Sabean argues, ‘attention is turned away from the dynamics of social relations in a particular society to a grand narrative of human

progress. Each new study recodes its findings to fit an objectified story already known to the observer.’

The same of course applies to the early modern city. To force what we know about the early modern city into a ‘grand narrative of human progress’ is to ignore much of what was most interesting and significant about the way that human beings lived in that era. When Margareta Torn moved to the Sendlinger Gasse in 1574, or Samuel Pepys took a coach to Whitehall in 1665, they were not searching for modern times — they were looking, as all humans do, for ways to make their own lives successful and meaningful for themselves and their families. And they did so in ways that would, in many respects, make perfect sense to us.

Of course the social norms of urban life in early modern times differed massively from those of today. Patterns of family life, work, leisure, politics, religious expression, and of course the very look and feel of the city itself have little in common with today’s world. But this book does not accept the widespread argument that these obvious differences are accounted for by some deeper difference between human nature in early modern times and human nature today. To say that people were more religious, or less worldly, or more deferential, or less able to plan ahead, or more violent, or less affectionate towards their children than people today — these and countless other statements of a similar kind imply that there was some fundamental variation in mental structure between people then and people now. This is not true. Men and women of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were motivated by much the same mixture of values and emotions as motivate people today: they were ambitious and altruistic, optimistic and pessimistic, devout and impious, assertive and passive, spontaneous and deliberate. But they operated in a different framework. What made this framework different from ours was, above all, one thing: limited technology in certain key areas of activity. And this in turn was due largely to the lack of information about certain specific topics — particularly a number of physical, chemical and biological processes whose workings are taken for granted today.

This does not mean that people in early modern times lacked scientific information or technological skills. Far from it. Indeed, many of the products of medieval and early modern cities — from cathedrals to cloths, from cannon to clocks — were the result of enormously complex technical processes, developed over centuries of

6. e.g. Spiess, Braunschweig im Nachmittelalter, 1: 6n.
7. cf. the discussion in de Vries, European Urbanization, 3–10.
trial and error. But early modern life was burdened by technical and scientific limitations of enormous consequence. Power sources were meagre. Almost all power had to be generated by human or animal muscles, for the use of inanimate power was extremely limited. This in turn had implications for the way in which products were manufactured, the way in which buildings were constructed and the way in which people and goods were transported. Communications were slow. Information could travel no faster than the wind at sea or the fastest horse by land. It was hard to make things very hot. This restricted what could be done with metals. It was hard to make things very cold. This prevented people from preserving most foods. Control of pain was extremely limited. Surgical intervention beyond a few outer millimetres of the human body was virtually impossible. The role of bacteria in human biology was not understood. Antibiotic medications were not available. All these factors contributed to creating an entirely different age-distribution of illness and mortality than the one we are used to today. This in turn had significant implications for relations within families and attitudes about life, death and the hereafter.

Of course there were important changes in scientific knowledge during the early modern era. But most of these changes were in the areas of physics and astronomy, and their impact on everyday life was quite limited before the later eighteenth century. There were striking technological developments as well. The early modern era opened with the invention of gunpowder and printing: both changed the way in which cities interacted with the surrounding world and the way in which city-dwellers interacted with each other. But neither fundamentally altered the institutional structure or value system of European urban life. Only the massive scientific and technological transformations of the nineteenth century would change all that.

In short, this book will not attempt to fit the early modern city into some broader pattern of progress or modernization. Instead, it will approach urban society of early modern times on its own terms, showing how men and women in an environment of limited resources tried to shape and reshape the physical and institutional heritage of the European city to cope with the challenges of their day and meet their own needs and aspirations. Every attempt to understand human society, however, must take account of some basic analytical principles. It may be useful therefore to keep in mind two fundamental concepts which can contribute to the understanding of urban society. One is the concept of community. The other is the notion of power.

For some social historians, community is the more important of these concepts. Such historians look in past societies for evidence of shared goals, conflict resolution and social stability. For others, the key concept is power, as revealed by patterns of exploitation and domination. But in fact the questions these historians ask often overlap. How effectively did cities as a whole function in meeting the needs of their inhabitants? How did sub-communities or groups within each city do so? Did cities offer a satisfying life to most of their inhabitants, or only to a small minority who exploited all the rest? To what extent was the success of some individuals or groups dependent on the domination, repression or exclusion of others? Was urban society of the early modern era an arena of opportunity and participation, or an arena of conflict and domination?

The answers to all these questions are shaped above all by one simple fact: no human community is made up of equals. Inequality is the fundamental truth of the human condition. But every community includes numerous overlapping axes of inequality, for each individual belongs to a multiplicity of groups. Determining which of these groups is most significant for the lives of individuals is often the most challenging problem in any form of social analysis.

In trying to understand the social organization of the early modern city, modern sociologists and social historians have followed the lead of early modern city-dwellers themselves by putting the primary emphasis on groups identified by economic and political function. City-dwellers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries envisioned their communities as being made up of such groups as the rich and the poor, patricians and commons, merchants and craftsmen, citizens and outsiders – with most of these groups being subdivided into numerous smaller groups. Modern social historians, drawing on data and conceptual models unavailable to people in early modern times, have refined, elaborated and corrected the traditional models for understanding the social, economic and political hierarchies of cities in the early modern era. But they still emphasize social groupings that would have been comprehended by contemporaries.

There are of course many other groups to which people could belong, which overlapped with these well-known socio-economic categories. People in the early modern city lived in distinct neighbourhoods, wards or parishes. In some cities the inhabitants were divided into religious or, more rarely, ethnic sub-groups. And of course everyone belonged to a family and network of kin.

But two other categories to which all humans belong also deserve emphasis because, unlike many other social groupings, they so often
form the basis for the consistent, even universal domination of one group of people by another.

The first is age. In early modern society, as in our own, children were consistently dominated by adults. This domination could be harsh and brutal or it could be what we call paternalistic though it is not without significance that the conventional term for nurturing domination is 'paternalism' rather than 'maternalism'. Either way, the domination of children by adults was total. But it was also temporary. About half of all children in the early modern city eventually survived into adulthood. As adults most of them, though not all, were released from subjection and many themselves eventually participated in the domination of the next generation of children.

The second category is, of course, gender. Unlike age, gender is permanent. In early modern cities, roles and distinctions based on gender were universal, as was the domination of females by males. This does not mean, of course, that all males exerted domination over all females. The male servant did not give orders to the female patrician – quite the contrary. But within any marriage, within any household, and more broadly within any single social group, adult males exerted unquestioned authority over females. This authority was not unlimited. Laws and social custom granted some powers and many protections to women. A few women even managed to stretch the bounds of social custom to exert more power than was usual for females of their social situation. At certain points in the life-cycle, notably widowhood, and within certain institutions, such as convents, women could exert powers that echoed and mimicked those of men. But even in those cases there were limits. And women were systematically excluded from certain aspects of urban life. Women participated, for example, in almost every sphere of economic activity – but they were rigorously excluded from participation in urban government and politics. In short, gender was a permanent distinction which cut through every other social or economic grouping in the early modern city.

Every individual human who lived in the early modern city belonged, then, to a multiplicity of social identities: age, gender, family, neighbourhood, occupation, civic status and religion. Some aspects of identity were immutable, some could be easily changed, some could be lost and some could be acquired. The city was in many ways an arena in which individuals attempted to shape their personal fates within often rigid constraints of custom, law and social expectation. The tensions between individual, group and communal needs and aspirations lay at the heart of all social interactions in the early modern city.

To understand the early modern city, however, we must begin by looking at its physical form, a form largely inherited from the middle ages though modified in some crucial respects during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We must then look at the political, religious, economic and biological systems which shaped and bounded urban life in early modern Europe. These themes will occupy Part One of this book. Having thus established the basic parameters of urban life, in Part Two we will turn to the inhabitants of these cities, seeing them above all in terms of the multiplicity of social groups to which they belonged. Finally, in Part Three, we will see how cities functioned in times of tranquility and in times of stress, asking ourselves how the exercise of power and the pursuit of collective goals interacted in shaping the rhythms and eruptions of urban life.

This book is not about the 'way of life' in early modern cities. A way of life is something individuals or families self-consciously shape for themselves in response to some ideal of how they wish to live. Some people had the means to do so in the early modern city – but only very few. Most people could respond only to circumstances, making the best of limited opportunities. The history of urban society in the early modern era is the collective history of countless people who struggled to survive, to achieve some security in this life or confidence in the next, perhaps even to rise above their fellows or help their children to do so. They did all this within the limited confines of a world not yet affected by the dazzling technological transformations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This book is about their way of making the most of early modern urban society. It is a book, then, not about their way of life, but about their way of living.